

# Food Rules and Disordered Eating

Strict dieting or strict food rules are common in disordered eating because it's believed they will create the ideal body.

The three most common rules are<sup>1</sup>...

- **When to eat:**

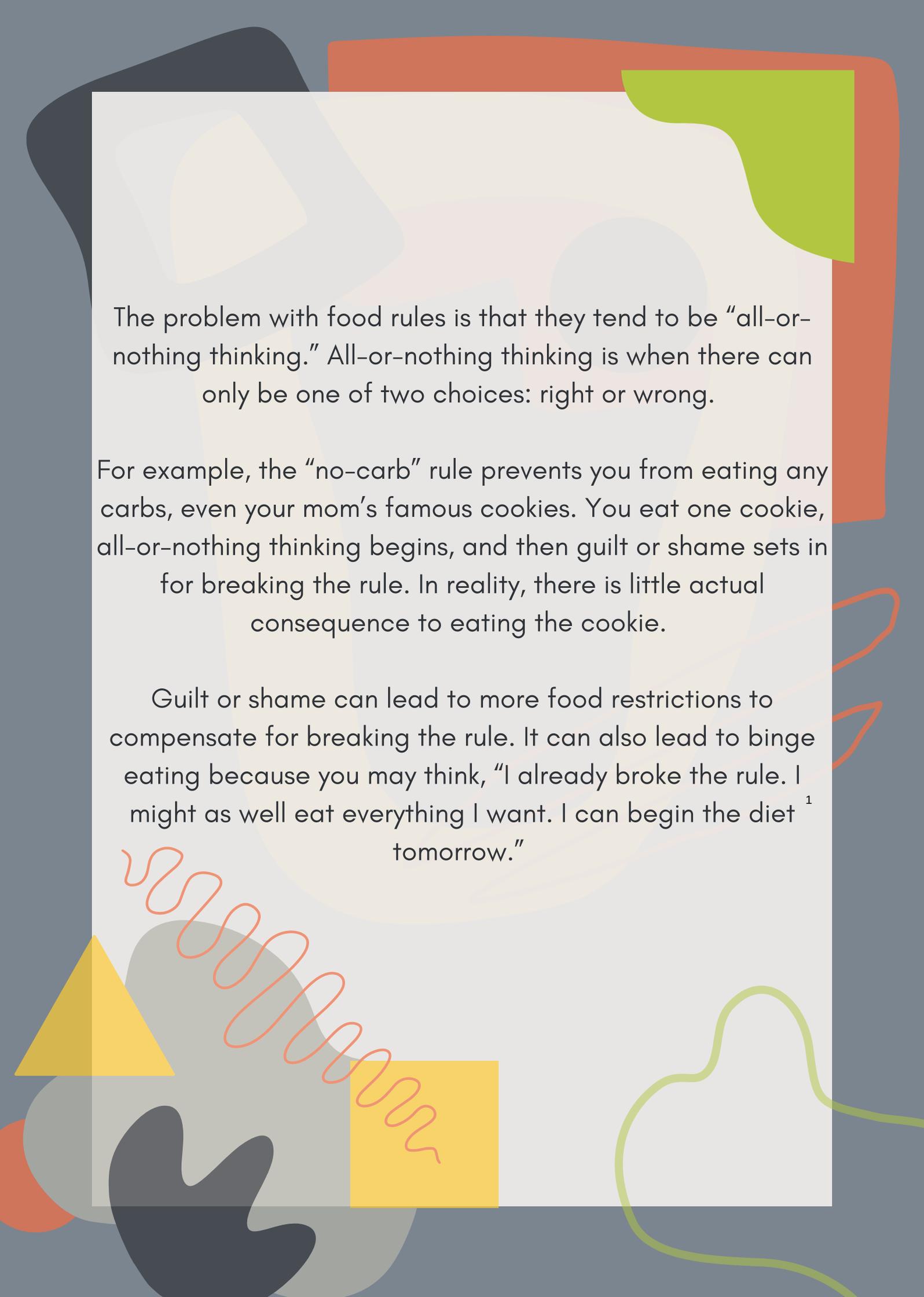
- "I will not eat until lunch" or "I will not eat after 7 pm."
- "I will only eat breakfast, my evening meal, and no snacks even when hungry."

- **What to eat:**

- "I will not eat carbs."
- "I will not eat food when I don't know what the ingredients are."

- **How much to eat:**

- "I can only eat 1100 calories a day."
- "If I am eating with others, I will eat less than anyone else."



The problem with food rules is that they tend to be “all-or-nothing thinking.” All-or-nothing thinking is when there can only be one of two choices: right or wrong.

For example, the “no-carb” rule prevents you from eating any carbs, even your mom’s famous cookies. You eat one cookie, all-or-nothing thinking begins, and then guilt or shame sets in for breaking the rule. In reality, there is little actual consequence to eating the cookie.

Guilt or shame can lead to more food restrictions to compensate for breaking the rule. It can also lead to binge eating because you may think, “I already broke the rule. I might as well eat everything I want. I can begin the diet <sup>1</sup> tomorrow.”

# How to Navigate Food Rules or All-or-Nothing Thinking

## Strategy 1: Challenge Your Thoughts <sup>1</sup>

When you want to challenge that all-or-nothing thinking, try to ask yourself the following:

- What evidence is there that my thoughts are true?
- What evidence is there that they are not true?
- Are there other facts I've overlooked?

Now, try to dispute those thoughts by taking a different perspective. To help you do that ask yourself the following questions:

- How might someone else think about this situation?
- How might I view the situation if I wasn't struggling with my eating and body image?
- What other explanations could there be?
- Am I overlooking something?

## **Strategy 2: Finding the Middle**

Finding the middle is another strategy to challenge all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of looking at something as two choices, try to find the middle ground and avoid thinking in negative or absolute terms.

An all-or-nothing thought could be "I ate a cookie, might as well eat ten more." Instead you could go to the middle and think, "I ate a cookie, and it was really good. Does my body feel that it needs more? How would I feel if I ate more cookies?"

Going to the middle encourages you to be curious about your thoughts and helps you develop more realistic expectations of yourself.

## Resources

1. Eating Disorders Self-Help Resources - Information Sheets & Workbooks. (2021). Center for Clinical Interventions.  
<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Disordered-Eating>