

Fuel Her

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO
FOOD, ENERGY & YOUR BODY

- ♥ Feel good.
- ♥ Have energy.
- ♥ Live well.



INTRODUCTION

A letter from Courtney

I want to tell you something nobody told me when I was 16.

I was a varsity soccer player. A straight-A student. I worked hard, I trained hard, and from the outside I looked like I had everything together.

On the inside, I was at war with my body every single day.

I was restricting what I ate. Then purging. Then counting every calorie in bed at night before I could let myself sleep. I thought about food constantly — not because I loved it, but because I was terrified of it. I hated what I saw in the mirror even though, from where everyone else stood, there was nothing wrong.

Nobody asked. Nobody noticed. And so I carried it alone — for the next 24 years.

I didn't get help at 16. Or 20. Or 30. I finally started healing at 40 — when I was sitting in my bathroom, my daughters in the bathtub, listening to a podcast that said the words nobody had ever said to me before: it's never really about food.

I looked at those little girls and started crying. Because I knew in that moment that if I didn't heal this, I would pass it on to them. Not on purpose. Not dramatically. Just in the small, everyday ways that women do — a comment about food, a look in the mirror, a sigh getting dressed.

I could not let that happen.

So I did the work. And I came home to myself. And I created Fueled — because I keep meeting girls who are already in the early stages of the same spiral I was in at their age, and nobody is giving them the real information. Nobody is having the honest conversation.

This guide is that conversation.

It's for the athlete who is exhausted and doesn't know why. For the girl who feels guilty after eating and can't figure out how to stop. For the one who looks completely fine on the outside and is quietly struggling on the inside.

And it's for the parent who senses something is off but doesn't know how to bring it up. Who grew up in diet culture too and is worried about what they might be passing on without meaning to.

You don't have to have an eating disorder for this to be for you. You just have to be a female athlete in a world that has been sending confusing messages about food and bodies since before you were old enough to understand them.

Let's start telling the truth instead.

With love,

Courtney

Creator of Fueled • The SHIFT Project

CHAPTER 1

What's actually happening inside your body

Before we talk about what to eat or how to feel about food, we need to talk about something more fundamental: what food actually does.

Not in a diet culture way. Not in a "calories in, calories out" way. In a real, honest, this-is-your-body-and-here's-how-it-works way.

Because most female athletes — and most adults around them — have no idea. And that missing information is at the root of almost everything we're going to talk about in this guide.

Energy availability — the concept that changes everything

Here's a term you've probably never heard: energy availability.

It sounds scientific but the idea is simple. Energy availability means: how much fuel does your body have left after exercise?

Think of it this way. You eat food. That food gives you energy. Then you train — and training uses energy. Whatever is left after training is what your body has available to run everything else. Your hormones. Your bones. Your brain. Your immune system. Your mood. Your growth.

When the math works out — when you're eating enough to cover both training and everything else — your body thrives. You recover well. You perform well. You feel good.

But when you're not eating enough to cover both? Your body has to make choices. And it always, always prioritizes survival over performance.

The first things your body cuts when it's running low are the ones it considers non-essential. Things like your menstrual cycle. Your bone density. Your mood. Your focus. Your ability to recover.

This is not your body failing you. This is your body protecting you. It's doing exactly what it was designed to do — keep you alive. But when this happens chronically, over weeks and months, the effects start to compound. And that's when things get serious.

The female athlete triad — named and explained

There is a medical condition that researchers and sports doctors call the Female Athlete Triad. It describes what happens when a female athlete isn't getting enough fuel over time. The triad has three components:

- Low energy availability — not enough fuel coming in to cover training plus everything else the body needs
- Menstrual dysfunction — irregular periods, very light periods, or periods stopping altogether
- Low bone density — bones that are weaker than they should be for your age

You don't have to have all three for this to be a problem. Any one of them is a signal worth paying attention to. And the root of all three is the same thing: not enough fuel.

Important: Research shows that around 1 in 3 high school female varsity athletes are in a state of low energy availability. Most of them have no idea.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says most female athletes need a minimum of 2,000 to 2,400 calories per day just to function — and that number goes up with more training. Most teenage girls are eating significantly less than that and wondering why they feel terrible.

Why athletes override hunger

Here's something important. When you train really hard, your body sometimes suppresses hunger signals in the short term. So you finish a two-hour practice and you don't feel that hungry. And you think — great, I'm fine.

But your body is running on empty. And it will catch up with you.

On top of that, female athletes are getting constant messages from every direction — social media, sports culture, sometimes coaches — that lean is better. That lighter is faster. That food is something to be careful about rather than something to embrace.

So they eat less. They perform worse. And nobody connects the dots. Until now.

CHAPTER 2

The signs your body is asking for more

Now that you understand what's happening inside, let's talk about what it looks and feels like from the outside.

These signs are easy to miss — or misattribute — because they don't look dramatic. They look like a girl who's tired, or stressed, or going through a lot. They look like normal teenage stuff. That's exactly why they so often go unaddressed.

For the athlete — signs to watch in yourself

Check the ones that feel familiar. There are no right or wrong answers here — just honest ones.

Energy and performance

- You're tired all the time — not just after practice, but in the morning, in class, all day. No amount of sleep seems to fix it.
- Your legs feel heavy or dead during practice or games. You used to be able to push through. Now you hit a wall early.
- Your performance has plateaued or gone backwards despite the fact that you're training just as hard, or harder, than before.
- You feel mentally foggy on the field — slow to read plays, slower to make decisions.

Body signals

- Your period is irregular, very light, or has stopped altogether. You might have been told this is normal for athletes who train hard. It is not normal. It is a signal.
- You're getting injured more than seems right for how you train. Stress fractures. Ankle sprains that won't heal. Things that keep coming back.
- You're always getting sick. Every cold that goes around, you catch it. Your immune system is running on empty too.

- Your hair seems to be thinning or falling out more than usual.

Mind and mood

- You're irritable, anxious, or hard to be around — and you can't really explain why.
- You think about food a lot. Not because you love it, but because you're worried about it. Guilty about it. Obsessive about it.
- You feel down or hopeless sometimes without a clear reason.
- You have trouble sleeping even when you're exhausted.

If you checked several of these, that is not a mental toughness problem. That is a fuel problem. And it is fixable.

For parents — signs to look for in your daughter

As a parent, you may not have direct access to what your daughter is experiencing internally. But there are things you can notice from the outside.

Eating behaviors

- She says she's not hungry after practice — even after two hours of training.
- She's eating noticeably smaller portions than she used to, or skipping meals.
- She's started avoiding certain foods or food groups — cutting out carbs, avoiding fat, labeling foods as bad.
- She seems anxious or stressed at mealtimes, especially eating in groups or at restaurants.

Physical and performance signs

- She's getting injured more frequently than makes sense for her training level.
- Her periods are irregular, very light, or have stopped.
- She seems to get every illness that comes through the team.
- Her performance has dropped in ways that don't match how hard she's working.

Emotional signals

- She makes negative comments about her body, her weight, or how she looks.
- She seems withdrawn after meals or avoids eating socially with the team.
- Her mood seems closely tied to what she ate that day.
- She's more irritable, anxious, or flat than usual in ways that feel new.

If several of these feel familiar, the most important thing to know is this: you are not late. The fact that you're paying attention and asking questions means you're already ahead of where most families are.

CHAPTER 3

Fuel vs. diet culture

Here's the thing about diet culture. It's incredibly good at disguising itself.

It doesn't always show up as a crash diet or a fad. Sometimes it shows up as "clean eating." As "being careful." As "I just want to be healthy." As sports nutrition advice that sounds reasonable until you realize it's still teaching you to fear food.

For female athletes specifically, diet culture often wears athletic clothing. It says: leaner is faster. Lighter is better. Your body is a machine and machines should be efficient. Cut the extras.

This chapter is about learning to tell the difference between fueling your body and dieting. Because they feel similar from the inside — but they lead to completely different outcomes.

Fueling vs. dieting — what's the actual difference?

Fueling means eating in a way that supports what your body does. It asks: what does my body need to perform, recover, grow, and feel good? It responds to hunger. It includes all foods. It treats food as information and energy, not reward or punishment.

Dieting means eating in a way that tries to change what your body looks like. It asks: how little can I eat? What can I cut out? How do I make myself smaller? It ignores hunger. It eliminates food groups. It treats food as a moral choice — good or bad, clean or dirty, allowed or forbidden.

The strongest, most powerful female athletes in the world eat. A lot. They fuel aggressively because they know that food is what makes performance possible.

The question to ask yourself is: am I eating this way to give my body what it needs, or to make my body smaller? Those are different things. And they lead to different places.

What carbs, protein, and fat actually do

Most athletes have been given mixed messages about macronutrients. Here is the plain truth.

Carbohydrates

Carbs are your primary fuel source. Full stop. Your muscles run on glucose, which comes from carbohydrates. Your brain runs on glucose. When you cut carbs, you are cutting the fuel your body uses to do everything it needs to do.

For athletes, carbs are not optional. They are not "treats" to be earned. They are the gas in the tank. An athlete who avoids carbs is like a car trying to run on fumes.

Myth: "Carbs make you gain weight." Reality: cutting carbs makes you tired, slower, and more likely to get injured. Your body needs them.

Protein

Protein is what your body uses to rebuild muscle after training. Female athletes often need more protein than they think — especially during periods of intense training. You don't need to track grams obsessively. You just need to include a source of protein at most meals and snacks.

Fat

Dietary fat is essential. It supports hormone production, brain function, joint health, and absorption of fat-soluble vitamins. Cutting fat from your diet — especially as a teenage girl whose body is still developing — has real consequences.

Fat does not make you fat. That is one of the most persistent and damaging myths of diet culture. Your body needs fat to function. Include it without fear.

The reframe that changes everything

Instead of asking "will this make me gain weight?" try asking "will this help my body do what I need it to do?"

That question shifts the entire frame. Food becomes information, not judgment. Eating becomes an act of care, not control. That is the beginning of fueling.

CHAPTER 4

Hunger, fullness, and the signals you stopped hearing

Your body was born knowing how to eat.

Babies cry when they're hungry. They stop eating when they're full. They don't worry about whether they ate too much. They don't feel guilty after a good feed. They just eat, feel satisfied, and move on.

Somewhere along the way, that instinct gets interrupted. Diet culture interrupts it. Sports culture interrupts it. Comments from coaches, parents, and teammates interrupt it. Social media interrupts it. And then intense training interrupts it further, because exercise suppresses hunger signals in the short term.

This chapter is about finding your way back to your body's own signals. Not a meal plan. Not a calorie target. Just you, listening.

What hunger actually feels like

Hunger shows up differently for everyone, but here are the most common physical signs:

- A hollow or empty feeling in your stomach
- Low energy or difficulty concentrating
- Irritability or a short fuse (the classic "hangry" feeling)
- Thinking about food more than usual
- Feeling slightly lightheaded or spacey

For athletes, hunger often comes in waves that don't line up neatly with mealtimes. You might not be hungry right after practice, but ravenous an hour later. That's normal. Your body is asking for something. Respond to it.

What fullness feels like

- A sense of satisfaction in your stomach — not stuffed, just settled
- The food starts to taste less interesting
- Your mind naturally starts to drift away from thinking about eating
- A sense of energy and comfort in your body

The goal is not to feel stuffed after every meal. It's to feel satisfied — fed enough that your body can do what it needs to do.

Why hunger signals get harder to hear

Training suppresses hunger hormones short term. This is a real physiological phenomenon. Your body prioritizes the stress response of exercise over the hunger response. So after intense training, you may genuinely not feel hungry — even if your body desperately needs food.

Not feeling hungry is not the same as not needing food. Eat anyway. Especially after training.

For athletes in this situation, eating on a schedule — even when you don't feel hungry — is often more effective than trying to rely on hunger cues alone. Think of it as fueling by intention rather than sensation. You know your body needs fuel after a hard session. Give it fuel. Even if you're not hungry.

The pause practice

Here is one of the simplest tools I know for rebuilding the connection between you and your body's signals.

Before you eat, take one slow breath. Put your phone down. And ask yourself two questions:

- Am I hungry right now? (Where is my hunger on a scale of 1 to 10?)
- What does my body actually want right now?

You don't have to get this right. You don't have to change what you eat based on the answers. Just practice asking. Just practice listening. The more you practice, the louder your body's signals get. You can hear it again. It just takes practice.

CHAPTER 5

When it feels bigger than food

If you have ever eaten when you weren't hungry, eaten past the point of fullness, or found yourself reaching for food when you were stressed, sad, bored, or overwhelmed — you've experienced emotional eating.

And here is the first thing I want you to know about that: you are completely normal.

Emotional eating is not a character flaw. It is not a sign that something is wrong with you. It is one of the most human things there is. We use food to celebrate, to grieve, to connect, to comfort. We have done this for our entire existence as a species.

The problem is not emotional eating. The problem is when emotional eating is the only tool we have — and when we pile shame on top of it.

What emotional eating actually is

Emotional eating happens when we use food to manage feelings rather than hunger. It's eating not because your body needs fuel, but because you're bored, anxious, sad, excited, lonely, or overwhelmed.

For athletes, emotional eating often shows up around high-pressure moments: before big games, after bad performances, during stressful school periods. It can also show up as restriction — not eating when stressed, or trying to feel in control of something when everything else feels out of control.

I used to purge. I used to restrict. I used to count calories in bed every night because food felt like the one thing I could control when everything else felt uncertain. The eating was never really about food. It was about feelings I didn't know how to handle any other way.

Hunger fear and food guilt

Hunger fear is being afraid of feeling hungry, or afraid of what will happen if you eat when you're hungry. It shows up as eating as little as possible and feeling proud of it. Feeling anxious if you eat "too much." Tying your sense of discipline or control to how little you can get away with eating.

Food guilt is the shame that comes after eating something you've labeled as bad or wrong. That sick feeling after a slice of pizza that has nothing to do with the food itself — and everything to do with what you believe eating that food means about you.

Both of these are products of diet culture. Neither of them are truths. Neither of them have anything to do with the food.

The inner critic and where she came from

Most girls with a complicated relationship to food have a very active inner critic. A voice that comments on every eating choice, every body fluctuation, every meal.

That voice didn't come from nowhere. It got built from comments — from coaches, from parents, from teammates, from social media, from a culture that has been telling women and girls their entire lives that their body is something to be managed and controlled.

The goal is not to silence that voice through willpower. The goal is to understand where it came from — and to slowly, gently offer it a different story. That's the work. And it's not a quick fix. But it is possible. I am living proof.

What to do when it feels big

- Name what you're feeling before you eat. Even just: "I'm stressed." That alone creates space between the feeling and the behavior.
- Ask: am I hungry, or am I feeling something? Both are okay. Just know which one it is.
- Find one other thing you can do with a big feeling — go for a walk, text a friend, breathe, write.
- Talk to someone you trust. A parent. A coach. A therapist. You don't have to carry this alone.

And above all: please stop punishing yourself for being human.

CHAPTER 6

Your emotional toolkit

Information is not enough. You can understand everything in this guide and still struggle to change how you feel about food and your body. That's because the relationship with food lives in the body, not just the mind.

This chapter is your toolkit. Real practices, explained simply, that help you regulate your nervous system, reconnect with your body, and process the feelings that come up around food.

Box breathing — for when anxiety spikes

Breathwork is one of the most powerful nervous system tools there is, and almost no one teaches it to athletes. Here is a simple practice you can use anywhere — in the locker room, before a game, after a meal that triggered anxiety, or any time you feel overwhelmed.

It's called box breathing, and here's how it works:

- Inhale slowly through your nose for 4 counts
- Hold your breath for 4 counts
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 counts
- Hold the exhale for 4 counts
- Repeat 4 times

What's happening when you do this: you're activating your parasympathetic nervous system — the part that signals safety and calm. When your body is in a stress state, your digestion is compromised, your anxiety is elevated, and your relationship with food gets harder. Box breathing interrupts that cycle.

Try it: The next time you feel anxious before a meal or overwhelmed after eating, try four rounds of box breathing before you do anything else. Notice what shifts.

Body scan — for reconnecting with yourself

The body scan is a practice that helps you come back into your body after you've been living in your head. For athletes who have been overriding their body's signals for a long time, this is particularly powerful.

- Find a comfortable position — sitting or lying down.
- Close your eyes and take three slow breaths.
- Starting at your feet, slowly move your attention upward — feet, calves, knees, thighs, hips, stomach, chest, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, head.
- At each place, just notice. What do you feel? Tension? Warmth? Tightness? Nothing? You're not trying to change anything. Just paying attention.
- Take three more slow breaths when you reach the top.

This takes about 5 minutes. It doesn't have to be perfect. The goal is just to practice being inside your body rather than observing it from the outside.

Movement as medicine

On hard days — the days when food feels complicated or your body feels like the enemy — choose movement that feels good, not movement that punishes. A walk. Gentle stretching. Dancing in your room. Anything that adds energy rather than depletes it.

Movement should be something your body does because it loves you, not something you do to your body because you hate it. If you finish a workout more depleted and upset than when you started, that's information. Your body is telling you something.

10 journal prompts for athletes

Journaling is not homework. It's just a way of getting your thoughts out of your head and onto a page, where you can actually look at them. Start with the prompt that feels most alive for you.

1. *What did I eat today, and how did it make me feel physically? Not morally — physically.*
2. *When do I feel most at home in my body? What is happening in those moments?*
3. *What messages have I received about food and my body from coaches, teammates, parents, or social media? Which ones have I believed without questioning?*

4. *What does food mean to me beyond fuel? What memories, feelings, or associations come up?*
5. *When I feel guilty about eating something, what am I actually feeling? What need is underneath it?*
6. *What would I say to a teammate who was eating the same thing I just ate and feeling guilty about it?*
7. *What are 5 things my body can do that have nothing to do with how it looks?*
8. *When I'm stressed or overwhelmed, what do I reach for? What am I really trying to feel or avoid?*
9. *What would it feel like to eat without guilt, just for one day? What would be different?*
10. *What do I need more of that has nothing to do with food?*

CHAPTER 7

A note for parents

If you're reading this, you love a female athlete. And you're paying attention. That matters more than you know.

This chapter is yours. There are some things that are specifically important for you to hear as the adult in the room.

The way you talk about food and bodies matters more than you think

Children learn their relationship with food and their bodies primarily at home. From the adults around them. From the language they hear at the dinner table. From watching how you talk about your own body in the mirror.

This is not an accusation. Most parents who pass diet culture on to their children do it without any awareness at all. They say things their own parents said to them. They model behaviors they themselves were taught. But awareness changes things.

You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be willing to notice.

What not to say

- "You're looking a little heavy lately." Even said gently, this is devastating. A teenage girl's relationship with her body is fragile in ways adults often underestimate.
- "You sure you should be eating that?" This teaches her that she can't trust her own hunger.
- "I wish I could eat like you do without gaining weight." Your relationship with your own body is being transmitted to her.

- "You need to be leaner to be faster." Please leave nutrition and body composition advice to qualified professionals.
- Any comment — even a positive one — that links her value or your approval to how her body looks.

What to say instead

- "How did your body feel during practice today?"
- "Did you eat enough before your game?"
- "What sounds good to you right now?"
- "I'm proud of how hard you work."
- "Your body is strong. It does incredible things."

How to start the conversation

If you're worried about your daughter and you don't know how to bring it up, here is the most important thing to know: lead with curiosity, not concern.

Concern feels like: "I'm worried about you. I've noticed you're not eating much. Are you okay?" Curiosity feels like: "Hey, I read something about female athletes and how much energy they need — can I share it with you?"

Curiosity opens doors. Concern sometimes closes them. Start small. Share an article. Ask an open question. Tell her about a time you struggled. Create the conditions for a conversation without forcing one.

What to do if you're genuinely worried

If your daughter is showing multiple signs from Chapter 2 — especially if she has lost her period, is getting frequent injuries, or you've witnessed restrictive eating or purging behavior — please take it seriously. Even if she insists she's fine.

Reach out to your pediatrician and specifically mention the female athlete triad. Ask for a referral to an eating disorder informed therapist or registered dietitian who works with athletes. Early intervention makes an enormous difference.

Your own healing matters too

I want to say this gently and directly: if you grew up in diet culture — and most of us did — there is probably some healing to do in your own relationship with food and your body.

The work you do on yourself is the most powerful gift you can give her. She is watching you. She is learning from you. When you eat without guilt and talk about your body with respect, she learns that's possible.

You deserve that healing too. Not just for her sake — for yours.

CLOSING

What comes next

If you've made it to this page, something in this guide landed for you. Something felt true, or familiar, or like a missing piece you've been looking for.

I want you to sit with that for a moment. Whatever it was that resonated — hold onto it. That's your starting point.

You don't have to fix everything at once. You don't have to have a perfect relationship with food by next week. You don't even have to know exactly what you need yet.

You just have to be willing to keep paying attention. To keep asking questions. To keep treating your body like it deserves to be treated — with curiosity instead of criticism, with care instead of control.

You are not a problem to be managed. You are a person to be known. And your body is on your side — if you'll let it be.

That's what Fueled is built on. That's the whole thing, really.

If you're ready to go deeper

This guide is the beginning. The Fueled program is where the real work happens — in a small group, with girls who get it, over 8 weeks of real sessions that cover everything in this guide and so much more.

- 8 weekly 75-minute live group sessions in a small group of 6–8 girls
- The Fuel track — real education about food, energy, and athletic performance
- The Feel track — honest conversation about the emotional side of food and body image

- Breathwork and nervous system tools built into every session
- A parent track — because home matters
- One optional 1:1 check-in with Courtney per month

The first cohort starts June 2025. There are 6–8 spots. Founding Member pricing is \$597. Applications are open now at fueledforher.com.

Stay connected

- YouTube: Fueled for Her — new videos every week on fueling, body image, and performance
- Instagram: [@fueledforher](https://www.instagram.com/fueledforher)
- The SHIFT Project: theshiftproject.com — for the moms and women ready to do their own work too

Thank you for being here.

You showing up for her is everything.

With love,

Courtney

Creator of Fueled • The SHIFT Project • [@fueledforher](https://www.instagram.com/fueledforher)