

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #79: Calorie Counting

Hi! You're here! And I'm here! And...I'm another year older! Happy belated birthday to me! Yay for 38! My birthday was actually about a week ago as I'm recording this...it was January 22nd, where my Aquarians at?? And it was such a fun day. I never work on my birthday, it's my day to do what I want and that's what I did! My boyfriend took the day off to spend it with me which was awesome and we went out to breakfast at a place where one of my oldest friend works, we took the train into Boston, and the highlight of the day was going to the New England Aquarium and it was a freakin' blast! I hadn't been since I was little and we'd go there on field trips and I gotta say, even as an adult it was so much fun. Fish and penguins and seals and turtles, oh my goodness I loved them all. They are so fascinating and entertaining. I just love animals so much!

And I love birthdays! 38 isn't very exciting, but I feel good and I'm happy with my life and I'm especially happy that I get to spend my days helping you all and creating less eating struggles in the world. And by the way, the world is showing up. I've worked with people all around the world – Australia, Ireland, England, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, just to name a few and I don't know what's going on but over the last couple months, people are requesting mini sessions in countries that I haven't had anyone reach out to me from before and it's been so fun! Turkey, Japan, Norway, Malaysia, what's up ladies!

Have I mentioned how much I love doing what I do and helping you all? I freakin' do so much!!

Okay okay, let's get down to business. Let's talk about calories.

Some people I work with have no history of counting calories, some do, and some are still struggling with not doing it because they're afraid of letting go of them or they think it's the only way to manage their eating and their weight.

That's how I was. Counting calories had been the main tool I used to lose weight back in college and

for years after that, I continued counting off and on because I believed it was the way to lose weight. I also believed it would help keep me in check with my eating so I wouldn't binge. Basically, I was focused on what I was eating to try and help me not binge, which obviously isn't the way to do it and I now know it's actually all about managing thoughts and feelings as I've talked about in pretty much every episode of this podcast.

Like I said, my calorie counting started way back in college the first time I was ever serious about losing weight back in 2001.

I don't even know how I found out about calories or where I first learned about them, but I do remember getting my tips for eating and exercising from the health and fitness magazines I'd read while working out on the cardio machines at the gym. So maybe there? I don't know.

What I do remember is that I was being told over and over from different sources to not go below 1200 calories because we need that many to live and for our bodies to function properly. I also found a calorie calculator on the internet that would tell me how many calories to eat if I wanted to lose a pound a week given my age, weight, height, and activity level. I'm sure most of you have done one of those at one time or another!

I like math, so I was down to do some addition, and the calorie counting began.

During that time, I was using a website I found somehow, most likely recommended from one of those magazines, where I could input what I was eating and it would add up my calories.

I entered every single thing I ate. I was obsessed with it. Adding up my calories was how I determined what I'd eat and how much. I didn't go by my hunger, I went by the numbers.

I remember my roommate and best friend at the time questioning my obsession with keeping track of calories and I told her that if I didn't do it then I'd overeat.

Basically I thought I wouldn't be able to eat exactly what I need in order to lose weight if I wasn't being so systematic about it. I'd for sure eat too much and ruin my progress.

I didn't trust myself and I was so reliant on the math. This wasn't only during that period of time when I lost weight, that was just the beginning.

Throughout the years between 2002 and when I stopped counting calories a few years ago, I was off and on, sometimes not caring, sometimes caring very much. Maybe it depended on where my frequently fluctuating weight was at or just where my motivation was at.

What I do know is that I thought the best way for me to lose weight, maybe even the only way, was for me to count calories. It was the only thing that had successfully worked for me in the past and I had such a strong belief in it that no one could convince me otherwise....not that people were trying to convince me, but I'd hear things here and there about low-carb and how a calorie isn't a calorie and I didn't believe any of it.

Counting calories had worked for me that one time in college, and there were times I lost some weight doing it over the years, and I didn't know a better way to manage what I was eating and to manage my weight.

But the thing about all of it was that I did not enjoy doing it. I didn't like being a slave to the numbers. I liked having the guideline to follow, it helped me feel secure in my choices, but I didn't like having those being the guidelines.

It wasn't how I wanted to be using my time and sometimes it was hassle, especially if I didn't have time to enter what I ate and was concerned about how much I was going to eat later, or I was with other people and I didn't want them to see me doing it, or if I wasn't able to find what I ate in the app, or if there were multiple results for the same food....which was the accurate one??

There was so much thought going into this and it was not where I wanted to put my thought.

So I'm so happy I found my way out and don't even consider them anymore.

In the last few years as my weight has been much more stable, there's been times when I've put on a little weight I've been able to take it off in a way that I like so much better than counting, there has been zero calorie counting. I have no idea how many calories I eat on a typical day, although I could easily calculate them, probably just from my own knowledge if I wanted to. But I don't. Because I like my life so much more when calories aren't part of the equation when I'm deciding what I want to eat.

And that's where I want to go with you in this episode. It's not about whether or not counting calories is an effective way to manage your eating or manage your weight. There's people out there who are die-hard about calories like I used to be and there are people out there who don't give a crap about them like me now. I'm not going to get into that debate here.

This here, today, is about whether it's something you want to do.

Consider what you want and what works for you, and not just right now as you're still bingeing or wanting to manage your weight, but forever.

Do you want to count calories for the rest of your life? Most people tell me they don't when I ask them that.

It's not how they want to spend their time and energy – doing food math.

And when it comes to choosing how you want to handle your eating at this point in your life, I am always an advocate for eating the way you would be okay with eating for the rest of your life. Instead of counting calories until you get to your goal weight and then relying on your hunger and fullness, learn to rely on it now.

So if you don't want to be counting calories to know how much you should be eating, figure it out based on what your body tells you.

Because really, are the numbers we're given correct? Maybe, maybe not. I'm not going to get in to the debate about whether 1200 or 1500 or 2000 is the correct number of calories to eat. But what if a calculator tells you a number is right for you and your body disagrees? What if your unique body with it's unique composition would prefer more or less?

There's so much information out there, so many opinions so many studies, and so much contradiction.

What's really great about being a human and having all this knowledge and research available to us is that we get to choose what we believe. What sucks about is that we can get confused. How many calories is the right amount?

I used to think I knew the right amount when I was counting, but there were so many times when I'd eat that many and still feel hungry. Or I'd be too full. Because it depended on how hungry I was and what foods I was eating. It's not just the number that matters. 500 calories of potato chips is going to fill you up differently than 500 calories of a salad with chicken and full fat dressing. You'll be more full after eating the salad. Proteins, fats, simple carbs, and complex carbs all fill you up differently. You've probably noticed this for yourself. One of my favorite examples is cheesecake vs regular cake. How much regular cake could you eat vs how much cheesecake?

Back in my binge days, I bet I could eat several slices of a regular cake. But when it comes to cheesecake? I wouldn't get nearly as far. The cheesecake is way richer and more filling, and why? It has more fat and more protein. You might even eat the same amount of calories of each but you're still most likely going to get fuller on less calories eating the cheesecake than the regular one.

Calories are not all the same when it comes to filling you up.

Now, if you have been counting calories, how has it effected you personally? Has it helped with your binge eating and has it helped you to manage your eating?

For some people, myself included, it didn't really help all that much. It actually sometimes even led to binge eating.

If I went over my calories for the day, I'd just say screw the day, give up, and binge. This didn't always happen, but it happened a lot. I was all or nothing, either I stayed below my goal or I failed.

I was talking to one of my clients the other day about this and she was saying how much of a failure she'd feel like if she even went over by a few calories. Seeing it say she was five over didn't feel good at all. And I mean, come on, it's 5 calories! What does that even do??

And what about when you are approaching your goal for the day and you're feeling really hungry. Do you eat according to the numbers or according to your body? This question alone can cause so much confusion and indecision and stress.

Again, it can lead to going over your calorie goal if you choose your body and then how will you feel? Not so great probably.

You want to eat like a normal person. Do normal people count everything they eat? Do they see food as food or as a number?

If you want to rely on your body and not rely on math, there's going to come a time when you're going to have to make that transition. Will it be any easier to do it when you've hit your weight goal or when you've stopping bingeing? Maybe, but probably not. So why not just do it now if that's what you ultimately want to be doing?

You can't build trust unless you let go and actually practice trusting.

From what I know, the best way to begin doing this is by trying to eat as nutritiously as possible. If you're eating mostly a diet of whole, natural foods like vegetables, healthy fats, unprocessed proteins, and limiting your sugar, flour, and simple carb intake, then it is unlikely you will gain a bunch of weight. I've known so many people who aren't naturally, genetically thin, who eat this way and are able to manage their weight effortlessly.

I personally prefer to pay attention to what types of foods I'm eating, when I'm eating, and how I'm feeling. For me, that is how I want to decide what and how much to eat. Not according to the numbers. To me, it actually feels less restrictive than going by calories. I don't have to worry about going over a number if I'm feeling hungrier than usual. I don't have debates about whether or not to eat because I have too few calories left or if I have a lot of calories left and I'm deciding whether to just eat for fun to use them up or not. I categorize my foods with simple labels like protein, fat, grain, starch, not 100 or 300 calories.

Yes it may be scary at first to let go of counting, but sometimes we gotta do the scary things if we want to change how we do things.

I know you may have a fear about not counting calories while you're still bingeing and not knowing exactly how many calories you're eating the day after a binge, but honestly, does it really matter? Has knowing this information helped you at all as you've tried to stop binge eating?

I know a lot of you pick a number to go by that's quite low the day after a binge and you end up restricting in a detrimental way that leaves you feeling far too hungry and can lead to another binge.

So what if you just forgot about the number, and planned out your day in a way that will bring you back to normal. Whether you restrict or eat an adequate amount in the days after a binge, your body will eventually balance itself out. If you binge and then eat adequately the next few days, you're not going to continue to gain weight, that just doesn't make sense.

What it all comes down to is that whether you binge or not and whether you are trying to lose weight or not, however you're eating should be however you'd be okay with eating forever.

So is calorie counting effective? As a whole, the answer to that depends on who you ask and what research you read. But I think an even more important question is whether or not it is effective for you personally.

Do you like doing it or do you find it to be a hassle? Does it help you or hinder you? Does it actually make a difference with your binge eating or does it sometimes drive you into a binge? Do you want to do math with your food or do you want to see food as food?

There are so many different methods out there that are trying to teach you how to eat. People are counting calories, counting macros, using portioned containers, giving specific meals plans and menus, using ridiculous restrictions that you really don't want to follow.

What I say is, do what you want and do it now. Don't wait and don't let fear stop you. Decide what you want to be the deciding factors for your eating and practice eating that way now. Are you going to be perfect at it? Probably not, but you'll only get better if you try and if you're consistent.

Go do it.

Have a fantastic week, talk to you next time, bye bye.