

# FOOD DIARY 101



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# FOOD DIARY 101

A food diary is a powerful tool that supports communication and transparency between Health Coaches and their clients.

Before advising clients to use a food diary, remember that people don't always represent their own diets accurately. For some, this occurs out of embarrassment – they don't feel comfortable sharing what they actually eat each day or they embellish their eating habits to make them seem healthier. For others, it may simply be a lack of awareness – they think they had only a few potato chips, but they actually ate most of the bag. This misrepresentation happens because they sincerely feel their diet is more nutritious than it actually is.

A food diary can help you find patterns in your clients' diets while also helping clients build awareness around their food choices. This information is useful in the larger picture of helping clients connect their eating habits to how they feel, which may help identify potential shifts that will support your clients' well-being.

In order to use this tool effectively, you have to establish a strong sense of trust between you and your clients – if your clients don't feel safe giving you an accurate picture of their food intake, this tool won't be of much use. It's important that you remain supportive, nonjudgmental, open, and encouraging during your time with your clients so they feel they have the space to share these personal details with you.

To get the best results using a food diary, help your clients understand what information should be included. Typically, three days is an adequate time frame for a general food diary. If possible, including two weekdays and one day over the weekend can help highlight potential dietary shifts during the weekend that might be missed if focusing solely on weekdays.

Still, you may have clients who respond to the food diary best when they can determine how to make it their own. Talk with your clients and coach them through the best food diary strategy for them based on their goals and personality type.

You may find that some clients enjoy tracking their diet, but if it seems like a client is taking food tracking overboard, it's time to take a step back; this tool is no longer working in their favor. Ask high-mileage questions and bring the focus back to primary food.

If a client has a history of disordered eating or is prone to obsessive thinking or self-shaming, you may want to avoid food diaries and instead use different tools when working with them. If necessary, review your scope of practice to determine the appropriate action. Remember to emphasize a positive and curious approach to using a food diary and continue to check in with your clients to assess their feelings toward it.

## BENEFITS OF USING A FOOD DIARY

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**Awareness:** Reviewing a food diary periodically can empower you to coach from a place of genuine curiosity and compassion. Every person you work with is unique, and you will most likely find that exploring your client's food choices and thought processes through a food diary will help you work together to reach their goals. The benefit of awareness also extends to your clients as they begin to make connections between their diet and how they feel.

**Symbol of Transformation:** A food diary is an empowering symbol that allows you and the client to celebrate their health transformation as you compare their habits when you first met to their habits after working together for a few months or more. It also provides objective evidence of what does and doesn't work for a client when it comes to food and the progress made toward their goals.

**Accountability:** You may find that some clients struggle with consistency. A food diary can be a strong accountability tool as they work to integrate new healthy habits into their lifestyle. It also increases transparency so they understand the ins and outs of their diet and how their food is making them feel.

## WHEN TO USE A FOOD DIARY

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**At the start of a coaching relationship:** You can recommend clients use a food diary to get honest with themselves and give you a clear idea of where they are in terms of food, emotions, and their physical health.

**As a checkpoint at set intervals throughout a coaching program:** Remember, as your clients evolve, so do their unique challenges with primary and secondary food. Food diaries can help troubleshoot roadblocks and course correct with ease.

**Every day:** Some clients will want to record their food and connected feelings every day – just be sure it doesn't cause obsessive behavior. Check in periodically to ensure the food diary is still serving their wellness vision.

## TIPS FOR YOU AS THE COACH

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**Be sensitive:** Remember that food journaling is deeply personal. It's likely you'll be the only person who has the privilege of seeing your client's food diary. Be aware that this exercise might bring up strong emotions for your client. When discussing your client's food diary, it's important to offer your support and remain nonjudgmental.

**Emphasize progress over perfection:** You might notice opportunities to increase the nutritional quality of your client's diet, especially when you first start working together. Keep your coaching points focused and aim to provide no more than 1–3 solid takeaways from each session rather than bombarding your client. This will reassure the client that progress is within reach and that you're truly on their team. Keep your feedback positive.

**Seek to understand:** Analyze your client's food diary thoughtfully. Look for clues that reveal their personal relationship with primary and secondary food. Ask clarifying questions to reach a place of understanding and high-mileage questions that push your client to explore larger patterns or themes in their diary. Periodically ask your client questions like, "How's it going?" or "How does this exercise feel for you?"

**Be flexible:** Encourage your client to customize the diary to fit their bio-individual needs. You may even want to create a version of this tool that clients can adapt – prepare to be amazed by their creativity! Finally, know when to move on to a different coaching tool or strategy if the food diary is no longer serving your client's needs.

## WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU INCORPORATE A FOOD DIARY INTO YOUR SESSIONS

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Food diaries are invaluable because they promote awareness and allow clients to track their physical and emotional reactions to food. This way, they can see for themselves what works and what doesn't. From there, they learn their power foods and those that negatively impact them based on personal evidence. It's one thing to read a book about how bad junk food is for you; it's another to see how it affects your body, energy, and mood firsthand.

Food diaries help clients feel accountable. Many people have to see things for themselves in order to make lasting, sustainable changes. You can't just tell clients to stop eating a particular food. They have to witness for themselves how it impacts them. Then they can decide if it's worth eating.

As clients journal, they'll come to their own breakthrough moments and essentially learn to coach themselves. This doesn't mean they won't need you – everyone needs outside perspective and support! Once clients learn how food affects them through experience and observation, you can dive into other subjects to help them find nourishment, not only with secondary food but primary food as well.

## TIPS TO SHARE WITH CLIENTS

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**Be honest:** Write everything down and be as specific as possible. Things like portion size, meals out of the house, sauces/dressings used, and type of food (e.g., processed vs. homemade) can be important. This is the whole point of food journaling.

**Be kind:** This is a safe space for you! Avoid self-judgment and overanalyzing.

**Be creative:** There's no right or wrong way to keep a food diary, so experiment to see what works for you. You might find you enjoy keeping a food diary every day, just on weekdays, or every so often as a check-in.

**Be intuitive:** Allow your food diary to strengthen your intuition about what to eat and what makes you feel happiest and healthiest. Explore the categories that feel right for your life and be open to evolving your use of this tool as you grow. Your intuition will guide you. It will also reveal patterns that you can discuss further with your Health Coach.



On the following pages, you'll find instructions on how to fill out the Food Diary Template so you and your clients can get the most out of it during your sessions. Feel free to print these instructions to give to your clients along with the template.

## FOOD DIARY INSTRUCTIONS

This is an example of a completed food diary.

Notice how emotional and physical states are included alongside food consumed.

It might look like a lot, but don't worry. We'll walk you through completing each section.

### FOOD DIARY

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

|           | Food  | Emotional  | Physical  |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| Breakfast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 am; takeout from coffee shop</li> <li>• 3/4 everything bagel</li> <li>• 3 tbsp cream cheese</li> <li>• 16 oz black coffee</li> <li>• 2 packets sugar</li> </ul>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed. I felt rushed this morning and ate quickly</li> <li>• Started thinking about eating lunch mid-morning, even though I wasn't hungry</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt jittery</li> <li>• Feel very full</li> </ul>  |
| Lunch     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 pm; ate at desk</li> <li>• 1/2 homemade mandarin chicken salad</li> <li>• Balsamic vinaigrette</li> <li>• Whole wheat breadstick</li> <li>• Unsweetened iced tea</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed about a project at work that isn't going as planned</li> <li>• Craved something sweet</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling tired and having trouble focusing. Drank an iced tea for boost</li> <li>• Still feeling a strange fullness sensation from this morning; bloated</li> </ul> |
| Dinner    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 pm; at home</li> <li>• Grilled lemon pepper salmon</li> <li>• Asparagus</li> <li>• Quinoa</li> <li>• Red wine</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling anxious and a little depleted from worrying about work project all day</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bloating. Experiencing mild constipation</li> <li>• Felt more alert after walk home</li> </ul>   |
| Snacks    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3:30 pm</li> <li>• Apple slices with peanut butter</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxious</li> </ul>  |   |

#### HEALTHY DAILIES:

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Glasses of water         | _____ (80 oz)                               |
| Vegetables and/or fruits | _____                                       |
| Protein                  | _____                                       |
| Healthy fats             | _____                                       |
| Supplements              | _____ (Fish oil, multivitamin, probiotic)   |
| Movement                 | _____ (45-minute run - 4.5 miles)           |
| Sleep                    | _____ (6 hours, had trouble falling asleep) |
| Self-care                | _____ (Homemade lunch)                      |

## FOOD

List the food items you eat in the Food column for each meal, including **Breakfast**, **Lunch**, **Dinner**, and **Snacks**. You may find it helpful to note the time and source of each meal to have a complete picture of your eating habits. You can be as specific or as general as you'd like. Check out samples below of a general food entry and a more detailed entry. Keep in mind that the more detailed the entries are, the more you will get to know your true habits. Experiment with different ways of tracking your food to discover what works best for you!

### General food intake sample

|           | Food                             |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| Breakfast | • 8 am; takeout from coffee shop |
|           | • Bagel w/cream cheese           |
|           | • Black coffee with sugar        |

### Detailed food intake sample

|           | Food                             |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| Breakfast | • 8 am; takeout from coffee shop |
|           | • 3/4 everything bagel           |
|           | • 3 tbsp cream cheese            |
|           | • 16 oz black coffee             |
|           | • 2 packets sugar                |

## EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL

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When you eat, it's important to be mindful of how your food makes you feel, both physically and emotionally.

Tuning in to your emotional responses can reveal patterns and imbalances in your primary food that may be affecting your diet. Identifying physical symptoms your body has after eating particular foods can reveal food sensitivities that are interfering with your ability to feel your best.

To explore how your diet is impacting your emotional and physical states (and vice versa!), there is space on the food diary to record the responses that might come up before, during, and after eating. If you choose to track your emotional and physical responses to food, be sure to set aside time for reflection and analysis. Look back at your diary and search for patterns. At first, you will want to review and reflect every day. Eventually, it may be helpful to check in every few days or weekly.

This is a close-up of the Food, Emotional, and Physical sections of a completed food diary.

## FOOD DIARY

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

|           | Food  | Emotional  | Physical  |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| Breakfast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 am; takeout from coffee shop</li> <li>• 3/4 everything bagel</li> <li>• 3 tbsp cream cheese</li> <li>• 16 oz black coffee</li> <li>• 2 packets sugar</li> </ul>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed. I felt rushed this morning and ate quickly</li> <li>• Started thinking about eating lunch mid-morning, even though I wasn't hungry</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt jittery</li> <li>• Feel very full</li> </ul>  |
| Lunch     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 pm; ate at desk</li> <li>• 1/2 homemade mandarin chicken salad</li> <li>• Balsamic vinaigrette</li> <li>• Whole wheat breadstick</li> <li>• Unsweetened iced tea</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed about a project at work that isn't going as planned</li> <li>• Craved something sweet</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling tired and having trouble focusing. Drank an iced tea for boost</li> <li>• Still feeling a strange fullness sensation from this morning; bloated</li> </ul> |
| Dinner    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 pm; at home</li> <li>• Grilled lemon pepper salmon</li> <li>• Asparagus</li> <li>• Quinoa</li> <li>• Red wine</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling anxious and a little depleted from worrying about work project all day</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bloating. Experiencing mild constipation</li> <li>• Felt more alert after walk home</li> </ul>   |
| Snacks    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3:30 pm</li> <li>• Apple slices with peanut butter</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxious</li> </ul>  |   |

## HEALTHY DAILIES

Self-care is a vital component of health. Your food diary is a great place to record the loving actions you show yourself daily, like drinking water, moving your body, and getting enough sleep. Everyone's personal care routine will look different, so record your Healthy Dailies in a way that works for you! Some people find it useful to create the scales below based on personal goals or by rating their satisfaction with each Healthy Daily. There are different ways to interpret the scale, so decide how you want to use it.

FOOD DIARY

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

|           | Food  | Emotional  | Physical  |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| Breakfast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8 am: bakery from coffee shop</li> <li>3/4 everything bagel</li> <li>3 tbsp cream cheese</li> <li>16 oz black coffee</li> <li>2 packets sugar</li> </ul>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stressed: I felt rushed this morning and ate quickly</li> <li>Startled thinking about eating lunch in a meeting, even though I wasn't hungry</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Felt jittery</li> <li>Felt very full</li> </ul>  |
| Lunch     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12 pm: ate at desk</li> <li>1/2 homemade mandarin chicken salad</li> <li>Balsamic vinaigrette</li> <li>Whole wheat breadstick</li> <li>Unsweetened iced tea</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stressed about a project at work that isn't going as planned</li> <li>Crowed something sweet</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling tired and having trouble focusing. Drink an iced tea for boost!</li> <li>Still feeling a strange fullness sensation from this morning's breakfast</li> </ul> |
| Dinner    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 pm: at home</li> <li>Grilled lemon pepper salmon</li> <li>Asparagus</li> <li>Quinoa</li> <li>Red wine</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling anxious and a little depleted from worrying about work project all day</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bloated: Experiencing mild constipation</li> <li>Felt more alert after walk home</li> </ul>  |
| Snacks    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3:30 pm</li> <li>Apple slices with peanut butter</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anxious</li> </ul>  |   |

HEALTHY DAILIES:

Glasses of water: \_\_\_\_\_ (80 oz)

Vegetables and/or fruits: \_\_\_\_\_

Protein: \_\_\_\_\_

Healthy fats: \_\_\_\_\_

Supplements: \_\_\_\_\_ (Fish oil, multivitamin, probiotic)

Movement: \_\_\_\_\_ (45-minute run - 4.5 miles)

Sleep: \_\_\_\_\_ (6 hours, had trouble falling asleep)

Self-care: \_\_\_\_\_ (Homemade lunch)

### HEALTHY DAILIES:

Glasses of water

(80 oz)

Vegetables and/or fruits

Protein

Healthy fats

Supplements

(Fish oil, multivitamin, probiotic)

Movement

(45-minute run - 4.5 miles)

Sleep

(6 hours, had trouble falling asleep)

Self-care

(Homemade lunch)