Why do people eat what they do? How can health professionals interact with people in a meaningful way about food and eating? This publication summarizes findings from our food choice research program and suggests ways that health professionals can apply this research to practice. We hope that this report will encourage practitioners to think in new ways about food choice and how they work with their program participants.

First we present a conceptual model for food choice that has emerged from our qualitative studies of food choice involving in-depth interviews with adults in diverse areas of New York State. The remaining pages present questions and probes that professionals can use to engage participants in a dialogue about how and why they select, prepare, and eat food as they do. Health professionals are trained to think about food and eating in certain ways, and their views on food choice may not relate to how participants experience eating. This report emphasizes the many factors that are involved in food choice and the dynamic and situational processes by which they influence food behaviors.

The Food Choice Process Model (Figure 1) tries to represent the factors and processes involved in food choice as viewed from the perspective of the adults we interviewed. The model seeks to portray habitual and unconscious food practices as well as more thoughtful decisions. It conceptualizes each new engagement with food as contributing to a person’s life course experiences related to food. The concepts in the model are described on the next page.
**Concepts in the Food Choice Process Model**

**PERSONAL FOOD SYSTEM**
The way a person constructs the options, trade-offs, and boundaries for daily eating

**Value Negotiations** The food choice values or considerations that are important to people in food choice:

- **Physical well-being** (personal definitions for health, weight, digestibility, performance)
- **Taste** (sensory perception and satisfaction)
- **Cost** (monetary considerations including price and judgment of “worth”)
- **Convenience** (time and effort)
- **Managing relationships** (interpersonal interactions with family, friends, guests, etc.)
- **Other** (such as Quality, Ethics, Environment, Religion)

**Strategies** Adaptive systems people use to simplify and manage food and eating:

- Rules, routines, and habits related to food acquisition, preparation, eating
- Classifications for foods and eating situations according to personal values and meanings
- Ways of balancing and setting priorities when values conflict

**LIFE COURSE EVENTS & EXPERIENCES**
- **Experiences and memories** — childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, marriage, child-rearing, changing household composition, and other relationships
- **Major life events and transitions** — food availability, acquisition, eating, health, residency, roles, relationships, responsibilities
- **Future expectations** — residency, relationships, health, roles, responsibilities

**INFLUENCES**
The multiple factors related to the person and the environment that influence food choice

- **Personal Factors** — age, gender, identities, ethnicity, physical needs, emotions
- **Ideals** — Standards and wishes related to food and eating; “what should be”
- **Resources** — Finances, time, space, equipment, skills, transportation related to food
- **Social Framework** — Personal relationships involved in food choice
- **Food Context** — Food choice settings, availability of foods, influences from information sources

The food choice process model

Adapted from Connors et al. 2001; Furst et al. 1996; & Falk et al. 1996

Ways to Get Participants to Talk about Food Choice

- Create a comfortable conversation
- Use open-ended questions & non-threatening probes to encourage talking
- Start with easy, open-ended questions to build rapport with person and set a tone so that the person will do most of the talking. Sample questions include:

  “What are your favorite foods? Anything else?”
  “How did they get to be your favorites? When was that?”
  “What foods do you dislike? How did that begin?”
  “Tell me how a typical day goes for you in terms of food and eating.”
  “In what settings do you do most of your eating? Tell me about those.”

- Follow questions with probes so that participant will add detail. Sample probes include the following:

  "Help me understand how..."
  "Tell me more about..."
  "Can you explain to me a bit more how this works in your situation."
  "Describe a situation when this occurred."
  "Can you give me an example of what you mean?"
  "I’m interested in what you mean by..."

- Adapt wording to participant’s age, language, cultural background, education, and personality.
- Use different approaches as needed to draw different participants out
- Respond in non-judgmental, accepting manner to whatever person shares.

Sample Questions About PERSONAL FOOD SYSTEM

Use the Sample questions as ideas. Questions are repetitive to show how different phrasing may be used to address the same topic.

Food rules, routines & food habits
- Can you tell me a bit the routines you have for food and eating?
- Do you have any guidelines or rules about food and eating? What are they?
- How would you describe your food habits?
- Tell me about the ways you simplify food and eating for yourself.
- What kinds of foods do you tend to look for? How do you do that?
- Are there foods you try to limit or avoid? Tell me about them.
- Do you ever try to substitute some foods for others? Tell me how this works.
- How stable is the way you are eating right now? Do you expect it to change?
- Have you tried any new foods or routines? How did that work for you?

Classifications for foods & situations
- What are your favorite foods? How did they get to be favorites?
- What are the most important foods you eat?
- What foods couldn’t you do without?
- Are there any foods you crave? Tell me about them
- What foods do you really dislike? What is it that you dislike about them?
- Tell me about the different types of situations that you eat in.
- What are your favorite eating situations? What situations are less enjoyable?

Balancing priorities & resolving conflicts
- What is easy about eating for you? What is difficult?
- Do you have trouble eating the way you would like to? What is difficult about this?
- What do you wish would change about food and eating?
- Tell me about a recent conflict you had related to eating and how you handled it.
Sample Questions About FOOD CHOICE VALUES

Physical well-being – health, weight, digestibility, fitness, performance
- What foods do you like to eat to feel well? Are there foods that you cannot tolerate?
- Do you eat in any particular way to have enough energy for work/school/athletics?
- Do you eat in any particular way to stay healthy? Tell me about that.
- Tell me how you think you should eat to be as healthy as possible.
- Are there any foods that could not possibly fit with eating healthy? Why don’t they fit?
- How does this view of healthy eating compare with the views of other people you know?

Taste – sensory perceptions and satisfaction
- Are there certain food textures you like or dislike? Tell me about them.
- Are there food odors that bother you? Aromas you really like? Tell me about them.
- How have you changed your food preferences over time?
- Can you tell me about certain brands of foods that you prefer above others?
- How easy is it to find foods that taste good in the different situations that you eat?

Cost -- monetary considerations including price and worth
- Are there certain foods you won’t buy based on their cost? Tell me about them.
- Does it ever seem worth it to buy them? When? Why?
- Tell me about any good deals or good values you have found in selecting food.
- What do you do to try save money on food?

Managing Social Relationships – family, friends, co-workers, guests
- How do the people in your life help or hinder your food choices?
- How do the roles you have at home, at work, or in your community affect your food choices?
- Are there situations where eating is difficult because of other people? Tell me about this.

Convenience – time, effort and energy
- How does your daily schedule influence how you eat?
- Is time an issue for you in choosing food and eating? How do you deal with that?
- How do you feel about spending time shopping/cooking/sitting down to a meal?
- Are shopping or cooking difficult for you in any way? Tell me about that.
- What are the most convenient food choices for you?
- Has the amount of time available for food and eating varied over the years?
- When do you generally look for the easier things to eat?
- What do you do to save time and effort in food and eating?

Other Food Choice Values – other considerations important to the individual
- How important is food quality to you?
- Are there certain foods for which quality is more important than others? Which ones?
- How do you determine good food quality?
- How do your religious beliefs affect your food and eating?
- Tell me about any ethical standards that affect how you eat.
- How do your thoughts about food waste influence how you eat?
- How do environmental or ecological considerations affect how you eat?
- What other considerations are important to you when you eat?
Sample Questions About PERSONAL FACTORS

Age
● How does your age influence your food and eating?

Gender
● How does being a man or a woman influence your eating?

Health Status & Special Dietary Concerns
● How does your health status influence the way you eat?
● Are there any foods you cannot tolerate? What are these?
● Do you have any food allergies? Tell me about them.
● What advice have you received from a health professional about how to eat?
● How did you feel about this advice?

Identity
● What type of eater do you consider yourself to be?
● What type of eater do others consider you to be? Your spouse? Your mother? Your friends?
● How does the way you eat compare to other people you know?
● What type of eater would you like to be? What are the reasons you feel this way?
● What type of eater could you never be? Tell me about the reasons you think this way.

Mood & Emotions
● How does your eating relate to your mood or how you feel emotionally?
● When you are sad or upset, what do you tend to do about food?

Ethnicity & Regional Traditions
● How is your ethnicity or regional background related to how you shop, cook, serve meals or eat?
● Help me understand how your ethnic or regional background might influence your eating.
● How have the places where you have lived influenced your eating?
● How do the ethnic or regional backgrounds of others in your household influence your eating?
Getting food
- Where do you usually get your food?
- How well do these places enable you to get the foods you want?

Influence of the media & sources of information
- How much do you read the newspaper and learn about food?
- How much do you hear about food from TV? The radio?
- What have you heard about food lately that sticks in your mind?
- How do you feel about food information you learn this way?

Food and eating in different settings
- In what settings do you do most of your eating?
- Tell me about the food that’s available at those settings?
- What are reasons you eat in these settings?
- Are there other places you sometime eat?
- Tell me about the exceptions to your usual ways of eating.

Probe for more detail on specific time and place settings.
- How is your eating the same or different when the place and time changes?

Sample Questions About Influences

RESOURCES

Finances
- How do your finances shape what and where you eat?
- How flexible or limited are your food choices because of your finances?
- Do you keep to a strict food budget? How do you do it?
- How have your financial resources affected your eating over the years?

Food acquisition—sources of food
- Tell me about how you get the food you eat.
- Are you able to get to the stores/places you like? How do you get there?
- Tell me about what you like and dislike about getting food at these places.
- How much experience do you have getting/buying food for yourself or others?

Kitchen and equipment
- Tell me about where you live and the food facilities there.
- How does the place where you live influence your food choices?

Time
- How does your schedule influence what you eat?
- How would your eating change if you had more/less time?

Food preparation knowledge and skills
- How much experience do you have cooking?
- Tell me about the things you like to cook.
- What kind of a cook do you consider yourself to be?
- What are some things you would like to make? What are the reasons you don’t make these now?

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Food and eating at different stages of life

Ask about each stage ......

- What was eating like when you were a ...
- What are your fondest food memories of that time?
- What things that you did back then still influence your eating today?

Major eating changes
- What major eating changes have you made during your life?
- What was going on when you made these changes?
- Tell me about events in your life that significantly affected the way you choose food.

Health changes across life
- How has your health changed over your life?
- Tell me about your weight and eating history across your life so far.
- How does this affect your food choices?

Places you have lived
- Tell me about all the places you have lived and how they might have influenced your eating.
- How did food and eating change each time you moved?
- Tell me about all the people you have lived with. How did they influence your food and eating?

Future expectations
- What food and eating changes do you expect in the future?
- How do you think you will be eating in 1 year? 5 years? 10 years?

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References


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