

**Glenn Livingston, Ph.D.  
and Howie Jacobson, Ph. D.  
Intuitive Eating**

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**Dr. Glenn:** Hello, Dr. Jacobson. How are you?

**Howie:** I'm well, Dr. Livingston. How are you?

**Dr. Glenn:** I'm good. And in case people don't know, this is Howie Jacobson from [plantyourself.com](http://plantyourself.com) and I am the very good Dr. Glenn Livingston from [NeverBingeAgain.com](http://NeverBingeAgain.com) and I wanted to have a talk with Howie today about intuitive eating and how it fits in with the Never Binge Again framework. Howie, are you open to doing that?

**Howie:** Let's do it.

**Dr. Glenn:** There are a lot of relatively controversial issues in the eating disordered world regarding Never Binge Again and one of the reasons that I offer this as coaching as opposed to psychological treatment and one of the reasons I operate as an educator rather than a psychologist in this arena and have the disclaimer that this is not intended to diagnose, treat, or cure any disorder, disease, or condition is because a lot of what I say goes against the standards of care in my profession.



What's really interesting is that there's a standard of care -- and when I say standard of care, I don't mean an official rule in psychology licensing board or something like that. I'm talking about a consensus among doctors and counselors and social workers who work with eating disorders. They seem to have developed a consensus that any type of food restriction is dangerous and there's good reason for this because people with anorexia, bulimia, and even plain old binge-eating disorder do tend to get themselves in trouble by restricting foods. Binge eaters tend to get themselves in trouble by over-restricting and dieting and fasting in response to a binge to try to lose weight quickly and get control over things and get clarity, et cetera. Anorexics tend to become frightened of food or want to punish themselves.

There are all sorts of reason for it, but it can be one of the most dangerous and physically devastating mental diagnoses that we have. So the way that eating disorder therapists treat these things is to say you really can't label any food as healthy or unhealthy and everything has to be okay in moderation and let's focus on eating when we're hungry and stopping when we're full. There's a whole set of things about it and I'm not really an expert in that arena because my system really gravitates in a different direction.

What I do is I tell people to be very careful that no matter what rules you implement with Never Binge Again to define healthy versus unhealthy eating that you need to be checking that against a nutrition calculator and checking it with a dietician or a nutritionist to make sure that you are providing nutritional sustenance and you're not overly restricting your calories because if you do, I firmly believe there is an evolutionary mechanism in the brain which says at some point, "Oh my God, if calories and nutrition are so scarce during some periods, we better hoard them when they're available."



So the moment you take a bite of one of the forbidden foods, you go off the deep end if you're doing that kind of restricting. Your body has a mechanism to force you to be less discriminating and that's part of the whole cycle, and the binging really does become a reaction to the overall restriction. So you do have to be careful with the rules in Never Binge Again to avoid over-restricting. It's very important. Howie, I'm sorry for talking so long. I just want to get the whole thesis on the table and I want to see what you think.

However, there is a problem which arises from the philosophy that you have to be able to eat everything, which is that not everything is really good for you. I mean, there actually is such a thing as flavored cardboard. I don't know why the leaf blower always comes right outside my window as soon as I start to record something. I don't know how loud that you can hear that or not, but he's right outside my window and he'll be gone in a second.

There are things that our industry produces to artificially enhance taste and produce a type of addictive response by concentrating starch and sugar and salt and oil and excitotoxins and other chemicals that are decidedly not good for you, and there's all this scientific research about what happens when you have too much of this food or that food, and we have evidence of populations in different parts of the world, in the blue zones that do better than others with their diet. So the philosophy that every food is just as good as any other food is nonsense. It's just not true. The monster (ph) believes it's scientifically false.

So then you ask yourself where is the answer, where is the solution, and I think that the solution is to carefully define what you really believe is healthy. I think it's okay to distinguish healthy from unhealthy foods,



but if you have any tendency towards anorexia or bulimia or serious binge-eating then you probably want to check that with a nutritionist and a doctor and make sure that you're not relying solely on your own opinion. Ultimately, it's you who takes responsibility for the plan and nobody else is going to follow you around all day and make sure that you eat well, so you really have to buy into the philosophy, but you can fight your myopia and the fact that with binge-eating or anorexia or bulimia, our brains get kind of broken and we start to think that we need these things for survival when we really don't.

It becomes hard to think rationally about food, so it really is good to check with external sources, not just rely on what feels right or what you think all by yourself, but once that's defined, to develop a simple a plan as possible and no simpler, to know exactly where the boundaries are, to aim for the bull's eye, but then I do think that within those boundaries, you eat intuitively. I think that's part of the reason that we have the unrestricted category in Never Binge Again. For example on my plan, I can have as many whole, fresh, organic fruits and vegetables as I want to at any time. Within those boundaries, I will try to eat when I'm hungry and stop when I'm full.

I will ask myself what do I really want, how did I feel after I ate it. I might even be trying to connect emotional triggers if I want to eat a little more than I wanted to or something like that, but just like the rules of the road, it took me a while to define and study and integrate, but I don't think about the rules of the road anymore. I just drive intuitively. I eat intuitively within this framework that I spent a lot of time setting up for myself, and so that's where I see intuitive eating fitting in. I think when people really are coming out of anorexia or serious bulimia and they had an eating disorder treatment, I do think that intuitive eating can be successful to restore a certain level of normalcy. Eating some



junk, eating some processed foods is really better than not eating at all. There's no question about that. You could seriously harm yourself by over-restricting, but I think there's a level of maturity that we can all strive for where we can have these rules of the road. We can grow up and look at foods in the world that aren't really food. There are a lot of things that are in bags and boxes and containers that aren't really food and I think we can label it as unhealthy. I think we can do that.

We might decide we want to have some of it anyway and allow some in our plan, but I think having knowledge and clarity about what you're actually putting into your body and what impact it has on your body is something we don't want to turn away from by saying we can't label foods healthy versus unhealthy, so that's my thesis. That's where I've come to with this whole intuitive eating versus Never Binge Again thing and I'm very curious what you think about the whole thing.

**Howie:** I'm sorry. I wasn't listening. Could you just say that again?

**Dr. Glenn:** Sure.

**Howie:** I was intuitively checking email and -- no. That's really helpful and the thing that I appreciate -- I definitely have opinions, but I also have no direct experience and very little professional experience with anorexia or bulimia, so I want to preface my comment by saying that this may not apply to everyone. The folks that I work with tend to have your sort of run-of-the-mill, disordered eating caused by our civilization and our commerce system as opposed to these life-threatening disorders.

**Dr. Glenn:** Howie, let me just say that the same goes for me. I did not specialize in treating eating disorders when I worked. I was a couples and family therapist. I had an eating disorder, so I largely referred people with



serious disorders out to people that did specialize in it. I fixed my own eating problem, which was a binge-eating disorder with exercise. Bulimia was a part of it. I fixed my own problem with Never Binge Again.

I've worked with some patients who were not diagnosed simply anorexic or bulimic but may have been diagnosed with binge-eating disorder. I've worked with some patients like that. I've worked with hundreds of people through the Never Binge Again process. It might even be climbing up towards a thousand at this point, probably not yet. So I'm experienced, but I didn't take any formal eating disorder training. I didn't work at an eating disorders clinic. Not every psychologist is extraordinarily experienced with eating disorders. I had my own personal journey and I wrote the book to help people who didn't seem to be getting better from the traditional treatment. Anyway, go ahead.

**Howie:** That said, that disclaimer up there, let's talk about the metaphor that you used of you drive intuitively. I'll start by saying that I think doing anything intuitively is always the desired goal, but the question is, are we doing it intuitively in getting the results we want? So if someone is eating intuitively and they love their life and they love their body and they love their weight and they love the results of their annual checkup and they love their energy and they love their performance then they're doing intuitive eating correctly, so we all do things intuitively until there's a problem. I can't remember who came up with the model from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence. Are you familiar with that?

**Dr. Glenn:** Yes.



**Howie:**

So basically, intuitive is another word for unconscious, so we're just doing it without thinking about it, so you can drive unconsciously to a certain extent. You're obviously not literally unconscious, but you're not having to focus on it. So unconscious competence is where we want to be and we only discover that we're somewhere else when something goes wrong, when we hit something, when we drive off a cliff then we go, "Oh, I guess I wasn't as competent as I thought I was, so now let me go look for solutions," and then we hit the next stage, which is conscious incompetence and we're like, "I don't know how to do this. I need to find out," and then we hit the next stage, which is conscious competence.

The journey is largely from conscious incompetence to conscious competence and both of those have the word "conscious" in front of them, which means we're working hard. We're burning cycles. We're awkward at it. We're new at it. It doesn't come naturally. It doesn't feel natural. It feels contrived. It feels like someone else is making the rules that we have to follow. That's an inevitable part of any journey when we're trying to improve, so that's one thing.

When you talk about driving intuitively, my guess is -- and I don't believe we've ever driven in a car together, but my guess is that your eyes are open when you're driving.

**Dr. Glenn:** Well, you can make assumptions if you want to.

**Howie:**

Well, if you've been driving for 52 minus 18, whenever you got your license, my guess is your eyes are open. Even if you're focusing on other things, you're still mindful. And when a car runs a red light and you're close to that intersection, you will slam on your brakes. You will intuitively not obey the green light signal because there's some data



that has entered your consciousness that causes you to act very intuitively. A new driver might not even remember which pedal is the brake and which is the accelerator. I remember that when my kids were learning to drive that that wasn't an obvious thing for them for a while and it probably aged me by 20 years.

So if you want to be intuitive, you have to be willing to be mindful of feedback. I know so many people who eat themselves into extreme discomfort. I used to be one of those people. Sometimes I still am. It sounds like you were also. It wasn't just the quality of the food, but the quantity. We would eat more than made us happy. We would hit diminishing returns and then we would hit negative returns and we would keep stuffing our faces, so that's the opposite of intuitive. And when we're doing that, we need to put brakes in place so that our intuition, which is so flawed because we're in a culture of distraction or because the need for dopamine is so overweighing the desire to feel good in our bodies, to not be bloated and full and gassy and miserable, that intuition requires the effort of being willing to open our eyes, to take off the blindfold when we're driving, and to notice for moment to moment what's happening as opposed to starting the journey, putting in the GPS, and completely ignoring any feedback along the way.

Another related issue around the driving metaphor, this idea that all foods are fine and that if we say that Twinkies are evil or cheeseburgers are evil, the word "evil" itself is probably overstating it and fraught. That's kind of the view that people who have standards are making these kinds of moral, ethical judgments and driving themselves crazy over it, so there's a lot of talk like people are trying to achieve purity. They're trying to achieve dispensation from sin. It turns into a whole religious argument.



Orthorexia, this diagnosis about being obsessed with pure eating, imagine if there was something like that called "safearexia" and if you are caught in your local library reading consumer reports about the crash tests of the late model car that you're looking to buy, you'd be suffering from "safearexia" because they're all good. Cars I guess are much safer now than they used to be when we were kids where you could lose an eye on the gear shifter or there weren't seatbelts.

Eating intuitively doesn't mean not having standards. That's my big beef with this whole idea of there's no bad foods. There are and they're supported by a giant industry with tentacles into every aspect of our lives and there's no other industry where aside from food and healthcare where people are encouraged to not look for safe and qualitative differences between options.

**Dr. Glenn:** That's a really good analogy.

**Howie:** I did a podcast interview yesterday with Michael Klaper, who is the medical director at TrueNorth Health Center and one of the things he's done a lot of work on is looking at vegans who fail to thrive. There's a trope in the world that people are lapsed vegans. They'll do good for a while, but after a while, they're going to miss out on important nutrients. This isn't to say that veganism is relevant here, but that was his topic.

So he examined health records and food diaries and food interviews, thousands of vegans and those who fail to thrive and either continue to fail to thrive because they were ethical vegans or went back to eating animal products, and one of the things he said was the thing is you go vegan and all of a sudden you start feeling tired and weak and lethargic. And then you say that will pass in a couple of days and it doesn't pass in a week or two. And then you go out to lunch and you



have a piece of salmon and all of a sudden you feel great and you're like, "Oh, okay. Obviously my body needs meat." What's going on there?

What happens is that our bodies, our muscles are supposed to produce these chemicals that promote muscle growth and development, strength, things like carnitine and choline and our bodies are supposed to do it ourselves, but when we eat a very heavy meat-centric diet, we're getting all those chemicals from our environment, from our food, so our bodies downregulate so we don't need to make this --

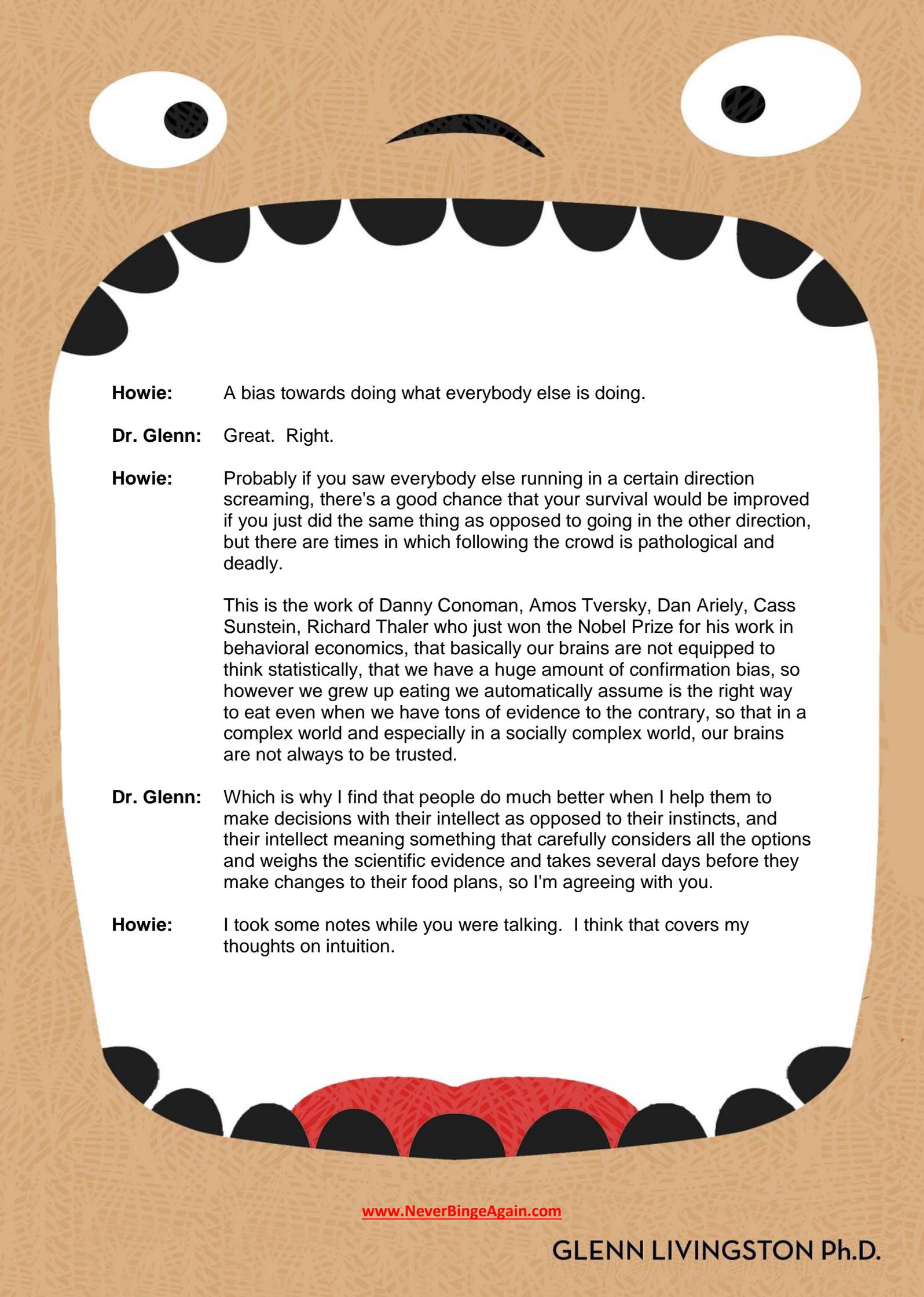
**Dr. Glenn:** Oh, that's interesting.

**Howie:** -- because it's coming in. And so then when you stop it, your muscles might take weeks or months to upregulate. In that case, it's almost like withdrawal from a psychiatric drug. If you try to withdraw somebody from Prozac or Abilify cold turkey, intuitively they would know within three days that they're much better off on the drug.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right. We can't completely trust our intuition in a world which has addicted us to all of these industrial chemicals. We can't because the whole point of the industrial chemicals is to mess with our intuition.

**Howie:** Right. Our intuitions aren't always right even in natural circumstances. There's an entire body of science called behavioral economics that looks at the ways in which we have these systematic biases that are basically playing the odds and they may have worked a lot of the time, but they don't work all the time.

**Dr. Glenn:** What do you mean?



**Howie:** A bias towards doing what everybody else is doing.

**Dr. Glenn:** Great. Right.

**Howie:** Probably if you saw everybody else running in a certain direction screaming, there's a good chance that your survival would be improved if you just did the same thing as opposed to going in the other direction, but there are times in which following the crowd is pathological and deadly.

This is the work of Danny Conoman, Amos Tversky, Dan Ariely, Cass Sunstein, Richard Thaler who just won the Nobel Prize for his work in behavioral economics, that basically our brains are not equipped to think statistically, that we have a huge amount of confirmation bias, so however we grew up eating we automatically assume is the right way to eat even when we have tons of evidence to the contrary, so that in a complex world and especially in a socially complex world, our brains are not always to be trusted.

**Dr. Glenn:** Which is why I find that people do much better when I help them to make decisions with their intellect as opposed to their instincts, and their intellect meaning something that carefully considers all the options and weighs the scientific evidence and takes several days before they make changes to their food plans, so I'm agreeing with you.

**Howie:** I took some notes while you were talking. I think that covers my thoughts on intuition.



**Dr. Glenn:** What's your takeaway then? Where do you land in terms of what you would advise people to do and how you would conduct your own eating?

**Howie:** I would say you'd want to plant gardens of intuition within your food universe, so you have some gardens of intuition around fruits and raw greens and things like that. These are foods that are good for us. Therefore, I can trust myself around that. They're not going to bite me. They're not going to explode. Once you start cultivating these little gardens and you do it through mindfulness, if you were to say, "Well, I can have an unlimited amount of fruit," I'm sure that you could eat bananas until you're miserable.

**Dr. Glenn:** I don't.

**Howie:** It's hard. You could force yourself.

**Dr. Glenn:** I could force myself to eat bananas until I'm miserable.

**Howie:** There's a thing that happens when we get rid of all the toxic imitations of food. Then our bodies can begin to re-regulate and we can begin to notice satiety signals and begin to notice signals for cravings for actual nutrients as opposed to cravings for Nestle Crunch.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right.

**Howie:** To live intuitively around our food is a noble pursuit. We will know when we get there when we're achieving our goals and we are at peace around our food. And I think it really goes hand in hand with developing mindfulness, which is another thing that in our ancestral environment we would have had a lot of. You wouldn't survive if you



weren't finally attuned to your environment, and we've lost the need for that. We've lost the ability for it through our culture of endless distraction through advertising and promotion, and so we have to reclaim that. We can't just be intuitive with our attention because if I was intuitive with my attention, I would spend all day on my phone.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right, or on Facebook.

**Howie:** Yeah, on Facebook on my phone.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah, and Facebook on your phone. There you go. There was no powdered sugar on the savannah and it's possible that if you went outside and got a little small bowl of dirt and rocks or pebbles and you put enough powdered sugar on it that you might intuitively feel like there was something you needed in there. I think that we have to get rid of the dirt and rocks before we can start to really trust our intuition. I guess that's what you're saying, right?

**Howie:** Yeah, and the powdered sugar.

**Dr. Glenn:** And the powdered sugar, right. Okay. Well, this was a really interesting discussion. I feel validated and one day I want you to listen to one of the podcasts where I was interviewed by the intuitive eating crowd and they tore me apart. I wasn't quite prepared for it, so I couldn't hold my ground like I did in this more friendly conversation.

**Howie:** Is that the one you wrote about on Facebook the other day?

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah. Sometimes I wind up on a hostile podcast and I get a lot of bad reviews, and then that interferes with our ability to spread the word on Amazon, so I'm always asking people if they liked what we have to say,



if they could pop over and give us a review. I'll let you hear it and you'll know. Okay. Thanks, buddy! This was really great.

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