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“My boyfriend and I almost broke up today. We had been waiting for an hour to be seated at our favorite restaurant. The hostess barely acknowledged our presence. I tapped my foot impatiently. As each moment ticked by, I became more and more hangry. I kept needling him about whether he had gone grocery shopping today. Then I critiqued the list of things he bought. We’ve been trying to eat healthier. The result? No food in the house. He told me to be quiet and turned away from me. He didn’t feel like talking. He said, “I’m starving, what’s the freaking holdup?” Eventually, he walked out the door. He stood outside and paced. I screamed out the door for him to just leave. It got ugly, fast. When we are hangry, neither one of us is a rational human being.”

—Ava

We’ve all been there.

All of us have snapped at someone just because we were hungry. And probably someone we know and love has crabbed at us simply because they had a seriously empty belly. When we’re not well fed, none of us are at our best. Irritable. Snappy. Downright angry. With my clients, I call this feeling “hangry,” a popular term that combines *hungry* and *angry*.

But it’s not just being hungry that can ruin our mood. Over-eating leads to feelings that are just as unpleasant. Hanger can lead us to overeat, which leaves us feeling what I call “regretfull” —

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a combination of *regret* and *full*. It is the physical and emotional discomfort that comes from overeating in a mindless way. I'll explain these concepts in more detail throughout the book. But my guess is that if you are reading this right now, you've experienced them firsthand already. At one time or another, we have all experienced the downright unpleasant feelings that come from being too hungry or overly full.

In my work with thousands of clients in my office and through my virtual practice, I've learned an important truth. Emotions have a huge impact on the way you eat. And what you eat has a significant impact on how you feel. But managing your hunger isn't easy. It's tricky to stay on top of hunger—feeding your stomach just the right amount, not too much and not too little.

The good news is that there are simple, effective strategies for managing hunger-induced moodiness. And strategies that don't just prevent moodiness, but actually boost your mood through eating. Yes, that's right. Eating well can make you feel amazing!

I call it Hanger Management. In this book, we'll get to the bottom of what causes hanger—and how to prevent it. And using the techniques of mindful eating, you'll learn to be on top of your eating habits and at your best. As a special bonus for buying this book, please visit my website, eatingmindfully.com, for freebies to help you kick hanger to the curb.

HANGER MANAGEMENT: IT'S PROBABLY NOT WHAT YOU THINK – AND THAT'S GOOD NEWS!

The other day I went to a birthday party for a colleague of mine who was turning forty. Her husband had it catered, and the dining room table was a sea of desserts, including cookies, cakes, and pie: everything a sweet tooth could desire. As I was standing by

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the table, eyeing the spread, a woman who didn't know me well came up. "You would never touch this," she said, gesturing at the feast. I cringed a little and quickly dispelled this idea by letting her know that I'd been eyeing the chocolate peanut butter pie.

People who don't know me make a lot of assumptions about the way I eat, probably because they know food is my area of expertise. That makes sense. But I'm often surprised by their assumptions. They hypothesize that I don't like food or that I'm a strict mouse who only eats salad. I guess that surprises me because what human being doesn't like food? So over and over again, I tell them: "I *love* food. It makes me happy. What makes me unhappy isn't food. It's when I eat too much of it. Or too little. That's what makes me unhappy." And that is the truth.

It's likely the same for you. It's not chocolate-chip cookies that ruin your day. It's when you eat five of them and find yourself deep in the throes of regret that causes you grief.

Food makes me happy in all kinds of ways. It tastes good—so amazingly spectacular. I spend my free time looking up new restaurants, food reviews, inventive recipes, and cooking videos. Next week, I am going to Charleston for the first time. The very first thing I did after making plans to be in the city was look up restaurant reviews and make a list of the best options. In fact, my favorite thing to do in new cities I visit is schedule a food tour. Almost every city has one. A guide walks you around the city taking a bite of food here and there at different well-loved restaurants. Often, the foods they choose have a historical significance to the city. For example, I mindfully tasted beignets in New Orleans and Detroit-style pizza when in Michigan. I even like to watch food being made when I don't get to eat it: in the past few years, I've been mesmerized by internet videos that show just hands, at fast speed, making recipes.

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Most of all, I love to enjoy great food at home. My husband and I have friends, parents of our kids' friends, who love to cook. They bring over their creations, and my family gets to be the guinea pig—lucky us! Yesterday, they brought a vegan strawberry, blueberry, and blackberry crisp with a brown-sugar-sprinkled crust. We spend Friday nights making food together, drinking wine, and chatting. I can't even tell you how happy that makes me.

I love the taste of my favorite flavors on my tongue and expanding my palate. This year, for example, when traveling in Sicily, I ate a prickly pear for the very first time. I remember looking at it closely. The green skin was bumpy and unfamiliar to me. I didn't even know how to eat it. Thankfully, my friend showed me how to slice it and take a bite—seeds and all. It was sweet and different—unlike any other fruit I have had. Now it's added to my list of dessert items that I enjoy.

Think for a moment right now. What about food makes you happy? Trying new things? The taste? Sharing food with friends? There are just so many aspects of food to love.

Still, it's not just the deliciousness of food that makes me joyous. Yes, that's a big part of it. But here is a confession. I am such a better person when I am well fed and eating mindfully. Maybe you are, too. Well-fed Susan is much more patient with her kids. She doesn't let their minor squabbles bother her. She can wade through tasks she doesn't enjoy as much, like paying bills or paperwork. The not-hungry, mindfully fed Susan is very present mentally. She can listen to your story in counseling or on the phone and remember every single word of it. On the other hand, the empty-stomached version of Susan misses details because that nagging little thought, "What should I eat?" keeps popping into her mind, distracting her.

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I'm at my best when I'm like a mindful-eating Goldilocks: I don't have too much or too little, but something that's just right. I love the feeling of having eaten just enough—satisfied, but not too full.

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well,” Virginia Woolf wrote, close to a hundred years ago. It's one of my favorite mantras in life, and I include it in all my writing. And my goal is to help people do just that. But what I have found for myself, and others, it is that it takes some very specific strategies to make that happen. It's not easy, but possible!

10 Types of Hangry People

Not all hangry people are the same. In this chapter, we will review all the reasons people get hangry. And all the ways they express it. But as I've seen people in my office talk about hanger, year after year, I've discovered some interesting common themes.

The bottom line: all hangry people suffer from a chronic mismatch between their hunger level and the actions they take to satisfy it. To prevent hanger, you have to get to know your hunger like the back of your hand. So as you read these examples, think about how they can help you be mindful of your own hunger.

After you read, take a moment to pause and ask yourself if you identify with one or more of these types (you can be more than one).

1. Too Busy to Eat

Each morning, Karen packs lunches for her three kids and struggles to find their socks and get homework into backpacks, all while trying to choose the right pair of shoes for her own morning meeting. “I want to eat healthy,” she says, again and again. But those words are always

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followed by “but I just don’t have time.” To Karen, eating feels like a time luxury she can’t afford.

The consequence: When Karen gets to work, she rummages around the office looking for anything she can find, usually stale muffins in a meeting room or a Diet Coke at her desk. The majority of the time, she runs on empty. At work, she’s grumpy, unfocused, and often thinking about lunch hours ahead of time.

2. Too Little Routine

Thomas installs drywall. Every day, he goes to a new house. And every day, the job is different. Some jobs last an hour. Others last all day. When jobs run long, Thomas works diligently through lunch.

The consequence: By the time he leaves at the end of the day, Thomas is hangry. When he gets home, he stomps in the door and is grouchy toward his wife and kids. And then his wife gets annoyed at him for ruining his appetite by snacking while she’s preparing a healthy dinner.

3. Too Much Trouble

Kristina’s husband works three evenings a week. On nights he is home, she plans a healthy meal for the two of them. But when she’s alone, she thinks: “Make a meal just for me? That’s too much effort.” Instead, she eats a bowl of cereal or a few handfuls of microwave popcorn and calls it a night.

The consequence: Kristina goes to bed hungry or unsatisfied. The next morning, she wakes up starving. And that sets off a negative cycle of eating for the whole day.

4. Too Hard to Diet

Sarah is trying to lose twenty pounds of post-baby weight. She’s tried multiple diets. Some fad diets work in the short term, but she winds

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up putting the weight back on. Now, she starts her day with coffee, hoping it will curb her appetite for the morning.

The consequence: By lunchtime, she's starving, so she gives up and overeats. Every day, she promises herself she'll eat better, then finds herself in the same pattern by noon the next day.

5. Too Much Mindless Eating

During daytime hours, Jill looks like the model of perfect health. But around ten at night, when her husband goes to bed, she gets bored and feels the need to unwind from a stressful day. She reaches for a bag of chips or bowl of ice cream and snacks on anything salty or creamy.

The consequence: Jill has trouble sleeping because she feels guilty about overeating, which sets her up for a tough day—and more snacking the next night.

6. Too Few Nutrients

Rachel is an elder-care nurse who drives from home to home to visit her clients. Between visits, she fuels up on whatever is easy to pick up in her car: candy, fast food, or a package of cookies from the grocery store.

The consequence: Rachel's body is running exclusively on sugar and processed food. Her body is getting no real nourishment. The spikes in her insulin level all day long lead to intense ups and downs in her mood.

7. Too Much Change

Joel works at a giant clothing store, unpacking shipping crates from sunup to lunchtime. The tough labor takes a huge amount of energy and calories, so he eats a lot to keep from being hangry at the end of the day. But on the weekends he spends most of his time on the couch. He can't figure out how to adjust his eating on weekends.

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The consequence: Joel sometimes eats too much on the weekends, when his body doesn't need as much energy. And sometimes he eats too little at work, trying to make up for the weekends. His body is in a constant state of confusion, always trying to run on too little or deal with too much food.

8. Too Confused

"I could eat any time of the day," Mary says. But that's very different than being hungry. Years of dieting have completely warped her understanding of her hunger cues. She can eat until she feels stuffed but still has trouble stopping if the food is tasty.

The consequence: She's not sure she can even tell the difference between genuine hunger and a craving that she can satisfy without going overboard.

9. Too Social

Laura and her husband have been married for five years. "He doesn't have to worry about his eating," she says. "And I gain weight just by looking at food." But her husband's food choices actually have a big effect on hers. When her husband snacks at night, she snacks. If he skips breakfast, she tends to skip breakfast, too. And it's not just her husband's choices that affect her. At work, if her friend orders a salad for lunch, so does she.

The consequence: Laura's food choices don't have anything to do with her own hunger or needs, so they leave her feeling unsatisfied or overstuffed—and hangry.

10. Too Stressed Out

Wendy is recently divorced and has a child with severe autism. Between bills and unexpected episodes with her son, each day brings new challenges. Worry keeps her from sleeping well, and she's got

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little patience with people at work who complain about little things, when her life is so full of real problems. Sometimes she's so stressed out, it kills her appetite. Other times she overeats to soothe her nerves.

The consequence: The ups and downs in her sleep and eating are starting to show as her weight creeps up, her health plummets, and her hair begins to gray.

CHOOSING HAPPY VS. HANGRY

Growing up, I loved Choose Your Own Adventure books. They were a series of children's books in which you get to decide the next step of the main character in the book, by making a choice at the end of each page: Do you want to run out of a cave because you're afraid of dangerous animals? Then you turn to a certain page of the book. Do you want to continue into the cave, searching for treasure? Then you turn to a different page. This is very different from most traditional books, in which you follow along with the plot and have to go where it leads you, whether or not you like the ending. In the Choose Your Own Adventure series, you take a much more dynamic role, with active choices.

Unfortunately, in many ways, we treat our eating choices like traditional books, just seeing where things go. We feel powerless to change the plot. But I believe eating can be more like one big Choose Your Own Eating Adventure. You have the power to choose where you end up: how your eating will evolve, and how that will affect your mood.

Every day, we have all kinds of opportunities (*#hungertunities* or *#hangrytohappy*) to pick foods that turn our hunger into happiness. Every time we eat, we choose between happiness and hanger. And hanger isn't something that happens only *before* we

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eat. We can also feel moody *after* we've eaten things that don't really satisfy us or that fill us up too much. But whether it happens before or after we eat, hanger is the opposite of happy: feeling content with and sustained by our food choices. Happiness, for me, isn't really smiling and feeling joyous. It's a feeling of contentment and satisfaction.

Whenever I eat, I ask myself a simple question: *Will eating this right now bring me hanger or happiness?*

It's a question I hope you'll start to ask yourself, too.

Let me give you an example. This morning, I opened the refrigerator, coffee in hand. "Okay, what's for breakfast, Susan?" I asked myself. Then I ran through my options: everything from a premade smoothie to some dry cereal. I knew I had a big day ahead of me. Clients that needed me to focus on them. A staff meeting. Soccer practice for my kids.

I like a lot of different breakfast foods. So my question wasn't what would taste good to me.

It was "What will make me happy, not hangry?"

When I ask that question, instantly the conversation changes in my head. I start to think about the foods that will fill me and keep my energy up and prevent me from getting hangry, which can happen so easily when we're busy. At the end of the day, it's a chicken-and-egg experience. Which comes first in the hanger spiral, not eating well, or being hangry? It's hard to tell, because not eating well leads to hanger and being hangry leads to not eating well.

My guess is that you picked up this book because you know all too well the downsides of not feeding yourself mindfully. Maybe you haven't eaten enough and withered into a not-so-nice version of yourself. Or maybe you ate too much and turned into someone wracked by regret, guilt, and irritation—at yourself, most of all. Maybe, like most people, you've had both experiences.

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I won't promise you that there's a magic bullet for eating mindfully 100 percent of the time. From working with hundreds of clients, I know that's not true. And I know it from trying to manage my own hunger myself. You won't find any magic bullets in this Hanger Management system. Instead, it's a set of strategies and a way of being. It's built to help in any scenario. And it works!

We'll begin by understanding hanger—the science behind it: psychological, biological, and social. Once you learn the roots of hanger, you'll get to know how hanger affects *your* life directly. Is it something that you struggle with only now and then? Or do you fret about your hunger level every day? Understanding how hanger affects you is the jumping-off point for the rest of the book: the tips that can help you deal with hunger in all kinds of situations.

As a busy professional and parent, I know that time is of the essence for my clients. Like you, they're already busy. They don't want to add anything extra to their day. So the tools I've developed to help them eat more mindfully are quick and easy to grasp, even for someone with the busiest of schedules. This book is designed so that you can crack it open and find relevant strategies in just moments.

And when you finish this book, this is my wish for you: I want you to understand that hanger is a real issue that impacts your life on so many levels that it deserves your attention. I want you to stop blaming yourself for not eating mindfully, as if it's a personal failure. You will see that it isn't. And I want you to have the mindful-eating tools to manage your hunger into happiness.

Hanger's a big deal. Bigger than a lot of us realize or want to admit.

But the good news is that we can do something about it.

It's in our hands.

It's up to us to choose.



Part I

HANGER MANAGEMENT 101



From Hangry to Happy

I don't have to tell you that hanger can damage your life. Some of the trouble is subtle. All of us know what it's like to feel distracted or foggy because we haven't eaten well. But hanger can also affect our lives in major ways we may never have realized. Hanger can dull decision-making and kill our mood in important moments. Left unchecked, it can sabotage relationships, both at home and at work. Most of us have firsthand experience of this. And the research backs it up. The science just emphasizes why it is so important to turn hanger around—to make turning it into happiness a high priority. I've heard it a million times—clients who explain why they have a hundred other things that are more important than managing their hanger. But I think the research will make you think twice—it definitely made me give it a spot high on my priority list!

HANGER FREE = HAPPIER RELATIONSHIPS

Where does hanger cause the most trouble, according to studies? One of the most notable research articles on hanger, and one of the first studies I encountered that really piqued my interest, shows that hanger poses the biggest threat to our closest relationships.¹

When I read this study from Ohio State University, I was intrigued. For one thing, it was the first study I had ever read that used voodoo dolls! For another, it focused on married couples. (That's unusual in research, which is done most often on rats or college students.) And the study took a very practical look at something that happens every single day.

The study was simple. For twenty-one days, researchers measured glucose levels in 107 married couples. But they also gave the participants voodoo dolls meant to represent their spouse. To measure aggressive impulses, researchers asked the participants to stick pins in the voodoo doll each night if they were frustrated with their spouse. Participants could also blast their spouse with loud noise via headphones. The study found that participants who had lower glucose levels stuck more pins in their voodoo dolls. And they also blasted their spouse with louder, longer doses of noise.

I wondered if this research was a little extreme. It's one thing to poke a voodoo doll with pins, but it's another thing to hurt your partner with sharp words that hurt their self-esteem or push their buttons. So I started informally asking people, "Has hanger ever affected your relationship?"

The first response I got was from my friend JT. He wrote:

Is "hangry" a real thing?

In my experience, YES.

I once dated a woman who was very sweet and considerate to all those who crossed her path. She patiently dealt with many of my quirks and flaws on a daily basis.

All of those admirable qualities vanished as soon as her hunger set in. She would change into a hangry person who I did not want to be around and a person who she did not want to be.

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Two months into our relationship, we had a nice emotional connection and there were real possibilities of a long-term commitment.

Then, early one Sunday afternoon, she arrived at my house hungry. And very quickly became hangry.

I offered to take her out to eat. As soon as she got in the car, I got the silent treatment and glaring looks, as if I was an idiot for not owning a helicopter that could get us there faster.

Then we arrived at the restaurant. There was a twenty-minute wait for a table.

“Where else do you want to go?” I asked. “I’ll take you.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Wherever you want.”

With the pressure on, I picked another place that we’d been to before and both liked. When we parked, I could see they were not busy and we could be eating within fifteen minutes. Hallelujah! But before we got out of the car she said, “I’m not in the mood for anything they have.”

Now with two strikes against me, I needed to feed this woman fast. I was sweating. I was terrified to speak.

We sat in the car and I proposed options.

How about the pasta place? “No. I’ve never been there.”

How about the Cajun place? “I don’t like spicy foods.”

Any place you can think of that you like? “No.”

At that point, I remembered what I was doing before she came over. I was happy. It was the weekend. The weather was nice. I was ready to hang out at home and watch the game. Life was great.

Now visibly frustrated and angry myself, I made the call to go to a carry-out sandwich shop.

We made it back to the house without further incident. She ate. I said nothing.

Then she started crying.

She apologized and said she never wanted to treat me like that again. She said hanger had been something that she always dealt with.

But I could not forget. Mostly because it happened several more times. I worried about a long-term commitment with someone who may unleash that behavior after a missed meal or slow service at a restaurant.

We went on to date for a year. We broke up for several reasons, most of which had nothing to do with her hanger. But when I think back, it was a factor. Should a significant other be subject to that kind of treatment just because someone is hungry? Absolutely not.

We often think about how a rumbling in our stomach impacts ourselves. We don't think as often about how our eating impacts those around us. But at the end of the day, how we take care of ourselves has a huge ripple effect on those around us.

I'm sorry for what I said when I was hangry...

My client Brooke was wedding-dress shopping with her sister Jackie, who had flown in from Chicago to help Brooke find the perfect gown. It was going to be a marathon day: Jackie was in town only Saturday, flying out the next day. So they had made back-to-back appointments at three of the most glamorous shops in the city.

In each shop, Jackie ran back and forth tirelessly from the fitting room to the front of the store, fetching dress after dress. Brooke tried on every version of her dream gown—an A-line with an empire waist. And at the last shop, they found it: the perfect dress.

The sisters returned home victorious but exhausted. They melted into Brooke's living-room chairs and began to chat about

old times and Jackie's vision for her bridesmaid's dress. Jackie started to reminisce about how their mom used to dress them when they little. The two girls weren't twins, but they were only eighteen months apart, so their mom had dressed them identically until they were old enough to pick out their own clothes.

It might have just been a pleasant walk down memory lane, but then the conversation made a quick, unexpected turn. Tears began to roll down Jackie's cheeks. "You were so selfish," Jackie told Brooke. "Always taking my clothing. You were the favorite child. You got all the best clothes. Mom loved to take you shopping."

Because Brooke is a great sister, she fell silent for a moment. And she thought, Was this conversation really about their clothing options at age four? No, Brooke realized. This was the powerful effect of hanger. She had seen firsthand the difference in her sister before and after eating well, in many emotional episodes. Also, Brooke felt ravenously hungry herself.

Brooke didn't want to engage Jackie's negative ideas and make things far worse. They had just had a great day. And she knew she had a very small window of opportunity to change the direction of this conversation.

So she looked at her sister and simply said, "Let's get something to eat. I think we're both tired and cranky."

Brooke headed straight for her fridge, flung it open, and rummaged through quickly. Then she ran over to her sister with a yogurt like she was a medic delivering an IV at an emergency scene. They each had a cup of yogurt. Before she knew it, Hangry Jackie had disappeared—and Brooke was in a better mood, too.

With each bite, Jackie started to perk up and feel like herself again. And the fun version of herself came back—the one that had just enjoyed her day laughing and being her sister's stylist.

Once she got something to eat, Jackie apologized for the

words that had spilled out of her mouth. She admitted she had felt a wave of hanger coming on. But she hadn't realized that shopping is a big culprit in hanger, because it's surprisingly active and exhausting.

"I should have taken a break between shops two and three," Jackie confessed. "Then I wouldn't have wilted into an emotional mess at home."

The two sisters learned a few things from this incident. Next time, fuel up before an intense shopping experience. Also, eat well before you talk—particularly on an emotional day.

And they put those lessons to work in the wedding itself. Jackie decided that it was really important for the entire wedding party to fuel up the morning of the wedding, to prevent tempers from flaring. Weddings are times of high emotion to begin with, and they didn't want to risk a family hanger session, due to some old extended family drama that could spark at any moment.

They couldn't control everything about the big day. But they could help everyone start with a well-nourished stomach. So Jackie planned a protein-filled breakfast before the ceremony and some filling snacks between the ceremony and the reception, during pictures. The wedding went off without a hitch.

And today, the sisters laugh together about the hanger incident—thankfully.

What's Going On in the Background?

"When my husband is angry," my client Melanie told me, "he has no qualms about taking it out on me." And it isn't just her. When her husband is in the throes of hanger, everyone in a fifty-foot radius knows it. Melanie tries to be more sensitive during those times. But he

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doesn't return the favor. When she's not well fed, he chalks her behavior up to her being "difficult," rather than dealing with hanger. This bothers Melanie, a lot.

"Why is he like this?" she asked me.

My thought: some people, due to their upbringing, may be more likely to air their grievances and more comfortable expressing aggressive behavior when they are hangry. Some of my clients, like Melanie, come from homes in which conflict is extremely taboo: a single cross word might result in the silent treatment. When people from that kind of background get hangry, they feel guilty and often stuff down those angry feelings or take out their aggression in private and secretive ways. Melanie doesn't lash out at all directly when hangry. She has a secret file of notes that she writes—page after page of angry thoughts. This file contains candid and unedited thoughts that she literally keeps locked away.

But another client of mine, originally from New York City, comes from a "no filter" family, and has been cited by the police for road rage. When he is hangry, he doesn't hold back a bit, including flipping people off on the road or yelling curse words. The difference between these two clients is not simply their level of hanger. It's also at least partly the result of the personalities, family backgrounds, and cultures that shape how comfortable they are expressing negative emotions.

HANGER FREE = BETTER DECISIONS

Hanger doesn't just sabotage our relationships. Researchers have also found that hanger can drastically affect our decision-making skills. Consider this: a prisoner's chance of getting out of jail may hinge on whether a judge is hungry or not.

In a study of Israeli courts, Jonathan Levav and his colleagues at Columbia Business School analyzed 1,112 parole hearings, presided over by eight judges over a ten-month period.² The

judges' days were divided into three sessions, and each session had breaks for meals or snacks. The judges chose when to adjourn for their breaks, but they didn't control the type of cases they saw or the order in which they saw them.

At the beginning of a session, a prisoner had a 65 percent chance of being paroled. This declined to almost zero by the end of a session, and leapt back to 65 percent after a snack break. Mental fatigue may account for some of this. When we're tired, we go back to the decision that takes the least amount of effort. So when a judge gets tired, it may be easier to default to the earlier decision, and deny parole.

But the researchers also suggest that hunger and low blood sugar help create mental fatigue. After a meal, the decisions of the judges dramatically changed. Overwhelmingly, judges appeared to be harsher when hungry. It's scary to think that your fate might hinge on whether a judge took a snack break. And it might give us a hint about when to ask a boss or significant other for a favor—right after lunch! (Don't even think about asking for anything important right *before* lunch!)

Researcher Andreas Glöckner suggests an alternative explanation for the judges' decisions.³ He believes that judges may give harsher sentences because they tend to schedule simpler cases in the morning. They do this because more complicated, lengthier cases run the risk of running over into the lunch break.

At the end of the day, we won't know for certain what causes judges to make harsher rulings. It's likely a complex set of reasons. But one thing is clear—it certainly isn't advisable for judges—or anyone—to make important decisions on an empty stomach. I personally would not want to be standing in front of a judge right before lunch—would you?

In a meta-analysis of forty-two studies related to the effect of

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low blood-glucose level on thinking, researchers examined four dimensions of decision-making. They looked at willingness to pay, willingness to work, impatience, and decision style. They found that low levels of blood glucose, or being hungry, increased the willingness to pay and willingness to work when a situation is food-related. In other words, people will do whatever it takes to get food when hungry — pay big bucks or put some effort into the task at hand. However, when the task didn't have anything to do with money, hunger made people less willing to pay or work in all other situations. For example, if you were at a store and hungry, you would be less likely to exert any effort to look for a different size or pay a high price for a shirt you wanted. Also, when people have low levels of blood glucose, they became more impatient with decisions about food but less so with decisions about money.

Low levels of blood glucose also increase the tendency to make more intuitive rather than deliberate decisions about food. We know this! This is the problem. When hungry, we don't stop to mindfully think it through, we grab the first thing in sight. The overall gist is that low blood sugar affects decision-making, most notably about food decisions.

Another reason not to make an important decision when you are hungry is ghrelin. Ghrelin is a hormone that is released before meals, known to increase appetite. It has a negative effect on both decision-making and impulse control. To understand its effects better, researchers looked at the impact of raising ghrelin levels in rats. They found that when they increase ghrelin levels to mimic levels when rats (and people) are hungry, the rats are more impulsive. The rats had been trained to earn a reward by not pressing a lever. But when ghrelin levels were high, they had much more significant difficulty restraining themselves—even though it

meant they lost the reward.⁴ Our impulsive decisions and actions are never our best ones.

HANGER FREE = BOOSTS YOUR BRAIN POWER

“I’m taking the ACT tomorrow,” a high school student, Becky, said to me. “I am so stressed about the test and the impact the scores could have on my future plans to be a physical therapist. I will be sure to get a good night’s sleep and a really solid, healthy breakfast.”

I happen to know that Becky skips breakfast almost every single day. So I paused and inquired why she planned to eat a healthy breakfast. Without skipping a beat, she said, “I will likely focus much better.”

I had to gently point out the irony of this situation. Becky fully realized the importance of a good breakfast on one particular day. She wouldn’t dream of going into that test hungry or not well fed. The connection in her mind was extremely clear. Breakfast = better focus. But doesn’t it matter if she focuses well on ordinary days? Each week, Becky took tests in school that were important to her future. She made decisions that needed her full attention. Why did it seem worth the effort that day, but not every other day?

Becky laughed when I said all this.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” she said.

It’s not just Becky. The effect of hanger on the brain is especially strong in many kids at school. A recent Cambridge University review brought together multiple studies with one thing in common: they all showed that kids who don’t have a solid breakfast don’t do as well at school. Without breakfast, kids’ cognitive skills, mood, and mental sharpness all take a hit, and they actually require more sleep. But unfortunately, 20 to 30 percent of chil-

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dren and adolescents still skip breakfast daily.^{5, 6, 7} This is particularly scary given that just eating breakfast helps people remember things and improves their performance on cognitive tests.⁸

A dose of glucose, which we get from food to power the brain, has been shown to help boost recognition memory, visuospatial function (the ability to mentally manipulate two- and three-dimensional objects), processing speed and reaction time, working memory, problem solving, and attention.⁹ Wow! These are all things we need to conquer the day!

Most of us could also cite our own “research” on the effects of hanger on our decisions. Time and time again, my clients admit making decisions they regret when they’re hangry, from grabbing a quick fix of junk food to making silly mistakes at work and at home. *Urban Dictionary* includes the term “dumb hunger,” which they describe as “You are so hungry you can’t make a decision” or you make a foolish one, like eating old hot dogs from a gas station or skipping an important meeting to get lunch. Later, you totally regret making that decision.

My client Stephanie refers to her “pineapple dress” with embarrassment when we talk about hunger and decision-making you wish you could do over. In the back of her closet, Stephanie has a hideous black dress with loud yellow pineapples scattered all over it. She bought it to go on vacation in Mexico. It’s hung there for many years with the tags still on. She hasn’t gotten rid of it, partly because she can hardly believe she would actually buy something so ugly and partly because it’s like a warning beacon. She explains that she bought the dress on a shopping expedition while in the throes of hanger. She distinctly remembers thinking, “I don’t care anymore. I’m starving—this will do.” Have you ever experienced buyer’s regret from something you bought during a hangry episode?

And even though I'm a psychologist who deals with hanger day in and day out, I'm not immune to making mindless decisions myself when hangry. Several years ago in California, I gave a lecture on mindful eating. I was the last person up on a panel, and the lectures of the physicians before me went on and on—two hours longer than they were supposed to. When I finally gave my lecture and got out of the room, I realized I was starving! My stomach was rumbling. I had a headache. But I was due to be at another lecture immediately.

Desperate, I opened my purse. I dug to the bottom and discovered a bag of trail mix so old that it was mostly crumbs. I began to ask myself a series of questions that should have stopped me immediately: "How old exactly are these? How did they get in here?"

I remembered that I had packed them weeks ago when I was watching my twin niece and nephew. But then hunger overwhelmed my attempt at personal integration. I gave up and ate every single bit in that bag.

Almost immediately, I regretted it. I didn't enjoy the trail mix. I'd never have eaten kids' old snacks under any other circumstances. And they didn't do anything to help the hunger. A better plan would have been to use what I know. I have been to a hundred conferences. Wordy presenters almost always run over scheduled time limits. I could have armed myself with a good snack in advance.

My clients tell me similar stories, with the same outcome. It always goes like this: getting too hungry results in reaching for whatever is near, whether you like it or not: stale donuts in the break room or baloney in the fridge.

Hanger sends us into scavenging mode. It's a basic biological reaction. But if we don't manage it, the result is regret, frustration, and weight gain/health issues.

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At first glance, hunger might seem like a little thing, easy to ignore. And hanger might seem like the punchline to a joke. But as we've seen here, the research is clear: hunger has a dramatic impact on everything from how we react in our relationships to the way we make big and little decisions every day.

HANGER FREE = LESS GUILT

One of the important benefits of getting a handle on hanger is steering clear of the awful feelings that come from overeating. When you are overly hungry, the next meal or snack is frequently not your finest.

"I feel terrible. I wish I hadn't eaten that."

This is the mantra of someone who is in the midst of a "regretful" state. Being hangry and being regretful both prompt seriously bad moods. Research indicates that people who overeat or eat particular kinds of foods like treats and chocolate often express shame and guilt.¹⁰

Unfortunately, even a bit of chocolate can prompt feelings of guilt. Thirty-seven healthy, normal-weight women ate a chocolate bar, an apple, or nothing. They rated how they felt before they ate and 5, 30, 60, and 90 minutes after eating. Both chocolate and the apple reduced hunger, boosted their moods, and increased their energy levels. However, eating chocolate was followed by good feelings for some women and guilt for others.

If eating just a small amount of chocolate causes feelings of regret, you can guess that eating too much chocolate can make you feel very regretful. It's not just the physical effects of feeling bloated, heavy, and sleepy from an overdose of food. It's the bad feelings that come from not eating in a mindful way. Nothing feels worse than making a decision but then doing the opposite.

The trick is eating just the right amount of chocolate to make you feel satisfied and not letting guilt guide your decisions.

Forgive me for what I said when I was regretfull.

We've looked at the research on what happens when we don't get enough food. But what happens when hanger causes us to eat too much?

My client Kelly described a day on which her husband had gone to a local bakery early in the morning. Being thrifty, he brought the donut special—a dozen. They were her favorite: old-fashioned glazed cake donuts. He knew this; he was thinking about her when he made his selection.

He and both kids each ate a donut before they headed off to work and school, leaving her alone with nine donuts.

“They were just staring at me from the box,” she told me. “They were still hot, and it smelled like the entire bakery was in my kitchen.” Kelly had fifteen minutes before leaving for work. “I intended to eat only two,” she said. “Typically, I'll savor one or two with some fruit.”

Kelly got a cup of coffee and ate one donut. It melted in her mouth and tasted fantastic—the perfect sticky, sweet cake texture. Before she knew it, she had eaten a second donut quickly—too quickly. She broke a third donut in half and told herself, “Just one half more.” But after eating the half, she broke off a bit more of the leftover half, and then popped the last fourth in her mouth. *It was just another bite, she reasoned. So why leave it?*

The donuts were so yummy that she took another one with her for a snack later in the afternoon. But as she drove to work, taking sips of coffee, she found herself nibbling on the donut.

By the time she got to work, she was jittery from coffee and

sugar and hyped up, thinking about the presentation she had to give that morning. She could literally feel the tension in her body. And she was kicking herself mentally for having that last donut. Three was pushing it. But she didn't even really *want* a fourth! *How did that happen?* she wondered. She could tell by the way she felt that she'd eaten too much. She didn't feel good at all.

I am a smart woman who makes decisions every day, Kelly thought. *So why couldn't I stick with my decision to have just two donuts?* That question kept repeating in her head. *How could I have let it snowball into four!?*

As she walked briskly down the hall to her office, she could feel her irritation rising. And so could others. Her employees scattered like cockroaches into their own offices, hoping to avoid her. Her dress felt tight, which only added to her bad mood and negative thoughts.

At eleven, her receptionist got out leftovers and heated them up in the microwave. It was Thai food, and as she began to eat it at her desk, a strong smell of curry wafted toward Kelly.

Kelly slammed her hands down on her desk, got up, marched over to her coworker and began to yell. "That food is smelling up the entire reception area!" Kelly bellowed. "How do you expect anyone to work or get anything remotely productive done?"

Kelly's coworker cowered in surprise, then awkwardly grabbed her takeout container and ran to the break room.

Kelly went back to her desk and angrily typed on her computer. But when she took a moment to pause, she felt terrible about the way she had talked to her coworker. Did she really care about the smell of curry? No. She loved it. What she was really feeling was uncomfortable in her body and this tight dress. She was clearly feeling the effects of being regretful.

As she recounted this story to me, Kelly's mouth clenched tight in embarrassment.

Later that day, Kelly told me, she began to feel better. She went to her coworker and apologized. She told her that she had been having a bad day but that it was no excuse for the way she had talked to her.

The experience gave her a glimpse of the very powerful effects of feeling regretful. "That version of me is bad-tempered, testy, irrationally grumpy, and ridiculously easily annoyed," she told me.

And that version of her didn't just show up at work. Her family had experienced it, too. Most of the people around Kelly had taken her hanger outbursts personally, because they had no idea her rants were linked to how she was feeling about her food choices and body.

The good news is that the story ends well. Kelly tried the Hanger Management techniques in this book. She learned how to make decisions about how many donuts to eat—and to stick with them. Most of all, she learned to enjoy everything she ate mindfully, with no regret.

Alas, hanger doesn't come only from not getting enough to eat. As shown in Kelly's story, eating too much can leave people feeling just as uncomfortable and unhappy as they do when they don't eat enough. My clients sometimes even confess very negative things, like "I HATE myself when I overeat. I just feel disgusting all the way around."

Some of the irritation comes from the physical effects of over-eating: feeling bloated or overfull. But we also feel irritated by the sense of being out of control. No one likes to make a decision, then not stick with it. And our disappointment with ourselves can snowball into feelings that we typically get when we don't follow through on something—guilt, regret, and shame. The

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Hanger Management program aims to help people conquer all of these feelings!

Whatever form hanger takes, whether it's eating too much or too little, this chapter has spelled out that it doesn't do us any favors.

Think for a moment about how hanger impacts you. Which part does it sway the most? Your decisions? Your relationships? Does it make you irrationally angry or keep you from thinking clearly?

Now consider, on the flip side, how eating mindfully could improve your life. Take a minute and really imagine the benefits that would come from being hanger-free. What would be different for you if you ate the way you wished? Do you like what you see? If so, keep reading!