

Fad Diets

Published 20 September 2022, with Janet Chrzan.

The average American starts in on a fad diet four times a year. A quarter give up after two weeks. What are they hoping for? Janet Chrzan provides plenty of answers in her book *Anxious Eaters: Why We Fall for Fad Diets*. Chrzan is a nutritional anthropologist who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania,

I started by asking what makes a diet a fad diet.

Janet Chrzan: For the book, we use the Pennington Biomedical Research Group definition and it has seven points. I'll just do them quickly. Asks the user to eliminate one or several food groups. Promises quick results. Uses personal testimonies. Often uses a certain or special foods that they claim have advantages for weight loss or health. Often recommends supplements or pills as part of the diet. They're almost always endorsed or advertised by a celebrity. And frankly, they usually sound too good to be true.

And they are. Too good to be true. But are Americans particularly susceptible to fad diets?

Janet: I think very possibly we are. And I think this is because socially we're a nation, mostly of immigrants; of course, not entirely. And many of our populations have they've come here, they've left behind ecosystems, food systems, food rules, rituals, food cultures. So that has left people historically a little unmoored. And we also believe very strongly in self determination and that the individual has control over the self, can control the self, their body, their health, and indeed should do so. But I think it's historical as well, because the New World was a place of abundance. So we've had this abundance and we've had to deal with it somehow. And that leaves us open, I think, to believing in diets and diet miracles.

Jeremy: But that's interesting because the abundance. Do you think humans just find it hard to not eat when there's an abundance? I mean, this is kind of the problem. We've never had to deal with hyper abundance before as a society.

Janet: You've nailed it. Yeah. Yeah. We are in this unprecedented experiment right here where we have more food, more abundance for those of us who are privileged. Right. Let's be very clear. We have more food than our species has ever had to deal with. And this is relatively recent. There's always been people in any society that had plenty of food. They were very privileged. But this privilege has now extended at least calorically to many, many, many of the people who live, particularly in the global north or the west. So all of the foods that we we have in front of us are foods that would have been highly desirable 100 years ago, 500 years ago, 50,000 years ago. So, yes, we have unprecedented abundance and unprecedented opportunities.

Jeremy: Let's go back to the diets for a minute. You put diets into one of four categories. And let's start with food removal diets. I mean, all diets kind of involve removing food, but the fad diets seem to involve removing particular, specific foods. So what makes a diet a food removal diet?

Janet: Well, the way we structured this by lumping them, each of the different categories has some structural background where they have some rationale that defines why the diet works or why it should be followed. And of course, food removal is usually, as you said, a specific element of the diet should be removed or almost removed. It's almost always a macronutrient, but not always. And the rationale is usually buried in medical pseudoscience, where perhaps the diet component that might be bad for someone with a specific physical condition ends up being universalised to be considered bad for everyone. And the rationale is, if it's bad for someone, it's probably bad for everyone. A little bit bad, right?

It then becomes a dichotomising process that allows the adherent to abjure foods based on their perceived contents. So it's very, I would say, intellectually salient in some ways, because it plays upon a narrative that we have about contagion. In some ways, consumption is so profoundly important. Again, in a wealthy Western world, for those of us who are privileged, consumption often serves to define the self to others: what you wear, what you eat, what kind of car you drive. They all say something about who you are and more importantly, how successful you are. And maybe even more important than that, how you wish to be perceived about how successful you are.

Jeremy: But one of the things you say also quite strongly is that these diets, you're kind of primed to fail. You may wish to portray yourself as successful, but you can't even succeed in staying on the diet.

Janet: So yes, it's hard to stick to a fad diet. If you think about a fad diet, if you think about eliminating, say, carbohydrates, you're eliminating not only an essential macronutrient and something that carries in your food a lot of other nutrients that we need. And it's socially very hard to do. These diets and fad diets are more often food shifting than food reduction. And it's that change of habits that make sociality more difficult. It's very hard if you have a normal family and social life to stop eating socially or to have a different kind of social experience with food. And in the book, I give a variety of examples of observations of this kind of problem. But just last night we went to a local Greek festival and these are community events. There were hundreds of people there, and it's eagerly anticipated every year, people in about three different townships go to this particular Greek festival. And the lady in front of me getting her food was asking to make sure that she didn't have rice and that she didn't have pasta, and she shouldn't have some of the other things that are such an important part of food offered at the Greek festival. And she was showing clear distress. And so that's kind of, for me, a tip off of something that is difficult to do. Yeah.

Jeremy: You've got another class of diets, which is sort of food addiction diet. So there, what's the difference between considering a specific food a trigger for ill health, like maybe carbohydrates, and being addicted. Do people say they're addicted to food or are they addicted to a particular food? And how does that work?

Janet: I think that conceptually, it is very different to say that you're addicted to something and that is taking on an individualised, sick role. The narrative about addiction, particularly in America, is very, very strong. I taught a harm reduction class for alcohol for Penn students for years, spent a lot of time talking with people who are in recovery and have another book out on alcohol. But that narrative of you're sick, you change your life, you get better, you regain your self, your identity. You often are very much more successful. Is such a clear and unique narrative that's very important, perhaps especially to Americans, with our our focus on personalised success.

Addiction really is something that is individual and it's inside the body. And it's — if you feel that you are addicted to something, then you have that addiction and other people don't. And that's different than, say, a food removal diet that's often premised on the idea of: if some people are gluten sensitive, therefore nobody should eat gluten. It's a very different way of presenting it. So to say, I have this sick role and this is my problem and therefore I'm special. It's very, very powerful. And it might sound a little goofy to say that people believe this, but it's usually focused on sugar and also white flour with the food addiction groups. And you might say, well, that's kind of not nearly as serious as, say, people who are addicted to alcohol or other hard drugs. But the pain of the people who feel that they are addicted is just as real. And when you listen to them or you read the food addiction literature, you hear true distress there. And so we have to respect that distress.

Jeremy: Yeah, but it does it does kind of tie you in knots because on the one hand, there's true distress for sure. But on the other, you're forced to kind of conclude that basically people think they're addicted to something and therefore we may as well treat them as if they are addicted to it.

Janet: Absolutely. And so that kind of gets to this question of, is food addiction real? And that is something that a lot of folks are doing research on. That's not my direct research, but we've reviewed quite a lot of that. And I think there's a real ... psychologists feel quite strongly that that eating can be addictive. So the process of eating is, can be, soothing and it can be addictive in a behavioural way, the same way that gambling is addictive. But I think that we have to be a little more cautious to say that food contents elements, the components of food, things that might be in food, are addictive. The research is ongoing on that topic. Some things are shown to provide certain kinds of psychological or biophysical pleasures, etc. But are they truly addictive in the way that alcohol or opioids are? Where there's a switch that's triggered? A lot of people are trying to find out now if elements of food could be functioning in that way.

Jeremy: I think a lot of food manufacturers are working really hard to make their foods addictive.

Janet: Absolutely. And, you know, this is what the focus really is on this highly processed food and, you know, salt, sugar, fat. Again, banging those evolutionary drums of the components that were more difficult to find in our early Palaeolithic environment and how to combine, that where you just can't resist the potato chips, the crisps, because they have all of the elements that that give you such intense pleasure.

Jeremy: You mentioned Palaeolithic. The Paleo diet does not focus on potato chips, as far as I'm aware. What it does, though, seem to be especially beloved of young right wing men. And why is that, do you think?

Janet: Yeah. Isn't it fascinating? It's also very scary. I think it has a great deal to do with the fact that many people believe — and I will add, erroneously, as I explain in nauseating detail in the book — that the Paleo diet is all about meat. And meat has such important cultural meanings in our Western world. So it has these connections, not only with wealth and privilege, but also with men. And lots and lots of research has been done to show that certainly here in America, people think that women eat salads and men eat steak. And so if you are what you eat, I might think "meat head". But many men think muscle. And if you're a man who's very interested in either developing or preserving a very masculine physique, you're going to gravitate towards those diets that tell you that you are going to retain muscle or build muscle. And if you have a cultural belief that you are what you eat, then that's going to be you've got to eat meat. And therefore the paleo diet makes a lot of sense.

Jeremy: Does it also appeal to women?

Janet: Absolutely. And when I talk to women who are following the paleo diet or some aspect of one of the multiple paleo diets, none of which, we know, are actually paleo diets, that's a whole 'nother story. A lot of times they are interested in health and wellness. The narratives about paleo diets are that it cures or prevents disease. It's in the realm of the preservation of health and living a natural life. It's going to be a sort of optimised life because the paleo diet is the optimal diet for our species, because that's what we evolved to eat. I think that what I mean, getting away from the male dominance and hegemony, that we know that the paleo diet sites are used to radicalise young men, particularly into misogyny, on the other side, to look at it as like a negative force, I think it offers hope for things that

really scare people. I've talked to so many people who have been told that the paleo diet will prevent or even cure cancer. This sounds like such a marvellous opportunity to to assuage that terrible fear.

Jeremy: Okay. Well, finally then then your fourth category is is clean eating. So what makes a food, or a diet for that matter, what makes it clean?

Janet: Isn't clean fun? I have no idea what makes a diet clean. There's really no definition. Or shall I say, it's just kind of wet, mushy. It changes from author to author. There's a magazine called Clean Eating that has a definition that is kind of focused on organic and doesn't have chemicals. And so it's very amorphous. But I think when you talk to people who say, "I'm a clean eater;" and I say, "what does that mean to you?", they'll say, "Well, I'm avoiding chemicals in my food". And then it kind of gets down to chemicals that have been put into foods. So they're worried about environmental. For processing chemicals that penetrate their food and that then cause health problems because that food is penetrating their body. So clean can be whatever you want it to be because it's a powerful, it's a defining, divisive, and really dichotomising word. And you can project what you want onto it so you can feel good about yourself.

Jeremy: Yeah, but just to take a devil's advocate position for a minute, you know, clean eating sounds, if you don't buy into, literally buy into all the stuff you're supposed to purchase, it seems like a good idea. Less processed food, cooking from scratch, maybe even eating organic. That does sound like a healthy choice.

Janet: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And I think one of the things that struck me when I was reading through the — oh, God — dozens and dozens, perhaps hundreds, I think, of these books and diets and recipe books, was that most of the clean eating recipes are pretty ... they're not going to hurt you. They're often quite rational, quite sensible.

But how are we defining "Clean". How is the individual, quote unquote, clean eater defined and clean? Is it a sustainable diet? Is it free of addictive or addictive chemicals? Is it produced in a manner that's supportive of people, the planet? Is it fair to workers, is it kind to the bees. These are kind of process categories, and for me it might be how you define sustainable, hopefully good for you, food. But I think for a lot of people, clean is all about the internal elements or the alleged internal elements and components, the chemicals. I think

that the question is, will what's in this food hurt me? And that's really showing how much people fear their food. It really comes back to this amazing choice that we talked about, with this abundance, that you have so many things you have to choose and your food becomes freighted with moral categories and categories of who the self is in relation to others. And you have just 50,000 food products in a grocery store and the USDA tells you to choose wisely. Right. That choice is really costly socially. It's costly psychologically. So having a sort of easy characterisation of food — clean — simplifies your choices a lot.

Jeremy: Right. Right. Yeah, I see what you're getting at. Instead of going up and down the supermarket aisle paralysed with choice, you say, Well, I can't have that. I can't have that. I can't have that. Here's something I can have.

Janet: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

Jeremy: Aside from reducing the cost of choice, what else do you think fad diets offer to their adherents?

Janet: Well, they offer hope. They assuage our fears. And they offer self transformation. They offer an easy fix to a complicated, thorny, multivariate problem. All you have to do is avoid a or do a, and your wished for the outcome will occur. And originally, we were going to call this book *The Magic Bullet*, because most of these fad diets tell you all you have to do is this simple thing. This one simple thing, or three simple things, and then you'll avoid cancer. You'll be healthy, you'll be wealthy, you'll be slim, you'll have a sexy partner, whatever it is.

Jeremy: And yet, apart from all the glowing testimonials that you'll get, individual stories, which — let's give them the benefit of the doubt, let's say all of those individual stories are true — for most people. most of the time, they don't get what the diet promises.

Janet: No, I don't think they do. But, you know, the books are so powerful and the testimonials are so powerful and so. ... But the fad diets, I think they don't necessarily work most of the time, because just as they call upon these very important cultural narratives for their legitimacy, things being clean, pure and natural, and the way we're supposed to be, whatever it might be. At the same time, they almost always ask people to go against established social and cultural

habits that have to do with food eating and food sharing. And we are a species that shares its food. It's one of the reasons we evolved, so it's really hard to maintain for a long period of time unless you really have a real reason to do it. That is, a real sickness process. You have celiac and you know, you absolutely have to avoid gluten, otherwise you would be very, very ill indeed. It's very hard to make those kinds of choices and changes for a long term period.

Jeremy: What do you think people get not out of, not out of doing the diet, but out of saying that they're following a strict diet?

Janet: Well, fad diets are, I think, rarely about the food. No, they're about health, identity, class, social performance, self transformation. They signal politics, class status, and they really contain and express psychological longings and anxieties. But I think particularly for Americans, they project the idea that you are trying to attain your best self. You are you're engaged in that important act of self transformation of self improvement. And that's something that I think Americans value quite a bit. If you're not trying to self improve, then what are you doing? Just sitting on the couch eating Cheetos?

Jeremy: I wonder what it was like for for you and your co-author Kima. I wonder what it was like for you to read all those fad diet books that you seem to have plowed through. I mean, did it drive you nuts or or are you empathetic to the people who follow fad diets?

Janet: Definitely the latter. And yes, it also drove me nuts being a nutritionist and a nutritional anthropologist, talking to people and listening to what they have to say about their diet, especially if they're following specific diets. And you really have to, I think, recognise that people who are adopting some of these diets are in distress. They often feel that they are powerless and that they are looking for assurances. They're looking for a way to kind of beat through this thicket of too much choice and too many tasty foods and too many indulgences or whatever it is that they feel they are uniquely susceptible to. Their distress is something we have to truly respect. There's real pain.

As far as the originators go, the diet gurus, I think they're cynical. I think they're making money from fear and I think it's highly scripted. Usually the next diet is the last diet with a small twist and a new price tag. And the formula is to pump a book out every two years and

to to have this constant marketing cycle. So I think it's a very well understood, very well scripted manner of making money.

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please [consider joining them](#).