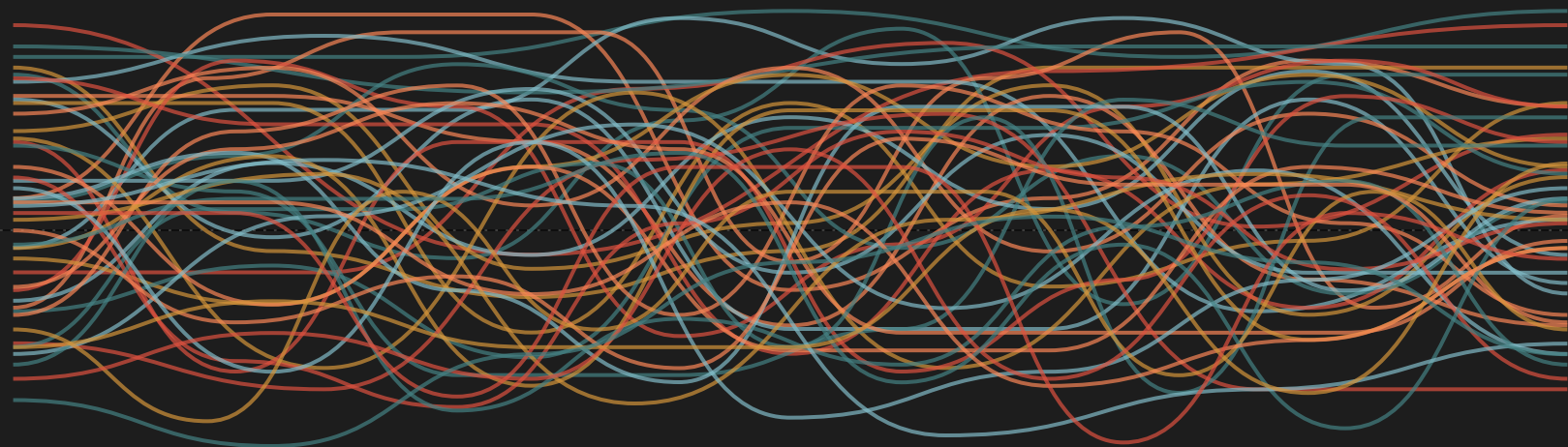




BLACK, LATINA AND WHITE WOMEN, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Burnout takes. Strength gives. Where does her **reset.** begin?

Five-day diaries on life, food and strength. 76 recruited, 56 wrote, 42 completed all five days.



Inside the report

	A note from the founder	3
	Six years on: the state of burnout today	4
	Executive summary	8
	How we listened	10
	Who took part	13
PART 1	Five days, five rooms	14
	Day 1 · You	14
	Day 2 · Your world	20
	Day 3 · Nutrition	25
	Day 4 · Resilience	31
	Day 5 · Envisioning your best life	36
PART 2	What we learned	43
	Food, mood and strength	47
	Across communities, life stages and means	48
PART 3	Fifteen lives	50
PART 4	Before the diaries	58
PART 5	From five days of diaries to five pathways	61
	In their own words	62
	Sources, about us, acknowledgments	65

Before we begin

In 2020, eight weeks after I lost my father to COVID-19, I launched JIVINITI, the Research and Creative Communications Program of The Virsa Foundation. I knew our work had to begin by listening. The SHAKTI Study was that first step, and it was designed as the first of three.

SHAKTI listened. From November 11 to 23, 2020, Black, Latina and White women on low incomes wrote five-day diaries about their lives, their food and their strength. Their words shaped the questions of The GAIA Study, which we conducted with Ipsos Public Affairs to measure diet, stress, burnout and resilience across 14,626 Americans. Together, SHAKTI and GAIA informed our award-winning documentary, Third Degree Burnout – A Survivor’s Guide.

Research, then story, then action. Project **reset**, the film’s educational impact campaign, is the action: five pathways that help people move from burnout to resilience, informed in part by what these women told us.

This report gives their words the space they deserve. Read them slowly. Each one comes from a woman who made time, in a very hard year, to tell us the truth about her life.

Nivi Jaswal-Wirtjes, MBA, NBC-HWC (Mayo Clinic)

Lead Researcher, The SHAKTI Study · Founder and President, The Virsa Foundation, Inc.

The emergency ended. The burnout did not.

The women of SHAKTI wrote their diaries in November 2020, in the first year of COVID-19. The emergency that framed their words has passed. The conditions they described have not.

Six years on, national data tell the story of burnout that the diaries told first. Feeding a family costs more, and more households run short. Families headed by women are still far more likely to be poor. Millions of women hold up a household and care for someone else at the same time. The strain shows in their minds and bodies, and the weather itself has become one more driver of burnout. Some numbers have improved; the gaps the women lived inside have not closed.

Food on the table

In 2024, 13.7% of U.S. households were food insecure at some point in the year, up from 10.5% in 2020, the year the women wrote.¹ The burden falls unevenly: 36.8% of single-mother households and 16.2% of women living alone were food insecure, as were 24.4% of Black and 20.2% of Hispanic households, compared with 10.1% of White, non-Hispanic households.² Groceries cost 28% more in September 2026 than in November 2020, the month the diaries were kept.³

IN THE DIARIES, 2020

At least 22 of 56 women raised the cost of food without being asked.

"A cheeseburger is \$.99 a salad is \$10."

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

Households women hold up

In 2025, 21.9% of people in families headed by a woman with no spouse lived below the official poverty line, about five times the rate in married-couple families (4.4%).⁴ Poverty also still follows race: 17.3% of Black Americans and 13.9% of Hispanic Americans were poor in 2025, compared with 7.5% of non-Hispanic White Americans. The Hispanic rate was a historic low, and still nearly twice the White rate.⁵

IN THE DIARIES, 2020

The woman decided what the household ate and usually cooked it, in all three communities. Under stress, 13 of 42 ate less or nothing at all, often while still feeding their children.

"I didn't eat all day, but I feed my kids..."

CLAUDIA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

Care, on top of everything

Sixty-three million Americans, nearly one in four adults, are family caregivers. Raising children while also caring for an adult is especially common among Latino (43%) and Black (36%) caregivers, and the financial strain falls hardest on lower-income, Black and Latino caregivers.⁶

IN THE DIARIES, 2020

Women cared for children, grandchildren, a foster child, an ailing parent. Asked what stood in the way of a healthier life, 8 of 42 named time and caregiving; asked what would help, the answer given most was someone alongside them (15 of 42).

"i always take on other peoples issues and put mine on the back burner"

EBONY · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Mind and body

Among women and girls age 12 and older in families below the poverty line, 26.0% had depression in a two-week period, compared with 8.8% in the highest-income families (2021–2023).⁷ Diabetes follows the same gradient: 19.6% of adults with a high school education or less have it, compared with 10.7% of adults with a bachelor's degree or more, and more than one in four adults with diabetes do not know they have it.⁸

IN THE DIARIES, 2020

Twenty-one of 56 women named a chronic condition of their own, and 36 of 56 named one in their immediate family. To get through hard days, 23 of 42 breathed, meditated or counted to ten.

"I can't live at my mind's pace I have to live with what my body will allow me to do."

VALERIE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

Weather at the door

In 2024, 27 billion-dollar weather and climate disasters struck the United States, costing about \$182.7 billion and at least 568 lives. Disasters displaced more than 3 million adults in 2022–2023, and lower-income households and people of color were more likely to be forced from home.⁹

IN THE DIARIES, 2020

Thirty-one of 42 women described unseasonal weather, from a warm November to hurricanes, floods and wildfire smoke, and many had already felt it at the grocery store.

"Climate change is expensive for everyone."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

Why SHAKTI matters now

13.7%

1

of U.S. households were food insecure at some point in 2024, up from 10.5% in 2020, the year the women wrote.

36.8%

2

of single-mother households were food insecure in 2024, as were 16.2% of women living alone. The rate was 24.4% for Black households and 20.2% for Hispanic households, compared with 10.1% for White, non-Hispanic households.

28%

3

higher: what groceries cost in September 2026 compared with November 2020, the month the women kept their diaries.

21.9%

4

of people in families headed by a woman with no spouse lived below the official poverty line in 2025, about five times the rate in married-couple families (4.4%).

17.3%

5

of Black Americans and 13.9% of Hispanic Americans lived in poverty in 2025, compared with 7.5% of non-Hispanic White Americans. The Hispanic rate was a historic low, and still nearly twice the White rate.

63 million

6

Americans, nearly 1 in 4 adults, are family caregivers. Raising children while also caring for an adult is especially common among Latino (43%) and Black (36%) caregivers, and the financial strain falls hardest on lower-income, Black and Latino caregivers.

26.0%

7

of women and girls age 12 and older in families below the poverty line had depression in a two-week period, compared with 8.8% in the highest-income families (2021–2023).

19.6%

8

of adults with a high school education or less have diabetes, compared with 10.7% of adults with a bachelor's degree or more. More than one in four adults with diabetes do not know they have it (2021–2023).

27

9

billion-dollar weather and climate disasters struck the U.S. in 2024, costing about \$182.7 billion and at least 568 lives. Disasters displaced more than 3 million adults in 2022–2023, and lower-income households and people of color were more likely to be forced from home.

Numbers tell us how many. They cannot tell us what it takes to stretch a grocery budget to the end of the month, to be the one everyone calls at 2 a.m., or to put yourself last, again. That is burnout, lived from the inside. The women of SHAKTI wrote it down, in their own words.

That is why their diaries matter now. They are not a picture of a year that has passed. They are an early, detailed record of the burnout millions of women are still living with, and of the strength, humor and hope they bring to them.

Figures as of October 2026; this opening chapter is refreshed each year, with its title moving forward a year (Seven years on, in 2027). Sources are listed at the end of the report under “Why SHAKTI matters now.”

Seven findings

Over five days in the first year of the pandemic, women living closest to burnout in America wrote about who they are, who they feed first, what knocks them down and what gets them up again. Here is what they told us.

- | | | |
|----|-----------------|---|
| 01 | 53 of 56 | Knowing is not the problem
53 of 56 women agreed that what we eat affects our health, and no one disagreed. |
| 02 | 13 of 42 | Women eat last
Under stress, 13 of 42 women eat less or nothing at all, often while still feeding their children. |
| 03 | 22 of 56 | The price of a salad is more than money
At least 22 of 56 women raised cost without being asked. |
| 04 | 42 of 48 | Heritage is where love lives; convenience decides dinner
Parents shaped how 42 of 48 women learned to eat, and family still comes first today (36 of 48). |
| 05 | 25 of 42 | Open to plants, wary of the word "vegan"
25 of 42 women said yes or partly to trying a plant-based diet, mostly for their health. |
| 06 | 2 of 42 | Strength is real, and it costs
Asked who they could call at 2 a.m., most women named a friend, their mother or a partner; 2 of 42 had no one. |
| 07 | 15 of 42 | Their own plan: a food goal, an inner obstacle, and company
On Day 5, most women set a food goal, 23 of 42 named "myself" as what stands in the way, and the help asked for most was someone alongside them (15 of 42). |

WHAT THE WOMEN ASKED FOR

Baby steps · Simplicity · People like me · Resilience · Community · Support for the long haul

Counts are women, of those who answered each question. Every count in the report gives its base.

The study at a glance

76

women recruited

56

wrote in the diaries

42

completed all five days

15

expert interviews first

9

follow-up video interviews

3

communities: Black, Latina, White

Women on low incomes, aged 26 to 54, from 14 states, kept a private online diary for five evenings in November 2020. Each day opened a different room of her life.

Day 1 You

Who she is, what is on her plate, and her health and her family's.

Day 2 Your world

The defining moments of her life, and the people who shaped how she eats.

Day 3 Nutrition

Shopping, cooking, heritage, the ads she remembers, and plants, animals and climate.

Day 4 Resilience

What she has overcome, her superpowers, what she eats under stress, and her 2 a.m. call.

Day 5 Envisioning your best life

One thing she would change, what stands in the way, and a letter to her future self.

Five evenings, one question at a time

The SHAKTI Study was commissioned in June 2020 by The Virsa Foundation, Inc. and its JIVINITI Research and Creative Communications Program. It had four parts: a review of films, books and papers; 15 expert interviews in fall 2020; five-day online diaries; and nine follow-up video interviews.

The diaries ran from November 11 to 23, 2020, in the first year of COVID-19. There were three closed discussion boards, one for each community: Black, Latina and White women with low incomes, across generations. Closed means that no woman could see another's answers, so each could write without performing for the others. Each day had its own theme: Day 1 You, Day 2 Your world, Day 3 Nutrition, Day 4 Resilience, Day 5 Envisioning your best life. Women answered one question at a time, in writing and with photos, and a moderator replied with follow-up questions.

1

REVIEW

Films, books and papers on food, health and animals.

2

EXPERTS

Fifteen interviews with people who work where food, health and community meet.

3

DIARIES

Five-day online diaries in three closed boards, one per community.

4

CONVERSATIONS

Nine one-hour video interviews with women from the diaries.

The study was exploratory. It began from a hope that plant-based eating might support emotional resilience. The diaries explored that idea. Later, The GAIA Study would test it.

The diaries were completed in November 2020. In 2026, Nivi Jaswal-Wirtjes, the study's lead at the Foundation, went back to the original answers and re-read every one for this site: counting with care, checking each quote word for word against what the women wrote, and preparing these portraits, narratives and analysis.

Who did the work



Nivi Jaswal-Wirtjes, MBA, NBC-HWC (Mayo Clinic)

Lead Researcher; Founder and President, The Virsa Foundation, Inc.

Nivi Jaswal-Wirtjes, MBA, NBC-HWC (Mayo Clinic), is the founder and president of The Virsa Foundation, Inc. and its JIVINITI program, and the director and executive producer of the award-winning documentary Third Degree Burnout – A Survivor's Guide.



Susan Newhouse

Lead Moderator and Research Designer; Principal, Susan Newhouse & Associates, LLC

Susan Newhouse is a consumer insights and innovation leader with more than 25 years of experience in qualitative and online research, concept development and consumer co-creation, working with Fortune 500 organizations across food and beverage, consumer goods, restaurants and other consumer industries. She is also a facilitator, trainer and coach in creative problem solving, design thinking and storytelling.



Marta Villanueva

Hispanic Research Consultant and Moderator; Principal, NuThinking, Inc.

Marta Villanueva has spent more than 20 years helping brand teams turn qualitative insight into strategy, with deep expertise in Hispanic and U.S. Latino consumers. She holds a master's degree in creative studies, has led more than 3,500 research sessions, and speaks regularly at QRCA, the Insights Association, IIEEX and Quirk's. For SHAKTI, Marta guided the study's work with Latina women and moderated alongside Susan Newhouse.



Schlesinger Group (now SAGO)

Respondent recruitment and research platform

Schlesinger Group recruited the women who took part and provided QualBoard, the platform the diaries ran on. QualBoard kept every answer private and secure, and let the moderators talk with each woman one to one.

Protecting the women

Every name on this site is a pseudonym. The women's own names, and the names of their children, partners, relatives and friends, have been removed, along with employers, schools, towns, and anything else that could point to a particular person. Places are described only in general terms, such as a city in the Southwest. No photographs of the women or their families are shown. No participant can be identified.

Quotes are in each woman's own words, with her spelling and punctuation. We remove emoji only, mark any cut with an ellipsis, and replace an identifying detail with a neutral word in brackets, such as [her son]. Where a quote touches something especially painful, we attribute it only to a description, such as a Latina mother in her 40s, and do not link it to a named woman.

The hardest stories in these diaries were told to a researcher, not to the public. We tell them only in outline, or not at all.

HOW WE COMPARE

We describe; we do not rank. Every count carries its base. We name the overlap of community, age and household means in the same breath, lead with what is shared, and let a woman who does not fit a pattern speak too.

Asked for the moments that defined them, many women wrote about loss, illness and hardship. Wherever a page touches assault, abuse, addiction, suicide or self-harm, pregnancy loss or a violent death, it opens with a short content note, and you can choose whether to read on.

If you are struggling, you are not alone. In the United States you can call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, at any hour.

Every woman who wrote, by community, age and household means

Fifty-six women wrote in the diaries; 42 stayed through all five days. All were recruited as having low incomes, but their lives differed. The 20 Black women were the most financially stretched once household size is counted, and most worked full-time. The 22 Latina women came from about a dozen national backgrounds, from recent immigrants to long-settled families; they were younger, most were married, and many had small children at home. The 14 White women were older (8 were 45 or over), more often lived alone or were divorced, widowed or single, and fewer had young children.

	26–34		35–44		45–54	
	More stretched	Getting by	More stretched	Getting by	More stretched	Getting by
Black 19	●●●● 4	●●●● 4	●●● 3	● 1	●●●● 4	●●● 3
Latina 22	●●●● 5	●●● 3	●●●● 4	●●●●● 7	● 1	●● 2
White 14	●● 2	●● 2	●● 2		●●● 3	●●●●● 5

One dot per woman who wrote (55 placed; one could not be matched to her recruit data). Ages are at the time of the diaries.

This overlap is the most important thing to know before reading any comparison. Because age, family stage and money travel with each community, a difference between groups may really be a difference of age or circumstance. We say so wherever it matters.

Household means is our estimate. We took the midpoint of each woman's income band and divided it by the 2020 federal poverty guideline for her household size. Under twice the guideline we call more stretched; at or above it, getting by. Getting by never means comfortable. The bands are wide, so for 16 of 55 women the line could fall either way.

Day 1

You

On the first day, 56 women introduced themselves: five words for who they are, the illnesses they live with and watch others live with, and what lands on their plate on an ordinary day, and why. Almost every answer about herself turned, sooner or later, into an answer about the people she feeds.

WHAT WE ASKED · 56 WOMEN ANSWERED

1. Tell us a bit about yourself: your family, where you live, your work, what you love to do.
2. What are 5 words you would use to describe your personality?
3. Do you currently live with a chronic illness? Does anyone in your immediate family?
4. What impact does your health have on your daily activities and your relationships? And your family's health on theirs?
5. "Our food choices impact our health." How strongly do you agree or disagree, and why?
6. On a typical day, what would we find on your plate, and why: breakfast, lunch, dinner and snack?
7. What are 5 words that describe your "food personality"? Make a collage that brings it to life.

"By seeing up and close and not just hearing it, it changes your perspective."

FERNANDA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

Who she is, and who she feeds

Asked to introduce themselves, most women began with other people: children and grandchildren, a partner, a parent they look after, a sister who lives with them. Only then did they describe themselves, and the words they chose were warm. “Funny” came first.

The same evening they told us what is on their plate. The answers were rarely about nutrients. They were about time, money, energy and the tastes of the people at the table. Fourteen of 56 described skipping or barely eating a meal, almost always because there was no time, not because they were dieting.

One reading is that the first day already holds the study's central finding. These women know that food shapes health. What they are short of is not knowledge but room: hours, dollars, energy, and permission to count themselves among the people being fed.

“I cook for my family so it's easier to eat they are eating.”

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S · ON HER BREAKFAST

Funny, outgoing, friendly, caring.

Funny

Outgoing

Friendly

Caring

Loving

Kind

Loyal

Honest

Fantabulous

Nuturing

no nonsense

Strong willed

quiet

loner

stubborn

high strung

People pleaser

indecisive

Turbulent

reserved

Her exact words, as she typed them. The most common: funny (18 of 56), outgoing (15), friendly (14), caring (12), loving and kind (10 each) and loyal (9). Light: quieter words some women also chose for themselves.

A typical day, in her own words

We asked what we would find on each woman's plate on a typical day, and why. Most answered with the whole day around the plate: who eats first, what is cheapest, what there is time for. Six women, two from each community, in their own words.

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

BREAKFAST meat, egg (with cheese), potato, and a bread of some sort.

LUNCH normally nothing or what my kids are eating (corn dogs, Mac and cheese, chicken nuggets). These things are cheaper.

DINNER normally a meat, veggie, carb (rice, pasta, potato, etc.) This is nmost affordable for us.

"I cook for my family so it's easier to eat they are eating."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

BREAKFAST cereal fruit skim milk

LUNCH salad with protein nuts and veggies

DINNER protein vegetable carbs

SNACK almonds, fruit

"These choices give me the energy to make it through the day, keep a good blood sugar level and don't make me feel sluggish or heavy"

ADRIANA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

BREAKFAST It really depends on what my husband wants lol

LUNCH most often I skip lunch and wait until dinner to eat.

DINNER most often I try to cook something that incorporates vegetables into the dish like Beef and broccoli with white rice.

SNACK the times we do treat ourselves, we bake cookies with the kids and end the night with a cup of milk.

"by the time I'm done making them lunch, I'm too tired to eat myself and end up taking a nap with my baby."

MARISA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

BREAKFAST avocado toast/tostones to a quick baked good (scones, cereal bars, etc).

LUNCH a sandwich, leftovers from the week, or my children's scraps/school lunch as to avoid food waste.

DINNER Our homecooked dinner staples are rice and beans, steak, pork chops, shrimp, assorted pastas/veggies.

"I've been cooking non stop due to covid and lately have opted for a pre-made solutions from being burnt out."

Skips or barely eats a meal, usually for lack of time

Fast food, frozen meals or take-out most days

Eats what the family eats, or cooks to their tastes

 **14**

 **13**

 **8**

Women describing each in their typical day, of 56 who answered on Day 1. A woman could describe more than one. Across the whole diary, at least 9 women described eating last or eating whatever the family eats.

Five words for how she eats

Adventurous, curious, a foodie		23
Healthy, mindful, balanced		20
Self-critical words: bad, lazy, unhealthy, sad		12
Quick, easy, on the go		10
Flavor: spicy, seasoned, saucy		10
Comfort or emotional eating		7
Routine, basic, predictable		7

Women using each kind of word for her “food personality”, of 56. A woman could use more than one kind.

Quick and delicious. All over the place.

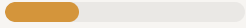
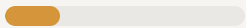
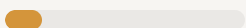
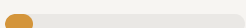
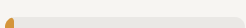
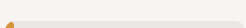
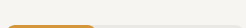
quick and delicious	Carnivore, happy, seafood, moderate and semi healthy
vegetarian, flavorful, colorful, indian and fresh	Spicy, flavorful, cheesy, saucy and seasoned well
Variety Global flexible International Home-made	delicious, seasoned, nutritious, comfort, zero-waste
All over the place	Purposeful, informed, healthy, delicious, portioned
	Adventurous Excited Zest New Joyful
Simple Plain Good Inviting Seasoned	
Sad, Full, Sweet, bad, weak	Blah unhealthy fast easy fun
	Basic, curious, apprehensive, afraid, stuck
Simple healthy satisfying not appealing flavorless	Inconsistent Grazer Food Junkie Good Intentions Trend Follower
Sometimes Healthy Sometimes Horrible	

Each line is one woman's five words, exactly as she wrote them. Bold: pleasure, curiosity and care. Light: the harder words some women chose for themselves.

Most women know chronic illness up close, in themselves or in the people they love.

Most women know chronic illness up close, in themselves or in the people they love.

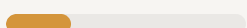
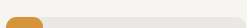
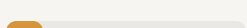
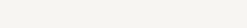
Herself: 21 of 56 named a chronic condition

High blood pressure		8
Diabetes or prediabetes		6
Autoimmune disease		4
Fertility issues		3
Heart disease		1
Thyroid		1
Another condition		10

“There's a lot of pain daily. I don't let it limit me. ... Tomorrow isn't promised and I'm not letting pain limit the joys of life.”

LEILA · WHITE · IN HER 30S

Her immediate family: 36 of 56 named at least one

Diabetes		26
High blood pressure		23
Heart disease		14
Autoimmune disease		7
Thyroid		4
Fertility issues		4
COVID-19, at the time of writing		3

“As a child, I couldn't understand why they couldn't play with us like some other grandparents could”

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S · ON TWO GRANDMOTHERS WITH DIABETES AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Of 56 women on Day 1, choosing from a list; a woman could choose more than one. “Another condition” was most often a mental-health or pain condition. Her own conditions follow age closely; see the lenses below before comparing communities.

Illness in the family is a story she has watched, not a fact she has read.

“By seeing up and close and not just hearing it, it changes your perspective.”

FERNANDA · LATINA · IN HER 30S · ON HER MOTHER'S DIABETES

“I often spoke to her about diet, exercise and how she didn't have to become dependent on the medication. However she didn't listen so here we are.”

CLAUDIA · LATINA · IN HER 40S · ON HER MOTHER'S BLOOD PRESSURE

“since my mom passed away from heart disease there's a sense from all of us that we need to do more to be healthy.”

VALERIE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

“its pains me that they are going thru health challenges and motives me to get healthier”

BERNADETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

Fifty-three of 56 already agreed

We asked how strongly each woman agreed that “our food choices impact our health”. Fifty-three of 56 agreed, 41 of them strongly. No one disagreed. Eleven reached, unprompted, for the same old phrase: you are what you eat.

The three who stayed neutral were not denying the link. One was tired of diets that had not worked for her. Another said her family had “been eating the same food since forever”. A third wrote, simply, “It depends on the person”.

Several women named the gap between knowing and doing themselves. One had studied nutrition in college: “I say that and I am not doing that in person.” Another, living with a long-term illness, put the gap in six words: energy and money run short.

One reading: what stands between these women and the way they want to eat is rarely information. It is the time, money and energy to act on what they already know.

“when i eat junk food i feel sleepy and sluggish but when i eat fruits and vegetables i feel energetic”

EBONY · BLACK · IN HER 30S

What her health means is measured in other people: keeping up, providing, showing up.

“My health effects my kids so if I’m not in good health how my gonna be provided for anyone else let along my kids.”

ROCHELLE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

“I am looking to loose weight so I can be HEALTHY and able to interact more with my grandbabies without being tired or unable to keep up.”

LORRAINE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

“I would luv to run or go skating with my family n friends, but I cant bc of my shortness of breath.”

DANIELLE · BLACK

“Some times it’s depressing some times it’s not I still get up daily an take care of my Family”

MONIQUE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

“Energy and money is lacking when you have a disease”

MICHELLE · WHITE · IN HER 40S

Day 2

Your world

On the second day, 54 women looked back. They drew the defining moments of their lives, then told us who shaped the way they eat, then and now, and whose advice they trust. The lifelines were about children, partners, illness, moves and loss. Food came in later, and it came in through people.

WHAT WE ASKED · 54 WOMEN ANSWERED

1. Which statements about life do you relate to most of the time? Choose two.
2. Looking back, what are the defining moments that helped you become the person you are today? Make a timeline and give each moment a title.
3. Choose your three most important defining moments. Why does each matter, and how did it shape who you are?
4. When you were growing up, who or what had the greatest influence on your food choices?
5. Today, who or what has the greatest influence on your daily food choices?
6. Who are you most likely to seek food advice from, and who least? Why?

"I learned food is an expression of love and pride."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

The lifelines were not about food. Food sat downstream of them.

Asked for the moments that made them, 49 women wrote about becoming mothers, losing someone, leaving or finding a partner, falling ill and moving on. On the 14 handwritten timelines that survive, food appears on one.

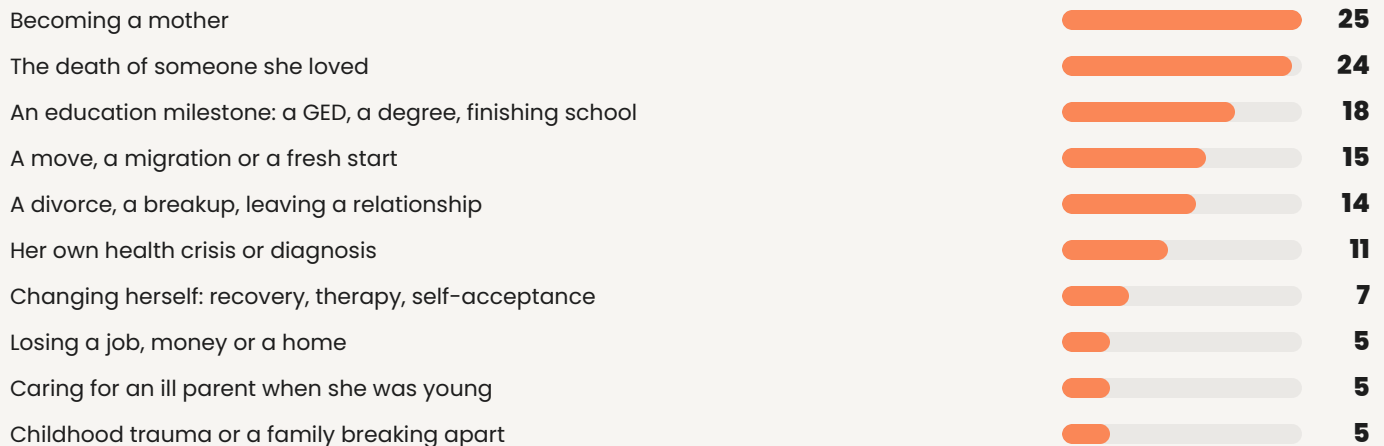
Then the questions turned to the plate. Parents shaped how 42 of 48 women learned to eat. Today the family still shapes it for 36 of 48, but now as the people she feeds, and media has moved in beside them.

One reading is that these women eat inside their histories. Several said so plainly: a stressed, grieving or newly single woman eats differently, and the turning points in a life are also the moments when the way she eats can change.

“life changing events nudge me to make better food choices once I deal with the shock, grief, stress or hurt”

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Content note: This section mentions childhood trauma, pregnancy loss and the death of loved ones, briefly and in general terms.

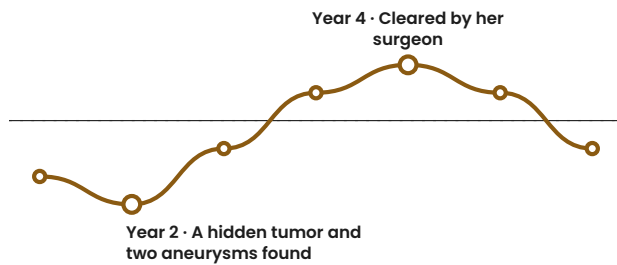


Women naming each among their defining moments, of 49 who described them on Day 2. A woman could name several. Education was often a hard-won victory: a GED after repeated tries, college a decade late, the first in the family.

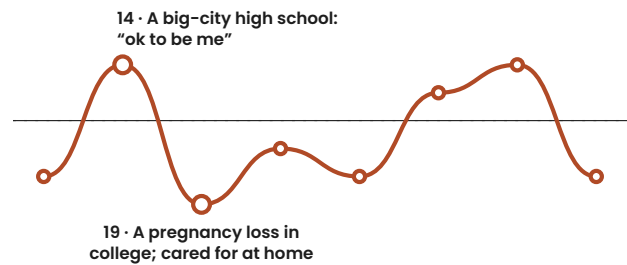
Every life has peaks and valleys

On Day 2, each woman listed the defining moments of her life. We drew each list as one line, read from left to right: it rises for the moments she remembers as high points and falls for the hardest ones.

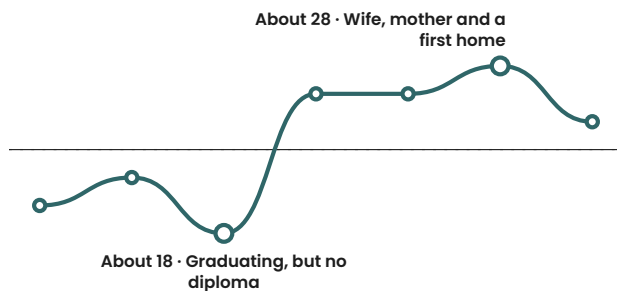
Yvette · Black · in her 50s



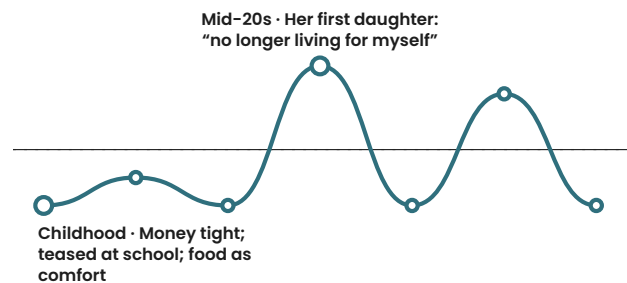
Renee · Black · in her 40s



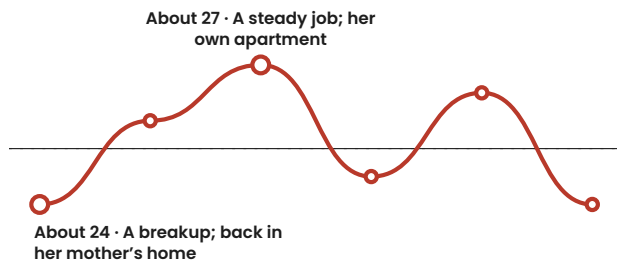
Kiara · Black · in her 30s



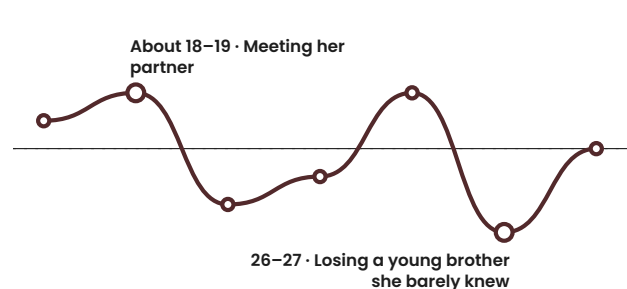
Tamara · Black · in her 30s



Nia · Black · in her 30s



Daniela · Latina · in her 20s



"This was the biggest risk that I'd ever taken in my life."

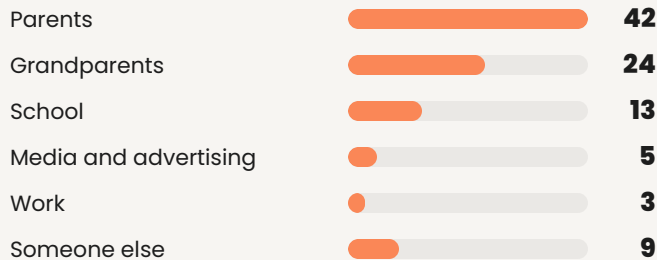
SIMONE · BLACK · IN HER 20S · ON MOVING ACROSS THE COUNTRY

"This moment made me who I am today, a strong independent woman."

ADRIANA · LATINA · IN HER 30S · ON BECOMING A YOUNG MOTHER

Then: the people who fed her. Now: the people she feeds, and the screen.

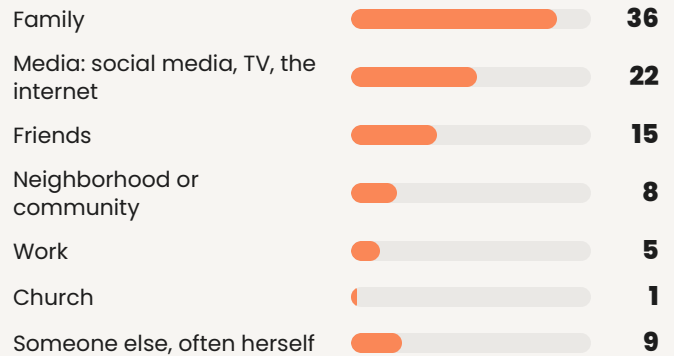
Growing up



"When I was growing up, you ate what was prepared. So definitely my parents."

YVETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

Today



"I cook what I think they will like and what I know they will eat. That often isn't very healthy. I'm too tired to prepare myself something separately even though I want to eat differently."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Women choosing each among their top two influences, of 48. Media today was named by 11 of 19 Latina women, 7 of 17 Black women and 4 of 12 White women; that difference is mixed up with age and is too small to read as a community pattern.

Love, pride, and the kitchens some women had to invent

"I learned food is an expression of love and pride."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

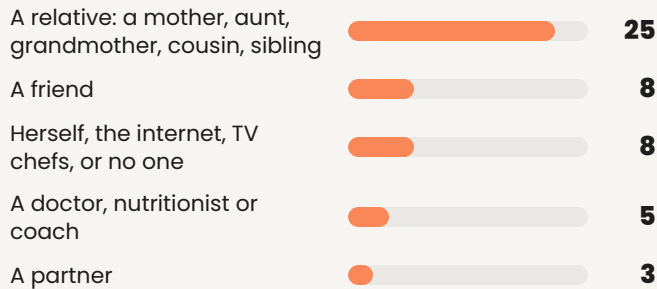
"She's the typical Spanish woman always cooking, house always smelling like fresh tortillas."

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S · ON HER GRANDMOTHER

Family is the trusted source and the cautionary tale

Family is the trusted source and the cautionary tale

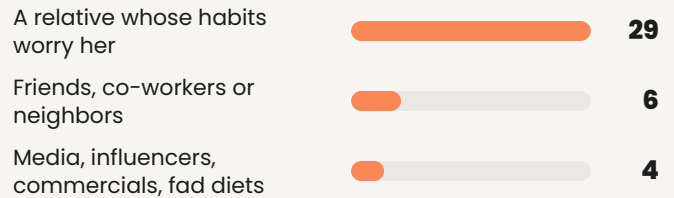
Most likely to ask



"My aunt because she now lives a healthier lifestyle through food and diet."

NIA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Least likely to ask

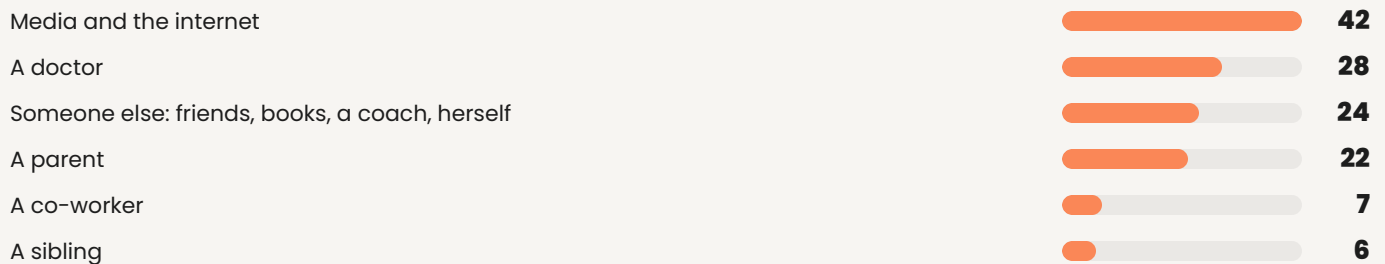


"I love my dad, but he was raised as a survivor and will eat just about anything"

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Of 48 women on Day 2.

Her phone first, then her doctor, and she checks both



Women naming each among their top three sources, of 47. Asked on Day 3; shown here with the people who shape her plate. Trust in doctors was real but conditional, and several women described having to advocate for themselves.

Day 3

Nutrition

On the third day, 47 women wrote about food itself: how it gets into the house, what counts as “my food”, the ads they remember and the ones they would make, the community event they would organize, and how they feel about plants, animals and the weather. By the last questions, 42 were still writing. The diaries explored plant-based eating; they did not test it.

WHAT WE ASKED · 47 WOMEN ANSWERED

1. How is food brought into your home, and how is it prepared? Who decides what to eat?
2. Think about the role your heritage plays in your food choices. How would you describe “your food”? What is not “your food”?
3. Think about a memorable food advertisement. Why does it stand out?
4. Create your own ad for a packaged snack or drink. Then create one for a healthy food or drink. How is it different?
5. If you organized a healthy food event in your community, what would be the must-haves?
6. Imagine your vegan friend invites you for dinner. What would you expect them to serve? What would you ask them?
7. Would you ever consider trying or adopting a vegan diet or lifestyle? Why, or why not?
8. What does “compassion for animals” mean to you, and how does it relate to the food you eat?
9. What examples of climate change have you experienced, and how does it relate to the food you eat?

“A cheeseburger is \$.99 a salad is \$10.”

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

Choices made at the checkout and the stove, under real limits

Almost every woman is her household's shopper and cook. She shops the sales, plans the week, and cooks to the tastes of the people at her table. At least 22 of the 56 women raised the cost of healthy food somewhere in their diaries without being asked, and their “cost” bundled money with time, energy and the risk that the family would not eat what she bought.

Heritage food, for many, is where love lives. The ads they remember are fast food, jingles and jokes; the healthy ads they imagined were about people sharing food, in every shape and color.

On plants, animals and climate, the women were open, and more honest than any campaign would dare to be. Most would try eating more plants, mostly for their health. Almost all love animals, and many cope with eating them by not looking. Almost everyone has felt the weather change; few connect it to their plate, except through prices.

“A cheeseburger is \$.99 a salad is \$10.”

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

She decides, she shops, she cooks, and she plans around everyone else

In the recruitment screener, 43 of 55 women said they do all of the grocery shopping and 37 all of the cooking. In the diaries, 32 of 47 described doing all or nearly all of it. That held in every community, at every age and in every kind of household.

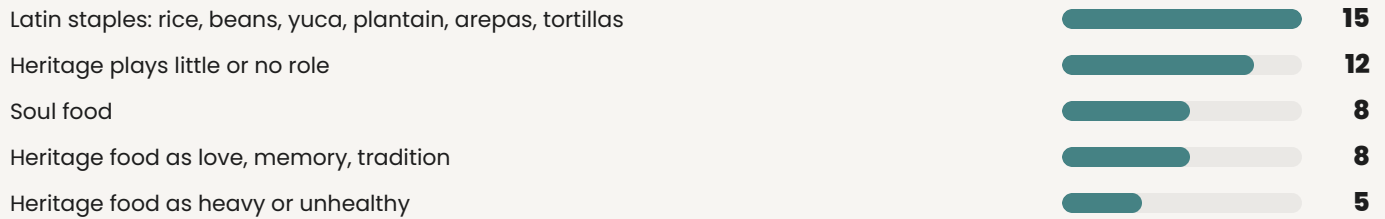
Their shopping is skilled work: discount and warehouse stores, sales checked twice a week, one store for staples and another for produce. In 2020, nine women had moved to delivery or curbside pickup, and several meant to keep it. Some women cook separate meals for children with allergies or picky eaters; a few rely on a partner who cooks.

Planning the week was described as relief. One woman said it was “such a load off, mentally”. Another, without a car, wished for farmers markets she could reach.

“I check every Wednesday and Sunday the shoppers to verify the sales and better deals and sales near me.”

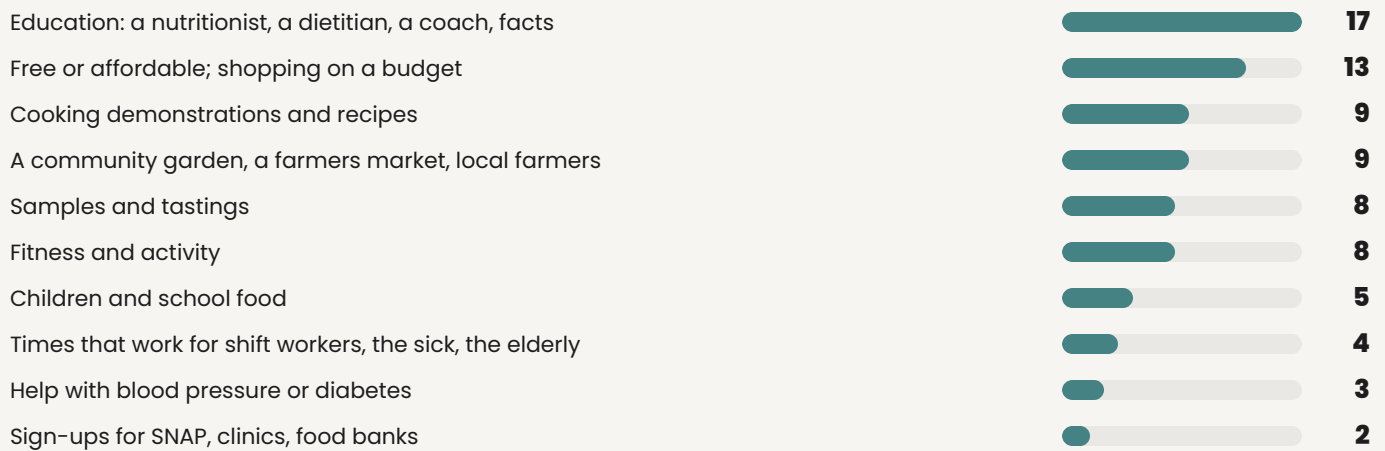
MARITZA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

“My food” is where love, memory and safety live



Women naming each, of 47 who answered on Day 3. Latin staples were named by 15 of 19 Latina women, from about a dozen national backgrounds; soul food by 8 of 17 Black women. Many White women said they had no food heritage, then described a grandmother's dish.

Their design brief: free, practical, local, with someone who knows



Women naming each must-have, of 42. A woman could name more than one.

The ads she remembers sell fast food and jokes. The ones she made sell company.

We asked each woman for a food ad she remembers, and then to invent two of her own: one for a snack or drink, one for a healthy food. What sticks is fast food, a childhood jingle, a laugh. What she imagined for a healthy food was people: a couple trying tofu together, girls sharing a bag of almonds, children fooled by a veggie burger, bodies of every size.

The ads she remembers

SONIC

"I really like the Sonic Guys because they're so funny."

MARISA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

A PIZZA SNACK

"The song was very catchy and the commercial was what I thought an ideal childhood was like."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

CEREAL COMMERCIALS

"They stand out because of the phrases and songs."

SIMONE · BLACK · IN HER 20S

OLIVE GARDEN

"They have a way to bring sense of homeness and feel of warmth."

VERONICA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

The healthy ad she made

"Often in health oriented advertisements everyone has the same look. ... Healthy people and people striving towards a more healthy lifestyle come in all shapes and sizes."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"This African American husband and wife ... ordered a sesame tofu salad they never ate tofu before this is there first time and trying it together which is wonderful"

BERNADETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

"Two young girls sharing a large bag while reading a magazine together. ... At the end the announcer says "Best when shared with friends""

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

"Maybe have a group of kids different ethnicities ... actually trying the burgers and not having any clue and commenting on how good they are! And a mom winking at the camera like yup got em"

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

Open to plants, wary of the word “vegan”

Content note: This section mentions an eating disorder, briefly.

Of 42 women, 15 said yes or that they are already moving that way, 10 said partly or maybe, and 17 said no. That openness rested mostly on health: how heavy meals make her family feel, a grandmother's illness, a wish for more energy.

Age divided the answers more clearly than community did. Ten of 15 women aged 45 to 54 said no, against 4 of 16 aged 25 to 34. Counting “yes” and “partly” together, openness was nearly level across the three communities.

The word “vegan” called up deprivation: “Crappy vegan food”, a life without cheese. Many women already use gentler words for what they do: “plant-based”, “flexitarian”, a meat-free breakfast sausage. One woman's experience is a caution for everyone who promotes plant-based eating: years ago, during an eating disorder she has since recovered from, veganism gave her an excuse to refuse food. Plant-forward messages should stay abundant, never restrictive.

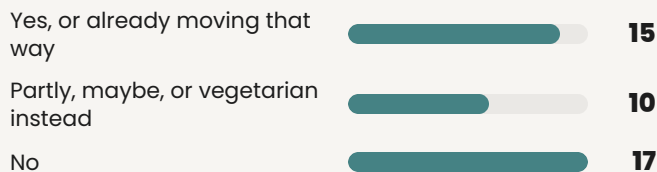
These were women recruited for their interest in better health, writing in one week of November 2020. The diaries show openness; they cannot show what anyone went on to eat.

“Yes, I'd definitely consider adopting a plant based lifestyle. Especially with my poor health. I think it could only improve my health.”

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Most would try. Cheese, meat and protein hold them back.

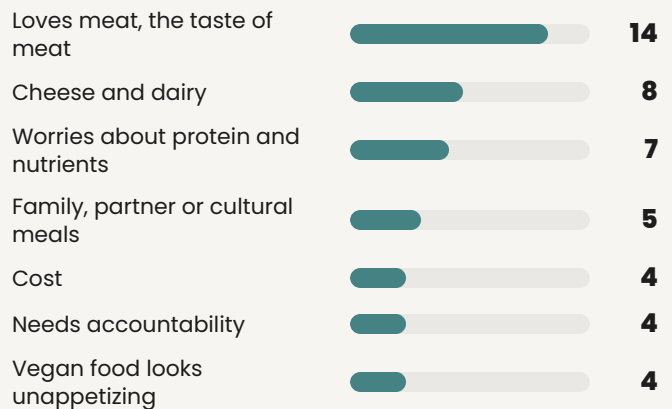
Would she try a vegan diet?



“The most difficult thing for me is cheese, it's definitely my weakness. But I'll get there slowly but surely”

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

What holds her back



“If it was a matter of life and death.. I am vegan! It would be hard but I would do it.”

YVETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S · AFTER FIRST SAYING NO

Of 42 women who reached this question. Barriers were coded across three questions, and a woman could name more than one. Others: “that means I could never eat my moms homemade food again” (a Latina woman in her 30s); “I would need to have like a person that checks on me and asks for pictures of my food” (a Latina mother in her 20s).

The turned-away gaze

Asked what compassion for animals means, almost every woman answered with care: no cruelty, a good life, often a pet she loves. Asked how that relates to what she eats, the 42 women's answers fell into a few groups. Eleven said meat is acceptable if animals are raised and killed humanely. Eleven named the tension or the guilt plainly. Seven said they try not to think about it, and 8 saw animals as food. Four were already eating fewer animal products, partly for the animals.

Psychologists call this the meat paradox, and it is common everywhere, not a trait of any group of women. These women knew what they were doing. One said no one wants to know how the sausage is made. Asked why, she answered: "It would hold us accountable".

One reading: the question itself did something that information might not have. Several women wrote that they kept thinking about it, and one that she would rather not answer at all. Whether that reflection lasted, the diaries cannot tell us.

"funny i have been thinking about that off and on all day today. i even thought about it when i ate a slice of turkey."

SHANNON · WHITE · IN HER 40S

"Saying this question out loud really makes me consider not eating meat."

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

Felt in the weather, priced at the store

Almost everyone had felt it. Thirty-one of 42 described unseasonal weather, most often a warm November: "Its November and its 70 degrees" Others named hurricanes, floods, hail, heat, wildfire smoke, and fields of corn, collards and cotton that are no longer there.

Asked how climate relates to what they eat, 18 described it raising prices or disrupting supply. Nine saw the link running the other way, from meat and factory farming to the climate; all nine were under 45. Thirteen saw no link, and some apologized, as if it were a test: "I feel like I'm failing a test with some of these questions".

One reading: the women are describing the link that touches them. Talking about climate through prices, storms and heat they have lived through starts where they already stand.

"More hurricanes/tropical storms mean that at times seafood is more expensive in the grocery store because of short supply."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

Day 4

Resilience

On the fourth day, 42 women told us how they get through: the hardest thing they had overcome, the strength they draw on, what they eat when they cannot cope, what they are grateful for, and who would pick up the phone at 2 a.m. Their answers are about strength, and about the burnout that comes from carrying so much.

WHAT WE ASKED · 42 WOMEN ANSWERED

1. Think of a time you faced a big challenge and overcame it. How did you do it? What was the lesson?
2. What are your unique “superpowers” that help you face adversity?
3. What might be your biggest weakness when facing adversity?
4. Think of someone you know who overcame a big challenge. What do you admire most about how they handled it?
5. How do you respond in moments of stress or uncertainty? What coping strategies do you use?
6. What do you eat when you are stressed out? What are your typical cravings?
7. What are five things you are most grateful for, and why?
8. If you felt troubled, who is the one person you could call anytime, day or night (even at 2 a.m.), and they would be there for you?
9. Imagine you could create a better, more compassionate world. What would it look like?

“I learned that if I just do my part and be patient and not be so stubborn to ask for help, everything will work itself out.”

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S · ON WHAT SHE OVERCAME

Almost every woman had a story of getting through.

Content note: This section mentions leaving an abusive relationship and the death of loved ones.

Asked for a big challenge they had faced and overcome, the women wrote about lives, not diets. Eleven of 42 named a job, money or housing crisis: a layoff, a forced move with nowhere to go, ten years of applications to leave public housing. Eight wrote about leaving a marriage or a relationship that was hurting them or their children. Seven wrote about grief, five about depression, anxiety or trauma, four about a hard-won school or work goal, and four about hardship while pregnant or raising children.

Their lessons were short and practical: plan ahead, keep savings, never give up. Several said the hardest part was asking for help, and that asking was the lesson.

"I learned that if I just do my part and be patient and not be so stubborn to ask for help, everything will work itself out."

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S · ON MOVING HOUSE A WEEK BEFORE HER DAUGHTER WAS BORN

"MOVING OUT OF THE PROJECTS, I OVERCAME BY WORKING TO MOVE FOR 10 YRS APPLYING TO OTHER APTS"

LILIANA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

"It was easier to just stay in a situation that was "comfortable" rather than happy. I finally realized that life is way to short to not be happy!"

TAMMY · WHITE · IN HER 40S

"i learned to coupon and we watched alot of the rush hour movies on repeat. the lesson was not to be frivolous and i learned to plan ahead for bills and expenses."

SHANNON · WHITE · IN HER 40S · ON RAISING FOUR CHILDREN THROUGH TWO SPELLS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

"It was hard but I did it, not just for them but for myself. It taught that I can overcome anything even though it maybe hard and may take awhile, it can be done!"

CHERYL · WHITE · IN HER 50S · ON GOING TO THERAPY TO RECOVER FROM AGORAPHOBIA

Some reach for something sweet. Almost a third stop eating.

Reaching for something



"Typically when I'm stressed I eat things that bring me memories of joy."

GABRIELA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

Not eating at all



"I get super cranky and sometimes I can't think and then I remember oh I'm stressed and I didn't eat all day, but I feed my kids..."

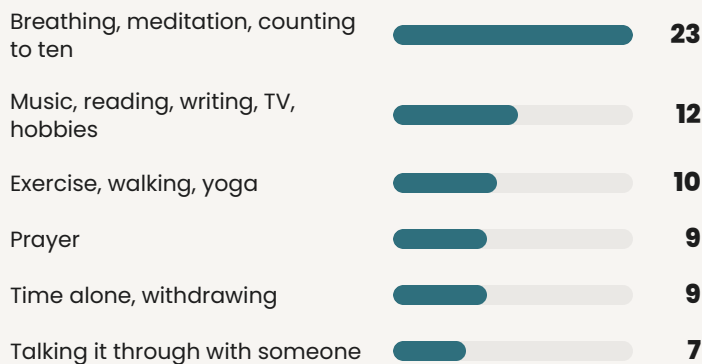
CLAUDIA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

Women naming each response, of 42 who answered on Day 4. A woman could name more than one.

WHAT IT MEANS

Eating more and not eating may be two answers to the same overload. One soothes; the other drops her own plate from the list.

How they get through



"I take deep breathes, I find a quiet spot and be still dont think about nothng but hearing the quiet in the room"

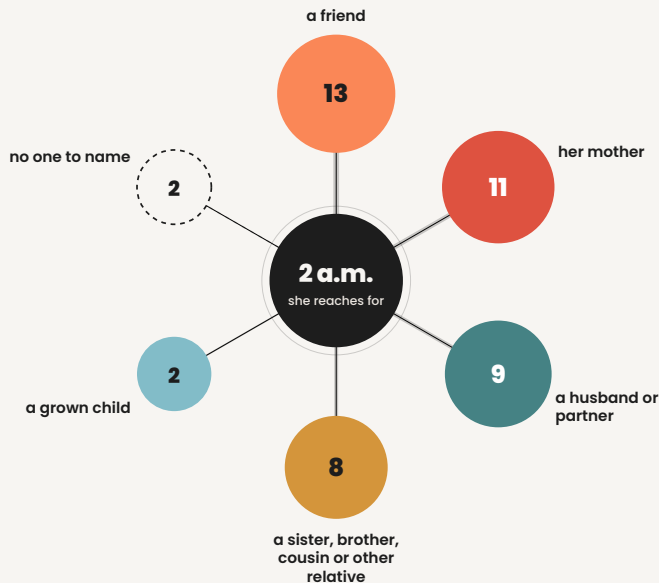
BERNADETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

"this past week i started putting my phone on silent and take an hour to decompress from work which helps my headaches"

EBONY · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Women naming each, of 42, across two questions on stress and coping.

Friends and mothers first. And two women with no one to name.



We asked each woman to name the one person she could call anytime, day or night, even at 2 a.m., who would be there for her. Friends and mothers came first. For some, a congregation stood in for family.

Women naming each kind of person, of 42. A woman could name more than one.

Superpowers, in their words

a great poker face

My belief in God

I am strong

a spirit of hope inside me

landing on my feet

compassion...with myself

Courage

a baby whisperer

God and my will

my thick skinned nature

And what weighs them down

I bottle things up

i always take on other peoples issues

self care is tough

Being too nice

Hiding my feelings

Shutting down when I feel overwhelmed.

I worry way too much.

I am definitely my worst enemy.

Five things she is grateful for

Children, family

Health

Friends

A roof, food on the table, the basics

A job, steady money

God, faith

39

24

21

16

12

11

Women naming each, of 42. A woman could name more than one.

Comfort, memory, and the guilt that follows.

"The comfort comes from loving them! The guilt comes from eating them!"

TAMMY · WHITE · IN HER 40S · ON HER FAVORITE SWEETS

"Typical cravings include smash burgers, my moms food like papusas or caldo, steak, italian food and hot wings."

GABRIELA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

"Take a break for yourself. This is temporary. Let me help you feel a little better."

ROSA · LATINA · IN HER 40S · ASKED WHAT HER CHOCOLATE WOULD SAY TO HER

"Bread!!! It's the devil"

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Kindness, equality, and time to breathe.

"The world would be a place where no one is devalued due to the color of their skin, origin, or any other orientation."

GWENDOLYN · BLACK · IN HER 50S

"A world with calmness without being rushed all the time."

VERONICA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

"mental health access because a lot of homeless people are written off by society as drug abusers and they need help"

EBONY · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"I imagine people having empathy with their fellow human even if they can't relate to them."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Day 5

Envisioning your best life

On the last day, the same 42 women looked ahead. Each chose one thing she would change about how she eats, weighed what she stood to gain and lose, named what stands in her way and what would help, made a vision board, and wrote a love letter to the woman she hopes to become. They wrote their own plan. Then they wrote to themselves as if it had already worked.

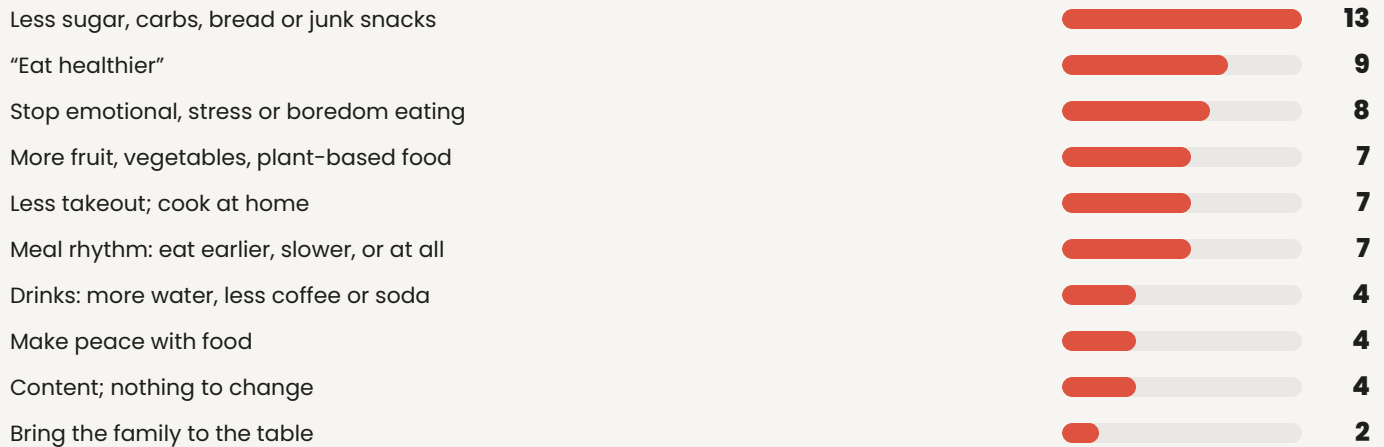
WHAT WE ASKED · 42 WOMEN ANSWERED

1. When it comes to your food choices or eating behaviors, what is the one thing you would like to change?
2. What do you stand to gain if you make this change? What do you stand to lose if you do not?
3. What would you need to start doing to reach your goal: new thoughts, new emotions, new behaviors?
4. What would you need to stop doing: old thoughts, old emotions, old behaviors?
5. What is standing in your way? What would help you?
6. Make a vision board called “My Transformed Self”, and talk us through it.
7. Write a love letter to your future transformed self. What are you most proud of? What advice would you share?

“In my opinion, I am the only thing in my way of achieving my new goal!”

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Most women chose a food goal. A few chose a table, a breakfast, a slower meal.



Women naming each goal, of 42. A woman could name more than one.

Asked what they would gain, many said weight. Asked what they would lose, most said their health.

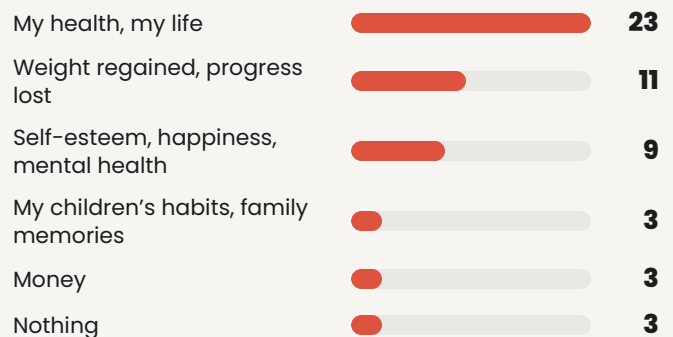
What I stand to gain



"Self control. If I can have control over my eating, I can probably do anything."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

What I stand to lose



"If I don't make this change, I lose the ability to teach my kids healthier habits and run the risk of having the same health conditions as my parents and grandparents."

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

Women naming each, of 42. A woman could name more than one.

Start lists were about structure and belief. Stop lists were about shame and delay.

Start lists were about structure and belief. Stop lists were about shame and delay.

RIGHT NOW TODAY

Figure out my true “why”

Eating without thinking and eating without feeling guilty

Happiness, curiosity, open-mindedness

putting my heart into wanting to do my best and believing I can do it

convince myself that I am worth cooking for

Feeling with my senses

One day at a time

Pack snacks

maybe try things in small bites

Thinking there’s always tomorrow

I’ll start next Monday.

Feeling defeated when I don’t meet a goal

Stop thinking I’m not worth the time it takes to cook for myself.

Stop feeding my feelings

waiting for something to give me motivation

Seeing myself as a fat blob.

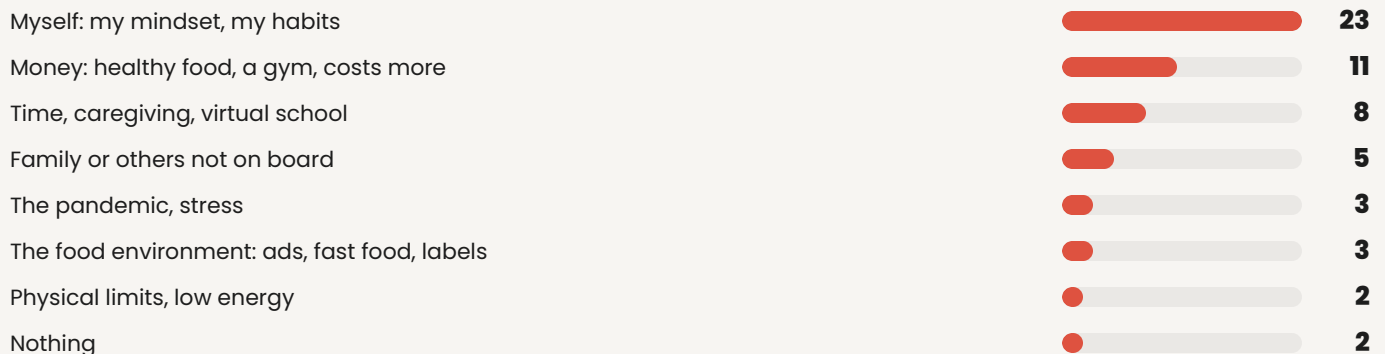
Stop thinking I can’t do it

I may also need an actual day off.

I’d need to stop virtual distance learning my kids for starters!

Bold: what women said they would need to start. Light: what they would need to stop. Many did not keep thoughts, emotions and behaviors apart, so all six answers were read together. Of 42, the most common start items were believing in herself (19) and planning: meal plans, lists, budgets (17). The most common stop items were junk food and cravings (17), negative self-talk and body shame (16), procrastination (12) and emotional eating (12). The emotional stop items together outnumber the food items.

“Myself,” then money, then time.



Women naming each barrier, of 42. A woman could name more than one. Several who named money, time or caregiving added that, mostly, it was them.

A Nourish goal, a Rebalance obstacle, Connect help.

Read together, the women's answers make one pattern. The goal they set was about food. The obstacle they named was about habit, self-talk and time. The help they asked for was company.

STEP 1 · THE GOAL

Most set a food goal.

Less sugar, carbs or junk		13
"Eat healthier"		9
More fruit and vegetables		7
Cook at home		7

"I would like to consistently (everyday) eat more vegetables."

SIMONE · BLACK · IN HER 20S

STEP 2 · THE OBSTACLE

Most named themselves, then money and time.

Myself: mindset, habits		23
Money		11
Time and caregiving		8

"In my opinion, I am the only thing in my way of achieving my new goal!"

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

STEP 3 · THE HELP

Most asked for someone alongside them.

Support, a buddy, accountability		15
Affordable healthy food		10
A plan or routine		8

"To have someone doing it with me, it would motivate me"

FERNANDA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

Of 42 women who completed Day 5. A woman could name more than one answer at each step.

Dear me.

On the last day, each woman wrote a letter to her future self, the woman who had made the change. Many wrote with a tenderness they rarely showed themselves anywhere else in the diaries.

"I would tell my future self not to be ashamed or too hard on myself for my past choices. That is something that I struggle with and I am always wishing that I had made better choices. So future self, please be forgiving and know that at any given time in my life I'm always doing the best I can"

NATALIA · WHITE · IN HER 40S

"I'm so proud that you didn't give up. You had good days, bad days, overwhelming days, too tired days, but you still showed up. Don't forget that happiness is an essential and your self-care is a necessity."

KARINA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

"Dear Me, Im proud of you for staying strong through the years and being the best mom you can be. You sacrificed your life and what makes you happy for your family and deserve to finally be happy. ... My advice would be to never give up on you, to always stay positive even through the the hard times because the hard time don't last forever, and that it's never too late to achieve your goals."

NIA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"Dear Darling Self, you really didn't need to change much just how you view yourself. You did the necessary things to survive and thrive, including losing the weight and eating healthier. I know it was a real challenge but you did it...good job! My only advice would be to enjoy the process and don't be too hard on yourself for failing because in the end you'll succeed."

VALERIE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

"Dear Future Me, It has been a long way, and you have achieved more than you ever thought you were capable of. I'm glad you finally broke the cycle of putting others before you. You're health comes first. You are so worth it. Keep going, dont look back. Thank you!"

NATALIE · LATINA · IN HER 30S

"Dear Me, I am absolutely proud of the changes that you've made in life in order to provide a better example for your kids but also to educate them that they can still eat good food that is healthy. ... You along with those you've motivated are the beginning of breaking a generational curse! ... For the record, not everything that looks good tastes good and not everything that looks bad tastes bad. Stop being so critical of food and just try it."

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"Dear self, I am so proud of you for loving yourself as you are and rewarding yourself for just for being you. Each day is a gift and wake up smiling as you open your eyes. I am happy you are finally relaxing and no longer worrying about things that have not happened. Live each day with no regrets and like it's your last."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

"Dear [her name], Be proud of whom you've become. Love yourself always even if you are heavy or thin. Laugh more. Read and explore the world! Keep your head high."

VERONICA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

Every answer, by community

The full coding of Day 5, for readers who want every count. B, L and W are the Black, Latina and White women who completed the day (14, 17 and 11).

The one thing she would change

	B	L	W	All
Cut sugar, carbs, bread or junk snacks	4	6	3	13
Eat healthier, in general	5	2	2	9
Stop emotional, stress or boredom eating	4	2	2	8
More fruit, vegetables, plant-based food	3	1	3	7
Less fast food or takeout; cook at home	1	4	2	7
Meal rhythm: late nights, skipped breakfast, eating too fast	2	5	0	7
Drinks: more water, less coffee or soda	0	3	1	4
Make peace with food: eat without guilt	2	1	1	4
Content: nothing to change	1	2	1	4
Family meals, bringing the family along	0	1	1	2

Women naming each, of 42 who completed Day 5 (14 Black, 17 Latina, 11 White). A woman could name more than one.

What she would gain

	B	L	W	All
Weight loss, or keeping it off	5	12	5	22
Health, a longer life, avoiding disease	7	7	5	19
Self-control, discipline, confidence	4	2	1	7
Energy, focus, mood, appearance	1	4	1	6
Time with family; a better example for her kids	2	1	2	5
Peace, freedom from worry about food	1	2	1	4
Money saved	1	2	0	3

Of 42. A woman could name more than one.

What she would lose if nothing changed

	B	L	W	All
Her health, her life	7	9	7	23
Hard-won progress; weight regained	1	4	6	11
Self-esteem, confidence, happiness	2	4	3	9
Teaching her kids bad habits; family memories	1	1	1	3
Money	1	1	1	3

Of 42. A woman could name more than one.

What she would start

	B	L	W	All
Believe in herself; “just start”	5	9	5	19
Plan and prep: meal plans, lists, budgets	7	5	5	17
Exercise, activity, better sleep	2	6	4	12
Emotional skills: stress, breathing, prayer	4	3	4	11
Learn or cook healthier food; small swaps	5	3	3	11
Get support or accountability	2	1	1	4

Of 42, across questions on thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

What she would stop

	B	L	W	All
Buying junk or fast food; giving in to cravings	7	6	4	17
Negative self-talk, self-blame, body shame	3	8	5	16
Putting it off: “I’ll start next Monday”	2	5	5	12
Stress or emotional eating; “feeding my feelings”	4	4	4	12
Late nights, screens, late eating	1	4	2	7
Letting others’ negativity sway her	2	3	0	5

Of 42, across questions on thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

What stands in the way

	B	L	W	All
Myself: mindset, habits, discipline	9	9	5	23
Money: healthy food costs more	2	3	7	12
Time, busy family life, caregiving	2	5	1	8
Family or others at the table	2	2	1	5
The pandemic, stress, insecurity	0	2	1	3
The food environment: “fast food on every corner”	1	2	0	3

Of 42. A woman could name more than one.

What would help

	B	L	W	All
Support: a buddy, a family “on board”	5	6	4	15
Money; affordable healthy food	2	3	5	10
A plan, routine, schedule, meal prep	3	4	1	8
Know-how: recipes, a dietitian, cooking skills	3	0	3	6
Convenience: meal kits, help with shopping	1	2	2	5
Motivation and mindset	2	3	0	5

Of 42. A woman could name more than one.

Seven findings

01 53 of 56

Knowing is not the problem

53 of 56 women agreed that what we eat affects our health, and no one disagreed.

Most of them had watched it happen: 36 of 56 have someone in their immediate family living with a chronic illness. What they lacked was time, money and energy, not knowledge.

One reading is that the gap between knowing and doing is about capacity. Asked on Day 5 what stood in their way, 23 of 42 answered, in one form or another, "myself".

"By seeing up and close and not just hearing it, it changes your perspective."

FERNANDA · LATINA · IN HER 30S · ON A PARENT'S DIABETES

02 13 of 42

Women eat last

Under stress, 13 of 42 women eat less or nothing at all, often while still feeding their children.

The women decide and cook for their households, usually to other people's tastes. 14 of 56 described skipping meals for lack of time, not to diet.

This is care under constraint, not self-neglect to be corrected. Eating more and not eating may be two answers to the same burnout: one soothes, the other drops the self from the list.

"I'm too tired to prepare myself something separately even though I want to eat differently."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

03 22 of 56

The price of a salad is more than money

At least 22 of 56 women raised cost without being asked.

Their "cost" is a bundle: money, time, energy, the risk that the family will not eat what she buys, and sometimes the lack of a kitchen or a car.

They knew the price of every option. Asked to design a community health event, 13 of 42 said it had to be affordable or free.

"A cheeseburger is \$.99 a salad is \$10."

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

04 42 of 48

Heritage is where love lives; convenience decides dinner

Parents shaped how 42 of 48 women learned to eat, and family still comes first today (36 of 48).

Media has moved in beside family rather than replacing it: 22 of 48 name it as an influence today. Heritage food carries memory, safety and identity, especially for Latina women (15 of 19 named Latin staples as their food).

The women already adapt what they love: cauliflower rice in jambalaya, salt-free seasoning, spaghetti squash for spaghetti. They keep the dish and change what goes in it.

"I learned food is an expression of love and pride."

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

05 25 of 42

Open to plants, wary of the word "vegan"

25 of 42 women said yes or partly to trying a plant-based diet, mostly for their health.

Age divided the answers more than community did: 10 of the 15 women aged 45 to 54 said no, against 4 of the 16 under 35. The word "vegan" called up loss; many already said "plant-based" or "flexitarian".

Women love animals, and most managed the conflict with eating them by not looking. A gentle question asked in a safe space moved some of them more than information did.

"Saying this question out loud really makes me consider not eating meat."

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

06 2 of 42

Strength is real, and it costs

Asked who they could call at 2 a.m., most women named a friend, their mother or a partner; 2 of 42 had no one.

Faith, persistence and a steady face carry many of these women. Faith was named as a resource by 11 of 19 Black, 10 of 22 Latina and 1 of 14 White women, a difference that holds across age and household means.

The same strength has a shadow: the bottled feeling, the poker face, the retreat to the car. One reading is that strength here is a form of care, carried at some cost.

"I can't say that I have superpowers because inside I might be screaming, but I have a great poker face."

YVETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

07 15 of 42

Their own plan: a food goal, an inner obstacle, and company

On Day 5, most women set a food goal, 23 of 42 named "myself" as what stands in the way, and the help asked for most was someone alongside them (15 of 42).

Their goals were small and concrete: less sugar, more vegetables, cooking at home, a steady meal rhythm. Their letters to their future selves were about whole lives, not diets.

Experts and women met here: change as one small step. The experts pointed to the system and the women named themselves; both are part of the picture.

"Maybe someone else doing it with me"

KEISHA · BLACK · IN HER 40S · ON WHAT WOULD HELP

What SHAKTI tells us about food, mood and resilience

The SHAKTI Study began from a hope that plant-based eating might support emotional resilience. Read together, the diaries speak to that hope in two parts. The first, that food and mood are bound together, they support strongly. The second, that plant-rich eating builds resilience, they raise but cannot settle.

“I truly think we do eat what we are feeling”

TAMMY · WHITE · IN HER 40S

Food is mood, and mostly mood drives food

Across five days, eating and feeling run together. Comfort food is “memories of joy.” Under stress, 18 of 42 women reached for sweets, and others for chips or fast food. Almost a third, 13 of 42, stopped eating altogether, often while still feeding their children.

Strain shows in how women talk about food. In the most stretched households, 7 of 28 women described their eating in terms of feeling: comfort, sadness, fullness. None of the 27 women with a little more room did. And 53 of 56 agreed that food choices affect health, usually because they had watched a parent or grandparent decline.

The direction matters. The diaries mostly show stress shaping the plate, more than the plate shaping the mood.

“Typically when I’m stressed I eat things that bring me memories of joy.”

GABRIELA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

Plant-rich eating and resilience: an open question

SHAKTI listened to women who eat in many different ways, over five days and in their own words. What they wrote shows how food lives inside a woman’s day: who she cooks for, what she can afford, what comforts her and what she hopes to change.

When the women named what carries them, they named faith, their mothers and sisters, a friend they could call at 2 a.m., and their children. Food rarely came first. The women who were moving toward plants described more energy, better sleep or weight lost, changes that arrived alongside others in their lives. In their telling, strength is built from many things at once, food among them.

Interest was real. Twenty-five of 42 women said yes, or partly, to trying a plant-based diet, mostly for their health. What held them back was practical: cost, cheese, family meals, and the word “vegan” itself. The GAIA Study went on to explore these questions at national scale.

Across communities, life stages and means

Start with what is shared, because it is most of the story. In all three communities, the woman decides what the household eats and usually cooks it. In every group, “myself” was the most common answer to what stands in the way, and someone doing it with her was the help most wanted. The notes below describe differences without ranking anyone, give every count its base, and let a woman who does not fit the pattern speak too.

AGE

Plant-based eating: age before community

Openness to eating more plants depended most on age. Ten of the 15 women aged 45 to 54 said they would not try a vegan diet, compared with 4 of the 16 women under 35. Younger Black women were the most open (6 of 7), mostly for their health. Among Latina women who were open, animals and the planet came up most. Counting “maybe” answers, openness was similar in all three groups. One woman spoke for many: she is moving that way, but cheese is “definitely my weakness.”

COMMUNITY

Faith as a resource

Asked what shaped who they are, 11 of 19 Black women and 10 of 22 Latina women wrote about God, prayer or church, often as what carried them through job loss, illness or grief. One of 14 White women did. This was true at every age, though faith was most present among Black and Latina women over 45. One Latina woman put her faith in “a higher power of myself.”

COMMUNITY AND MEANS

When money is named

Asked what stands in the way of eating the way they want, most women in every group answered “myself.” Money came next. Six of 11 White women named the cost of healthy food, compared with 3 of 17 Latina and 2 of 14 Black women, and the pattern held at every household-income level. The healthy food they priced was often a product, such as almond flour or protein shakes. One mother put it plainly: “a low income parent with kids cant afford that.”

HOUSEHOLD MEANS

Stretched households and the language of food

Women in the more stretched households, in all three groups, more often described their eating in terms of feeling: comfort, sadness, fullness. Seven of 28 did, against none of the 27 in households with a little more room, who more often called themselves “healthy” or “mindful” eaters. Women in stretched households also more often counted the death of someone close among their defining moments. Loss can strain a household, and strain can shape how food feels.

LIFE STAGE

Midlife, managed differently

Eighteen women were 45 to 54. Many were caring for someone: teenagers, grandchildren, a foster child. Twelve were living with a chronic condition. How they coped differed. Black and Latina women over 45 most often named prayer and family. Many of the White women, who were more often divorced, widowed or single, said keeping busy mattered. Another turned to meditation and yoga after her husband died.

COMMUNITY

Who belongs in a healthy ad

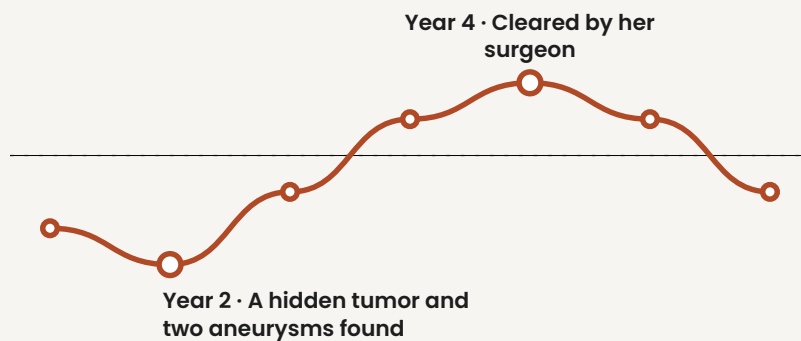
When women designed an ad for a healthy food, 5 of 14 Black women and 2 of 17 Latina women filled it with people of different races, body types and ages. None of the 11 White women did, at any age. One Black woman explained why: in health ads “everyone has the same look.” Several women, in every group, sold their healthy food with protein shakes or meal replacements, and many simply reused their snack ad. Healthy, for them, did not need to look special.

Fifteen lives

Fifteen women, five from each community, each drawn from the defining moments she chose and told in her own words where possible. All names are pseudonyms. The full portraits are on the SHAKTI website.

Yvette Black · 53 · her superpower: **"a great poker face"**

Content note: This story mentions a serious accident and brain surgery.

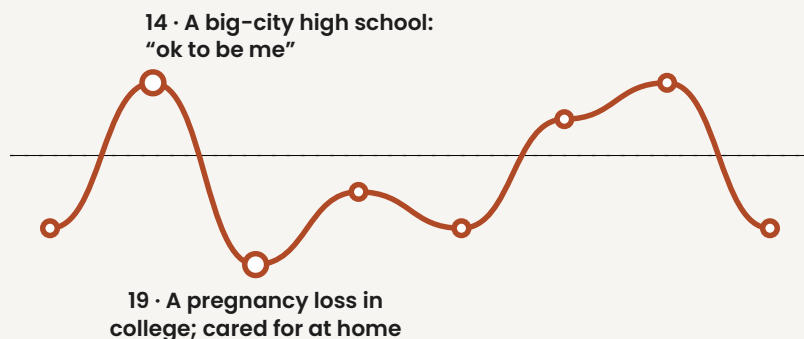


Asked for five words, Yvette chose “Fantabulous, friendly, happy, easy going and curious.” In November 2020 she lived in a desert city in the Southwest with one of her daughters and two grandchildren, a year and a half after leaving the Midwest she still calls home. The move was for the children: “I left a job that I love to come to a job that is just ok knowing that they would be ok.” Money is what stresses her most: “how am I going to pay this”.

Renee

Black · 49 · her superpower: **"Courage"**

Content note: This story mentions a pregnancy loss, a brief hospital stay for her mental health and a grandparent's decline. If you are struggling, you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S. at any time.

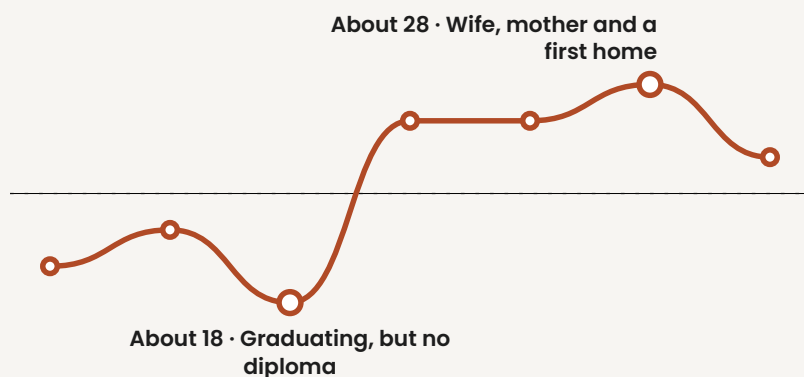


Renee describes herself as "Funny curious loyal caring strong." She lives on her own with her dog in a large Southern city, is a college graduate and an avid football fan, and at the start of the diary had "recently made a promise to myself to eat more home cooked meals than eating out," and to move every other day, "to be better to my body and more healthy in these unhealthy times."

Kiara

Black · 30 · her superpower: **"a baby whisperer"**

Content note: This story includes a parent's serious chronic illness.

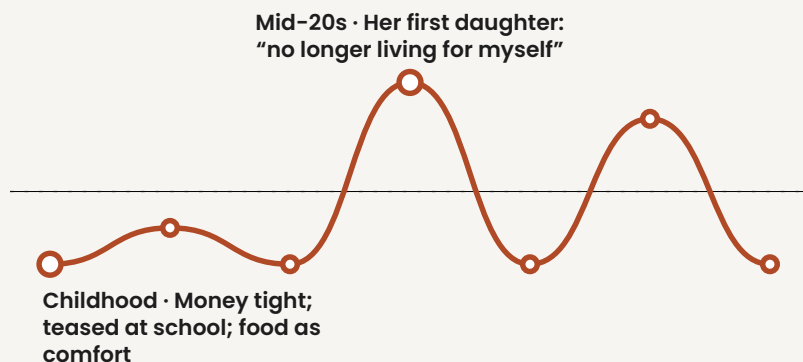


Kiara's five words are "Nurturing, enthusiastic, dedicated, thoughtful and loving." She has been married seven years, homeschools her two children every other year, worked as a substitute teacher "well before the pandemic anyway," and is slowly starting a childcare business. At about six she begged to skip children's church for the nursery "to help with the babies." Her superpower, alongside thinking fast in a crisis: "I also feel I'm a baby whisperer."

Tamara

Black · 30 · her superpower: **"My belief in God"**

| Content note: This story discusses weight, body image and a time without housing.

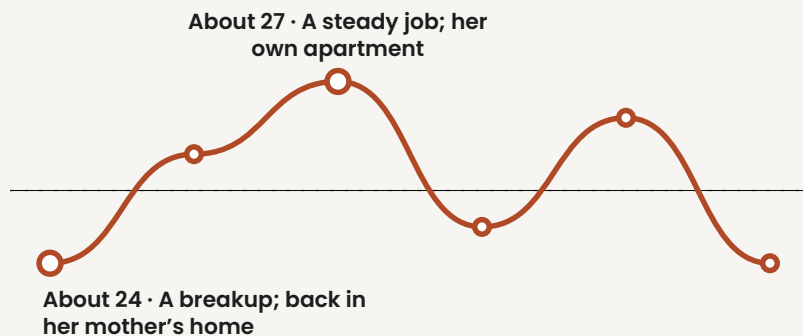


Tamara describes herself as "Charismatic, funny, adaptable, empathetic, thoughtful." She is a stay-at-home mother of two girls in a large Northeastern city, living with a partner who taught her to cook. The time they cook together, away from the children, is when "We get to laugh and share about our days together. I experience joy."

Nia

Black · 32 · her superpower: **"staying strong and positive"**

| Content note: This story mentions hostility at work during pregnancy, and low mood.

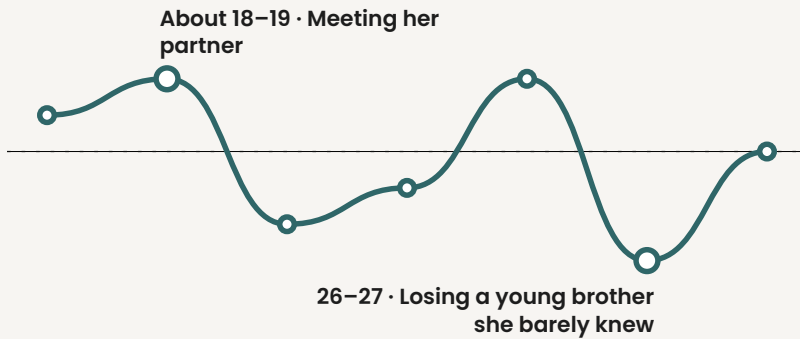


Nia calls herself "Funny, Loving, caring, understanding, and compassionate," and credits her upbringing with "a certain swagger, personality, and toughness to me even tho I'm also very sweet." She is a single mother of a young son and a younger daughter in a large Northeastern city, and "completed some college before my kids took over my life." Before the pandemic she did heavy manual work. In 2020 she "had to temporarily stop working because of no child care and school and become a full time mom/teacher."

Daniela

Latina · 27 · her superpower: **"I am strong"**

Content note: This story mentions a past eating disorder, a pregnancy loss and the violent death of a family member. If you are struggling, you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S. at any time.

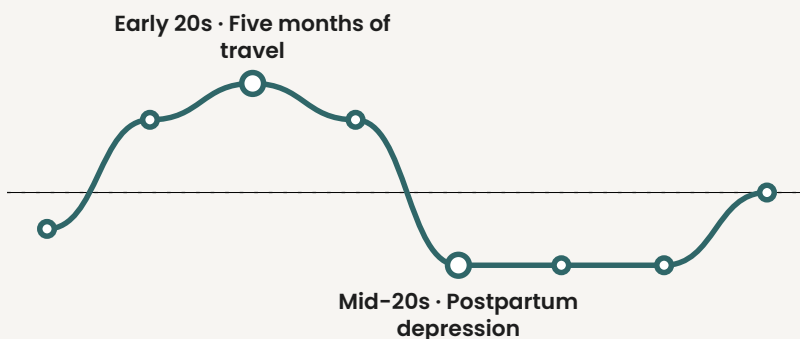


Daniela's five words are "Outgoing, Genuine, Honest, Loyal, People pleaser." She grew up in a small mountain town where her whole extended family lived "walking distance from each other," became a mother at fifteen and raised her son alone until she met her fiancé three years later. They moved south, had two more children, and are now "a family of 6," with a small dog. She cooks, bakes, makes crafts and takes photographs, and she says plainly: "I try to live a healthy life style but my family makes it pretty difficult."

Marisa

Latina · 31 · her superpower: **"my thick skinned nature"**

Content note: This story mentions postpartum depression, grief and using crisis lines. If you are struggling, you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S. at any time.

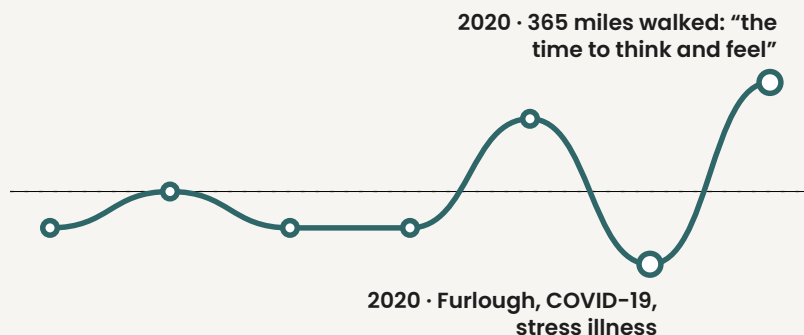


Marisa calls herself "Chill, funny, confident, creative, ambitious." She is a single mother of two young boys in a large Northeastern city, the daughter of immigrant parents, with a Puerto Rican and Southern Italian family behind her.

Veronica

Latina · 37 · her superpower: **"Empathy, care, compassion...with myself"**

Content note: This story mentions divorce, COVID-19 illness and stress-related health problems.

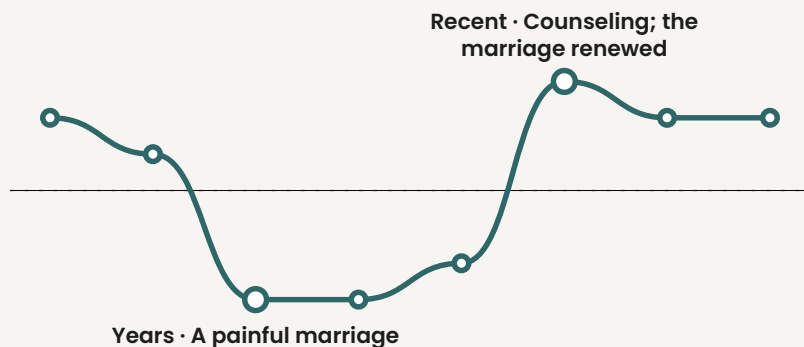


Veronica's five words are "Hardworking, Honest, Funny, Positive and Empathetic." Born and raised in a large Midwestern city in a Mexican American family, she trained as a cook and worked the line for "about \$5 hour...no tips" before money pushed her out of school and into a job in health care, where she has stayed for many years. Food remained "one of my therapeutic hobbies," alongside hiking. Her mother taught her to scramble eggs at five, and to taste as she goes: "Never wait until the food is done before tasting."

Mariela

Latina · 41 · her superpower: **"God and my will"**

Content note: This story mentions a painful marriage and a parent's serious illness.

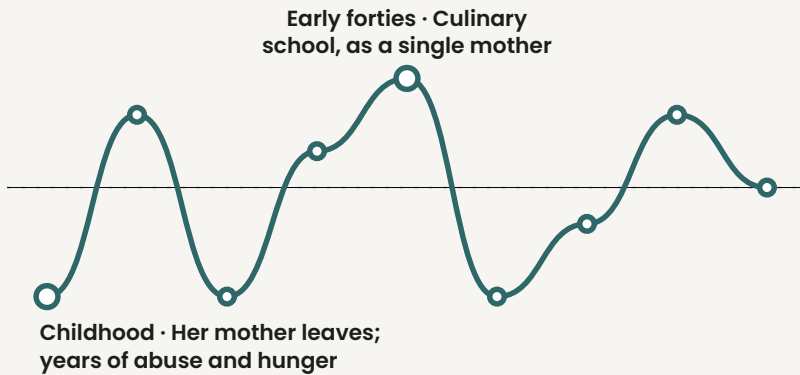


Mariela describes herself as "respectful kind friendly sincere easygoing." She grew up in South America, in a country where getting a higher education "is part of the culture," and now lives in a Gulf Coast suburb with her husband, a daughter who has just turned eighteen, a younger son and a husky. She likes board games, streaming shows and travel with her family. Her faith, she writes, is "the major influencer on my personality."

Elena

Latina · in her 50s · her superpower: **“my faith in God and my family”**

Content note: This story describes child abuse, hunger, a parent’s overdose death and a time of suicidal feelings. It is told briefly and with care. If you are struggling, you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S. at any time.

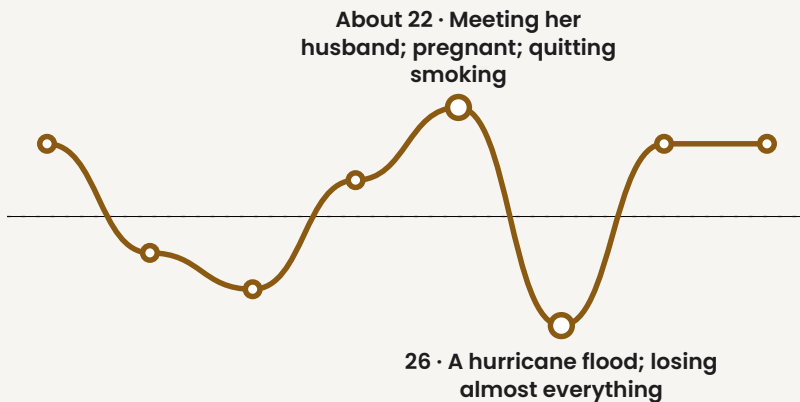


Elena’s five words are “Kind, funny, outgoing, loyal and clever.” She is a grandmother with two grown children, raised by her father in a “house full of males”: “I’m tough. I can defend myself. My dad also taught me kindness and compassion.” She finished culinary school in her early forties, a single mother “with only a high school diploma,” and has made her working life in food. Why she keeps working through daily pain: “Food makes people happy and that makes me happy. Not to mention that rent comes due every month.”

Brittany

White · 29 · her superpower: **“a spirit of hope inside me”**

Content note: This story mentions a flood disaster and teenage smoking.

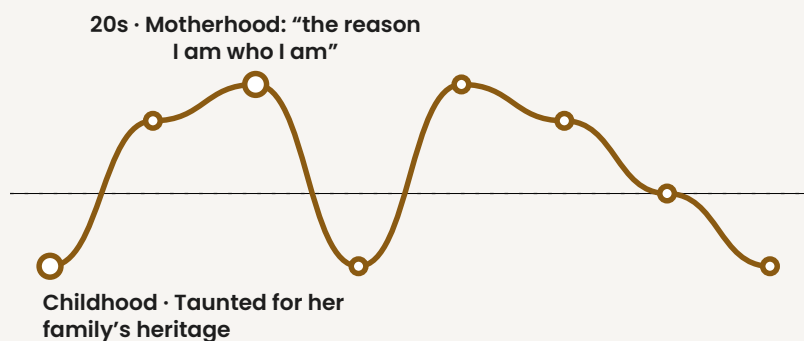


Brittany’s five words are “Kind, understanding, considerate, persistent, down to Earth.” She is twenty-nine, married seven years, with three young children and two cats, and has recently moved to a part of the South with mountains and hiking trails that she has “absolutely fell in love with.” She plays guitar with the kids and treasures one thing above all: “enjoying my coffee and some quiet time before everyone else wakes up.”

Leila

White · 38 · her superpower: **"I feel what others feel"**

Content note: This story discusses weight, weight-loss surgery, binge eating, chronic pain and the death of a friend.

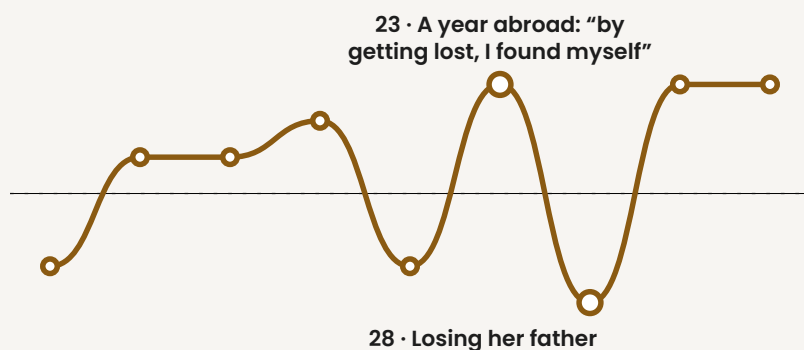


Leila calls herself "Outgoing Greatness Sweet Smartass Energetic." She is in her late thirties, the mother of two teenage boys, raised in the South in a Middle Eastern immigrant family. She recently moved back into her parents' home after leaving her children's father "after 20 years." She works long hours in the travel industry, where she landed after twenty years in restaurants, and loves that it lets her see and taste the world.

Natalia

White · 44 · her superpower: **"the ability to appear confident, even if I am frazzled"**

Content note: This story mentions a parent's depression, the death of a parent and an eating disorder. If you are struggling, you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S. at any time.

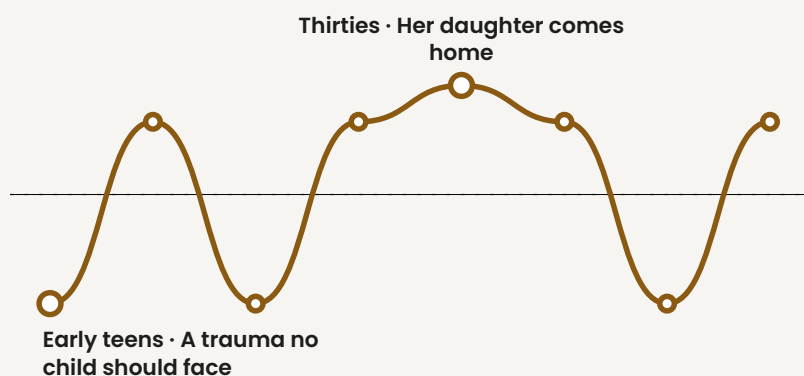


Natalia's five words are "Boisterous Comical Animated Attentive Turbulent." An only child of immigrant parents, raised in a large Midwestern city among people speaking many languages, she was "a traveler and party-goer who just couldn't sit still" before family. She now lives with her partner of twelve years and their son and daughter, manages a few family-owned buildings part-time, and lost her freelance event work when the pandemic hit.

Kristen

White · in her 40s · her superpower: **"endurance and positivity in the face of adversity"**

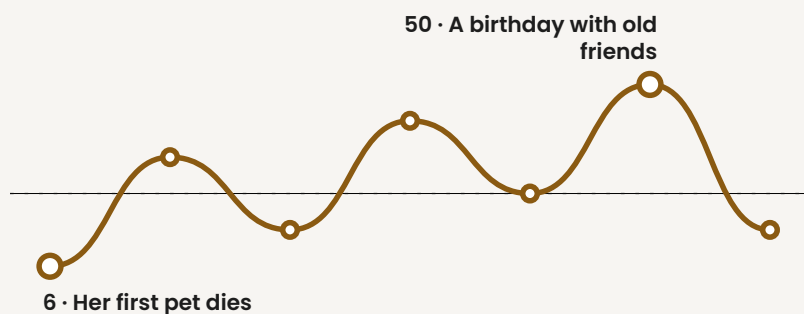
Content note: This story includes sexual assault, domestic violence, addiction, a suicide attempt, homelessness and the death of a spouse. It is told briefly and with care. If you are struggling, you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) in the U.S. at any time.



Kristen's five words are "Outgoing, sarcastic, witty, bold, and caring." She is in her forties, "an empty nester ... and a widow." Her husband died of cancer not long before the diary, soon after he fell ill. She lives with her dog on a small fixed income, takes on a little work "to make ends meet," and plans to finish a degree paused by grief and the pandemic. A self-described "natural pessimist," she does one kind thing for someone every day, because "cheerfulness can be just as contagious as any virus."

Jill

White · 51 · her superpower: **"landing on my feet"**



Jill's five words are "Outgoing, sweet, confident, smart, driven." College-educated, she moved to a small Northeastern city after many years in a big one, lives with "a beautiful cat," and works with animals: she has raised money for a sanctuary and now walks and cares for pets while their owners are at work.

What the field told us, and what the women added

Before a single diary opened, fifteen people who work where food, health and community meet shared what years of practice had taught them: physicians and nurses, coaches and cooks, advocates, educators and a filmmaker. Many of them work in the same neighborhoods, and some come from the same communities, as the women who would later write.

Their insight shaped the questions we asked. Then the women wrote, and their diaries echoed the experts again and again. Where the two meet, the women add the detail of daily life: the hour of the day, the price on the shelf, the child at the table.

THE FIFTEEN EXPERTS, BY THEIR WORK AT THE TIME

- Physician and resilience researcher
- Manager of a community plant-based eating program
- Attorney and founder of a social-justice advocacy institute
- Actress and documentary filmmaker
- Co-founder of a community food-education foundation
- Former executive director of a plant-based community health nonprofit
- Founder of a food-justice nonprofit
- Animal-rights advocate and academic author
- Nurse educator and diabetes coach
- Founder of a plant-based business network
- Educator, plant-based coach and Masters weightlifter
- Family nurse practitioner and plant-based lifestyle coach
- Founder and CEO of a plant-based food company
- Former operations director at a plant-based food company
- General surgeon in tribal health care

Experts are quoted with their consent, from interviews in fall 2020, and described by the roles they held at the time.

LIVING CLOSE TO
BURNOUT

“Resilience is the core strength you use to lift the load of life.”

PHYSICIAN AND RESILIENCE RESEARCHER

Under stress, 13 of 42 women eat less or nothing at all, often while still feeding their children.

“I didn’t eat all day, but I feed my kids...”

CLAUDIA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

THE PRICE OF
EATING WELL

“it’s just prohibitively easier to buy unhealthy food.”

GENERAL SURGEON IN TRIBAL HEALTH CARE

At least 22 of 56 women raised cost without being asked.

“A cheeseburger is \$.99 a salad is \$10.”

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

WHEN LIFE IS
FALLING APART

“When things are falling apart. Eating healthy is not your biggest problem.”

GENERAL SURGEON IN TRIBAL HEALTH CARE

Asked what they had overcome, the women wrote about lives, not diets: a layoff, a forced move, grief, leaving a relationship that hurt them.

“I can only be a real failure if I stopped trying.”

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

KEEP IT SIMPLE

“It has to be so simple. It has to be 1-2-3. It has to save them time.”

PHYSICIAN AND RESILIENCE RESEARCHER

On Day 5, 17 of 42 women wanted to start planning: meal plans, shopping lists, budgets. They asked for baby steps.

“I learned how to make a little stretch to a lot (food and money mostly).”

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

THE WORDS WE
USE

“I don’t really like to use the word ‘vegan’ because it tells you what you can’t eat. I prefer ‘plant-dominant’ or ‘plant-forward’ because it speaks to all the things you can eat.”

FAMILY NURSE PRACTITIONER AND PLANT-BASED LIFESTYLE COACH

25 of 42 women were open to trying a plant-based diet; the word “vegan” itself was one of the things that held them back.

“they basically made salad taste like a burger so yeah I loved it”

SHANNON · WHITE · IN HER 40S

FOOD AS LINEAGE

“one of the ways that they do connect themselves with their lineage is through food.”

FOUNDER AND CEO OF A PLANT-BASED FOOD COMPANY

Parents shaped how 42 of 48 women learned to eat. Heritage dishes are where love, memory and safety live.

“This meal always reminds me of being in the kitchen while my mom cooked. It was always a ‘safe space’”

LORRAINE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

RESPECT THE COOK

“acknowledge that you are the expert in your culture and tradition”

MANAGER OF A COMMUNITY PLANT-BASED EATING PROGRAM

Women already adapt the dishes they love, with swaps they found for themselves, and want to keep their traditions.

“it is important to keep your country traditions alive.”

MARIELA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

THE MESSENGER MATTERS

“Like the messenger is so important.”

ACTRESS AND DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

For food advice, 25 of 48 women would turn first to a relative, often one who has changed her own eating.

“My aunt because she now lives a healthier lifestyle through food and diet.”

NIA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

NOT ALONE

“We really want people to do it with their partner, whether it’s a spouse or a family member or entire family or an entire community.”

FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF A PLANT-BASED COMMUNITY HEALTH NONPROFIT

On Day 5, the help the women asked for most was someone doing it with them (15 of 42).

“I think I just need to do with someone”

KEISHA · BLACK · IN HER 40S

KNOWING THEY MATTER

“I want people to know that they matter.”

ATTORNEY AND FOUNDER OF A SOCIAL-JUSTICE ADVOCACY INSTITUTE

Writing to their future selves, the women offered themselves the kindness they usually give others.

“Is always good to believe in yourself you are beautiful you are worth it”

YARELIS · LATINA · IN HER 20S

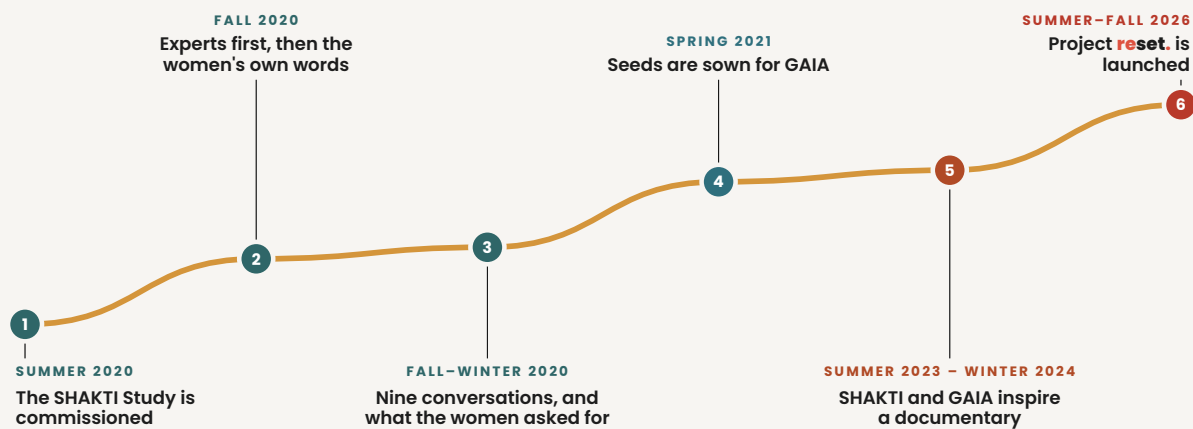
From five days of diaries to five pathways

SHAKTI is a study of women, and its findings belong to them. Their insights are also one of the sources that inform Project **reset**. The film's educational impact campaign draws as well on The GAIA Study, on the experts in the documentary and on wider research, and it is built for many audiences across ages, communities and walks of life.

What SHAKTI contributes is a set of lessons, learned from women living closest to burnout, about where change can begin:

NOURISH	RESTORE	MOVE	CONNECT	REBALANCE
Start from the food goal most women already held, and from the dishes they already love. Flavor and family come first.	Build on the breathing, prayer and quiet many already reach for, and notice the women who stop eating under stress.	Begin with the walks and outings women found for themselves, on their own terms.	Answer the help asked for most: someone doing it with them.	Work on the obstacle named most, "myself", by lifting blame rather than adding rules.

The journey



IN THEIR OWN WORDS • A LETTER TO HER FUTURE SELF

"I'm so proud that you didn't give up. You had good days, bad days, overwhelming days, too tired days, but you still showed up. Don't forget that happiness is an essential and your self-care is a necessity."

KARINA • LATINA • IN HER 20S

How Project **reset.** puts these lessons to work, for audiences of every kind, is told on its own website: jiviniti.org

The women's words

Short quotes from across the five days, grouped by theme, exactly as the women wrote them.

COST

"I learned how to make a little stretch to a lot (food and money mostly)."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"When budget is tight, you can't be as healthy as you want to be."

LEILA · WHITE · IN HER 30S

STRESS EATING

"food is the most affordable Vice, especially the 'bad' stuff."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"Typically when I'm stressed I eat things that bring me memories of joy."

GABRIELA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

ACCESS

"A cheeseburger is \$.99 a salad is \$10."

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

CHRONIC ILLNESS

"Energy and money is lacking when you have a disease"

MICHELLE · WHITE · IN HER 40S

"I can't live at my minds pace I have to live with what my body will allow me to do."

VALERIE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

BURNOUT

"I'm too tired to prepare myself something separately even though I want to eat differently."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

EATING LAST

"I didn't eat all day, but I feed my kids..."

CLAUDIA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

PREVENTION

"Its not about being vain, its about loving yourself and thinking about the future."

VERONICA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

GRATITUDE

"Time: Having time to put myself first. Above all --this is something money can't buy"

VERONICA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

"I am healthy. I am loved. I have a roof over my head. I have food in my table. I am able to provide for myself."

ROSA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

FAMILY ILLNESS

"By seeing up and close and not just hearing it, it changes your perspective."

FERNANDA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

"...it made me want to watch what I eat and stay active so that my kids and my future grandkids don't have to have those same experiences."

AYANA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

HERITAGE

"This meal always reminds me of being in the kitchen while my mom cooked. It was always a 'safe space'"

LORRAINE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

"it is important to keep your country traditions alive."

MARIELA · LATINA · IN HER 40S

"Omg... carb culture is most of the food in my culture."

BEATRIZ · LATINA · IN HER 40S

FOOD AS LOVE

"you can say so much to someone without a single word, but make them their favorite comfort meal"

GABRIELA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

REPRESENTATION

“Healthy people and people striving towards a more healthy lifestyle come in all shapes and sizes.”

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

“healthy foods and drinks should be seen as normal and not something special or unattainable.”

JADA · BLACK · IN HER 20S

COMMUNITY DESIGN

“Free event Free how to Free plans Basically it has to be free”

BEATRIZ · LATINA · IN HER 40S

COMMUNITY GARDEN

“I think people would be more likely to consume food that they had a hand in growing.”

ELENA · LATINA · IN HER 50S

ACCOUNTABILITY

“I would need to have like a person that checks on me and asks for pictures of my food to hold me accountable.”

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

“I think I just need to do with someone”

KEISHA · BLACK · IN HER 40S

PLANT-BASED OPENNESS

“If it was a matter of life and death.. I am vegan!”

YVETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

PLANT-BASED PRODUCTS

“they basically made salad taste like a burger so yeah I loved it”

SHANNON · WHITE · IN HER 40S

COMPASSION

“The thought of eat an animal that just wants to be an animal”

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

“no one really wants to know how the sausage is made.”

VALERIE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

“Saying this question out loud really makes me consider not eating meat.”

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

“awareness of another heart beating creature”

VERONICA · LATINA · IN HER 30S

CLIMATE

“Climate change is expensive for everyone.”

RENEE · BLACK · IN HER 40S

“hot flashes or wearing tank tops in november? its real folks.”

SHANNON · WHITE · IN HER 40S

RESILIENCE

“I can only be a real failure if I stopped trying.”

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

“We are all handed lemons. It just depends on how sour you want them to be.”

LEILA · WHITE · IN HER 30S

STRONG-WOMAN COST

“I don't want you to feel my pain... I'm gonna handle it like a boss.”

YVETTE · BLACK · IN HER 50S

REBALANCE

“i always take on other peoples issues and put mine on the back burner”

EBONY · BLACK · IN HER 30S

COMPASSIONATE WORLD

“some people are just one paycheck from living in the streets”

EBONY · BLACK · IN HER 30S

More letters to the future

"You finally got tired of allowing others to place their fears on you and followed your heart. ... TAKE A DEEP BREATH! You did it, you kept the faith, did the work and accomplished each and every goal."

KIARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"Always remember where you started and why you were there to begin with. You can't take back the past, and you will never get time back. So make sure you are living each day fully."

TAMARA · BLACK · IN HER 30S

"You are always cheering everybody else on, so never hesitate to bask in someone else's praise for you. Should you ever need a shoulder to lean on, you know I'm always here for you."

KRISTEN · WHITE · IN HER 40S

"[her name] you did so great! You worked so hard in bringing your family together and look what happened. ... They even said they look forward to our dinners together, it's something that everyone can count on. We have made so many memories throughout the years over the family table and our family is closer than ever."

BRITTANY · WHITE · IN HER 20S

"You are a majestic Phoenix and nothing has ever kept you down for long because you are an unstoppable force of nature."

HEATHER · WHITE · IN HER 30S

"I am most proud of becoming what people said I couldn't which is a great mother! ... Focus on you and let go of any toxic, energy draining, people in your life!"

DANIELA · LATINA · IN HER 20S

Sources and further reading

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The Virsa Foundation and JIVINITI

The Virsa Foundation, Inc. is a Greater Boston 501(c)(3) nonprofit connecting the dots between personal, public and planetary health.

The Foundation was born of a personal journey. After a global career in consumer behavior, public health, communications and strategy, founder Nivi Jaswal-Wirtjes experienced severe corporate burnout and found her way back to health through lifestyle change. She established The Virsa Foundation in 2018 to look beyond individual well-being to the systems that shape it. Its first initiative, from 2018 to 2020, supported some 325 women Phulkari artisans in rural Punjab, in northwestern India.

In 2020, eight weeks after Nivi lost her father to COVID-19, the Foundation launched JIVINITI, its Research and Creative Communications Program. JIVINITI's qualitative research, The SHAKTI Study, listened to 76 low-income Black, Latina and White women through five-day diaries in November 2020, the first year of the pandemic. The GAIA Study, conducted with Ipsos Public Affairs, surveyed 14,626 Americans on diet, burnout and resilience. Both informed the award-winning documentary Third Degree Burnout – A Survivor's Guide, recognized at 17 film festivals with 15 awards, including two UN-affiliated honors, and three Telly Awards.

Today, Project **reset.**, the film's educational impact campaign, brings this work to universities, clinicians, schools, workplaces and women in midlife, helping people move from burnout to resilience. Choose Better. Together.

JIVINITI is the Research and Creative Communications Program of The Virsa Foundation, Inc., a Greater Boston 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and the public home of all of its work.

Launched in 2020, JIVINITI studies how personal health is shaped by larger systems: food, stress, behavior, environment and culture. Its research includes The SHAKTI Study, a qualitative diary study of 76 women, and The GAIA Study, a survey of 14,626 Americans conducted with Ipsos Public Affairs. That evidence became the award-winning documentary Third Degree Burnout – A Survivor's Guide, which examines burnout as a personal experience and as a symptom of the systems we live in.

Project **reset.**, the film's educational impact campaign launched at NYC Climate Week 2026, turns those ideas into action. Through screenings, facilitated conversations and the **reset.** Check-In, it helps universities, clinicians, schools, workplaces and women in midlife move from burnout to resilience.

Acknowledgments

Our first thanks go to the women who wrote these diaries, in a very hard year, and trusted us with the truth about their lives. We thank the fifteen experts who shared years of practice before the diaries began; Susan Newhouse and Marta Villanueva, who moderated the diaries with warmth and care; and Schlesinger Group (now SAGO), who recruited the women.

KEEP READING

Their words are where **reset.** begins.

READ ONLINE

Every portrait, every day of the diaries, and the women's own words, on the SHAKTI website.

theshaktistudy.org

SUPPORT THIS WORK

The Virsa Foundation is a Greater Boston 501(c)(3). Gifts of any size help bring these findings to the people who can use them.

jiviniti.org/donate

BRING RESET. TO YOUR COMMUNITY

For hosts, employers and community groups.

jiviniti.org

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The Virsa Foundation, Inc. and its JIVINITI Research and Creative Communications Program

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