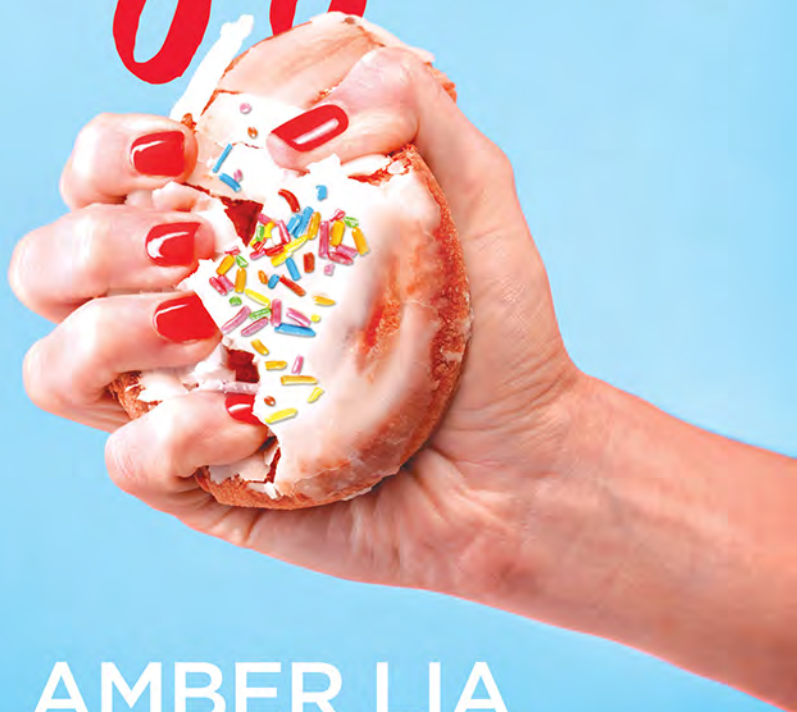


Exchanging Unhealthy Patterns
for God-Honoring Habits

FOOD

Triggers



AMBER LIA

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for God-Honoring Habits

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To my amazing clients
who are on this journey with me toward optimal health,
and for everyone who longs to believe they
can change their habits once and for all.
Let's live life to the full, together!

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Your Turning Point Starts Here

When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; when character is lost, all is lost.

Billy Graham

On my personal health journey over the years, a big part of my angst as a Christ-follower was the thought that if I was godly enough, I wouldn't be struggling so much with my food triggers. I felt that along with my lost health, my character must be lost too. For too long, I allowed the enemy to confuse me.

I remember how it felt to be the heaviest I had ever been. I was unhealthy and I knew it. Even though I loved Jesus and was involved in lots of ministry, I felt a deep conviction that I was out of control with my mindless eating and unhealthy pattern of craving ice cream and desserts every night. I was miserable. The quick sugar fix or carb binge left a lasting and obvious impact on my life—and one look in the mirror told the truth.

Here's what I want you to know, right at the start of *Food Triggers*: **It's possible to be in a good place spiritually, but to not be perfect.** The enemy was trying to whisper that I was a fraud because I had no self-control regarding food and sugar. He toyed with my mind that I could do okay for a while, but that I would go right back to my old ways again. It took several starts and stops for me to finally learn how to respond correctly to my food triggers. God understands this. He knows we are not perfect. Only Jesus is perfect!

My weakness did not mean I was worthless.

It did not mean I was a fraud.

It did not mean I would never change.

It just meant I was on a spiritual journey with ups and downs. It meant I was human and still sinned, even though God had done a lot of transforming work in my life already. It meant that my weakness gave all the more glory to God because I couldn't do it on my own. This is just as true for you as it is for me.

So I didn't give in to the feelings of hopelessness when I hit rock bottom. I didn't believe I could never get a handle on my spiritual weakness and tendency to run to food. I didn't listen when Satan whispered that my food triggers were more powerful than my God.

Instead, I found a medically designed plan and began eating healthy foods to help me get back on track again—and that was the practical piece I had to invest in with my time, money, and commitment. I adopted new, healthy habits *for life*. But it was mostly a spiritual transformation for me. The physical weight came off—sixty pounds—but the spiritual weight of my gluttonous tendency has been the most freeing! Facing my food triggers, one by one, was the jump-start I needed to set the stage for a lifetime of healthy habits.

Whatever plan you use to get healthy, the biggest factor for all of us is to exchange unhealthy patterns for God-honoring habits. It's foundational to remember that our weaknesses are not a reason

**It's possible to be
in a good place
spiritually, but to
not be *perfect*.**

to feel shame. They are a reason to place our hope in something bigger and better than ourselves—our faith in God.

For you, dear friend, let this book and this time of self-care be a time when lies about who you are and what you are capable of—even lies about God—fade away. Let this be a season when you learn to awaken hope that God is who He says He is. That He can and will help you in all your weaknesses. That every one of us can change when we pray expectantly and invite the Holy Spirit to transform us. That even though it may take time, nothing is impossible with God!

I am living proof of this holy exchange:

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:9

I’m betting that since you picked up this book, you have had enough of the ups and downs of getting healthy and staying healthy. I imagine that even if you have figured out a lot of your food and health issues, there is still that one thing that keeps gnawing at you. It may be that thinking about food and dealing with your health problems is exhausting you. It’s taking up way too much space in your brain and messing with your emotions! No matter what plan you have used, the same old triggers trip you up. You are not alone.

Years of research and hundreds of conversations with men and women all over the country have formed the foundation for this book. The thirty-one common food triggers that we’re going to talk about aren’t just triggers; they manifest as shackles. It’s become clear that our enemy, the devil, has thousands, if not millions, of us trapped in the bondage of unhealthy thinking and eating. I understand. My own journey from obesity to optimal health has been one that I wanted to experience in private. But God had other plans. When you find freedom and you live among captives, you can’t help but want freedom for them too. *For you!*

It's possible that some of you holding this book are ready to throw off those unhealthy patterns. You are full of excitement, and the thrill of hope is coursing through your body as you prepare to dive in over the next thirty-one days. The daily discipline of reading one chapter a day over the next month will solidify your commitment to improving your health—mind, body, and soul. This is your moment!

For others, we know we need a change, but we still feel timid about proceeding. We wonder, *Is this one more thing I will fail at?* I understand your wariness.

I have had a number of life moments that are personal measures of achievement for me. At ten years old, I stepped onto the first-place block after a gymnastics meet. As an adult, it's been an immense honor to write several bestselling books. Being a mom counts as one of the best parts of my life! But perhaps one of my greatest blessings has been my journey away from unhealthy patterns and toward God-honoring habits—and helping others do the same. Now we get to take this journey *together*.

For all my little victories, my life has been peppered with far more failures. Far more “nos” than “yesses.” Far more valleys than mountaintops. I don't believe I'm unique in this. My hunch is that you have had your own set of highs and lows in life. For many of us, the highs and lows affect our health—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

Whether I was achieving my life goals or facing disappointments from one letdown or another over the years, my food triggers were the one constant. I knew the right things to do, but I often felt powerless to do them.

The apostle Paul describes the battle within us this way:

But I need something *more!* For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good,

but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

ROMANS 7:17–23 THE MESSAGE

Have you felt any of this? As a certified health coach, I have heard this struggle verbalized from men and women of every age and stage of life, all over the world. I've come to realize that our circumstances or our food triggers don't get the final say in our personal growth. I've seen the sheer joy and relief of clients who have finally traded in their old ways and are living life to the full as God intended. Their health struggles were the portal through which they learned to succeed in areas of their lives beyond their health journeys.

When I began to apply biblical principles to each food trigger in my own life, everything changed. You see, no matter what is happening in our lives, our physical and spiritual health need not fluctuate with the ebb and flow of life's circumstances. **The spiritual tug-of-war to exchange unhealthy patterns with God-honoring habits is the ultimate food fight.** But I'm in your corner. More important, almighty God can help you achieve a new, healthier way to live.

You will hear more about my health journey throughout this book, but I want you to know, here in the beginning, that every food trigger we face has spiritual implications. Yes, when we exchange unhealthy patterns for God-honoring habits, we detox from sugar and processed foods. Yes, we lose weight and get off medications. But we also go through a spiritual transformation.

My recommendation is that you read one chapter a day for thirty-one days. Once you have completed the book, every chapter can stand alone—a sort of resource guide for revisiting specific food triggers as needed for future readings and encouragement. We will cover external food triggers—issues like traveling, holidays, our culture’s obsession with large portions, and those who try to sabotage our efforts to get healthy. We will also expose internal food triggers—factors like stress, emotional eating, and loneliness or boredom. Each chapter ends with a heartfelt prayer based on Scripture, to help us connect more deeply with God.

These damaging old patterns don’t have to weigh us down—or show up when we weigh in on the scale. The key to any temptation—any trigger—is to resist and then turn toward a new, healthier way of thinking and behaving. Together, we will break free from the cycle of frustration and pain that has trapped us for too long.

It’s been years now since I came to the end of my rope, obese, tired, and frustrated. I faced a turning point. Slowly but surely I confronted my many food triggers, armed with the truth of God’s Word and full of hope that I was at a final crossroads when it came to my health. I have never looked back.

Today can be your turning point. Through the pages of this book, I’ll be with you on this journey, but take a moment right now to invite the Holy Spirit to join you too. Ask God to open your heart, unlock your understanding, and empower you with self-control, patience, strength, and hope. He will answer. With each trigger, we will expose an old pattern we need to exchange for a God-honoring habit. In so doing, we won’t just get healthy bodies, we will receive spiritual health for our souls!

External Triggers

The triggers we discuss in this first section are some of the most common ways that outside obstacles hinder us from getting healthy. We will cover triggers such as traveling, holidays, our culture's obsession with large portions, and how to handle the people in our lives who should support us but don't. These external triggers don't have to steer us off track if we are aware of them—and if we apply practical biblical thinking and approaches to overcoming them.

one

When Your *Why* Is Front and Center

I couldn't remember the last time my husband, Guy, and I had celebrated Valentine's Day. In recent years, we have made date nights a priority and enjoy dining out together once a month or so, but on February 14, we typically skip the hoopla. This particular year, we decided to mark the occasion with lunch at one of our favorite steak houses. All was well until we were seated in a cozy little nook near the back of the restaurant. As I slid into the booth, my stomach grazed the table. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment. How did I get to the point that I couldn't easily slide into a booth or sit comfortably at a restaurant? How did my body become so thick that there was virtually no space between me and the table? Why had I allowed myself to get to this point?

I was on the cross-country team in college. I was even named Intramural Athlete of the Year my senior year. But even then, despite my athleticism, I carried excess pounds—mostly because I ate whatever I wanted. I might have looked somewhat fit, but I certainly wasn't

healthy. After graduation, I finally took my food issues seriously. By the time I met my husband, I had been a focused recreational bodybuilder for years. It was my daily habit to run three miles in the hills around my home. I knew all the things about good nutrition and exercise. I took my health seriously and I felt great! On a spiritual level, I felt relief that I was stewarding my body and not giving in to gluttony or excess as I had been prone to do during my teen and college years. Those days were a journey toward wellness that I accomplished over the course of time. As I considered how I had gone from fit to flabby, I realized that it, too, was a journey. Thinking back, I tried to remember when I last felt in control of my health.

In 2007, I married Guy, and during the next ten years I had five pregnancies. Early on, the baby weight came off fairly quickly, but with each new child, plus a miscarriage, the struggle to lose weight increased. It felt like my metabolism was stuck and the methods I used to get back in shape when I was younger were not as effective as they once were. But I wasn't the only one feeling unhealthy. My husband packed on sympathy pounds right along with me over the course of my pregnancies. **Becoming unhealthy didn't happen overnight. I knew that getting healthy again wouldn't either.**

That evening, after our special Valentine's lunch, I felt disgusted with myself. I had to admit that I was feeling sluggish and tired most days. Keeping up with my four active sons was a challenge. I didn't just feel discouraged over the reflection in the mirror; the discouragement was multilayered as feelings of failure swept over me. I pictured each of my kids, and my heart dropped. I was not being a good example to them. The punishing sentiments continued through my mind. *What kind of Christian am I when everyone can see that I don't have self-control? How can I be so casual about the sin of overeating in my life? Why is no one calling me on it?*

I knew I needed a change. I could not keep doing the same old things and expect a better result. I had to do something different! Romans 12:2 puts it this way:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

I needed to begin my health transformation by the renewing of my mind. I'm betting you do too. The pattern of the world around me was to mindlessly indulge in food. Overindulging in food and drink wasn't a topic I heard being addressed very often, even though recent estimates indicate that 42 percent of Americans are obese.¹ That's 137.4 million U.S. adults! God calls us to listen to something much more significant than our bellies. **We need not allow the growl of our stomachs to drown out the whisper of the Holy Spirit, calling us to freedom from the bondage of food.** He asks us to listen to—and live out—His will for our lives. Anything that is sinful in our lives is outside of God's will. Spiritually speaking, I believe that my issues with my health and my lack of self-control were also preventing me from living life to the full! My low energy, bulging waistline, and achy joints were simply symptoms of being outside of God's plan for my life. I knew that practically speaking, I could put down the fried chicken, but I needed the Holy Spirit to change me from the inside out.

We need not allow the growl of our stomachs to drown out the whisper of the Holy Spirit.

I began to pray, asking God for the next steps He wanted me to take. I was sick of being a statistic. That's when I remembered my friend Tammie.

Tammie and I met more than ten years ago at a parenting class at our church. Similar in age and lifestyle, she had also gained a lot of weight over the years. Thanks to social media, we stayed in touch when we both moved to different cities, busy living our lives. Except I had been watching Tammie over the last year as she lost eighty pounds. Desperate, I reached out to her.

When we first talked, she asked me *why* I wanted to lose weight. My answers were familiar. They were some of the same reasons she chose to get healthy too. I laid out my *why* for her:

I wanted to feel pretty and enjoy shopping for clothes again.

I longed to feel energetic and free from brain fog.

I wanted to be healthy for my kids so I wouldn't cut my life short, robbing them of their mother as they grew up.

And most important, I felt convicted to break the spiritual chains from the food triggers in my life so that I could honor God with my body, which the Bible describes as the Holy Spirit's temple.

This last *why* is one I believe many Christ-followers feel immense guilt over. First Corinthians 3:16–17 says, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (ESV). We know that being overweight is one way that we can harm our bodies. Our health matters to God. Because our bodies are a temple where God dwells, we show Him honor by treating our physical bodies well and with respect and reverence.

In my first book, *Triggers: Exchanging Parents' Angry Reactions with Gentle Biblical Responses*, coauthored with Wendy Speake, I address the guilt we sometimes feel when we fall short of God's standards for godly living:

There is a big difference between guilt and conviction. One is meant to condemn you, the other to free you. How do you know if you are feeling an unhealthy guilt versus a righteous conviction? Guilt defeats. Conviction catapults—towards spiritual growth and freedom! God always convicts us with a loving reproach that causes us to want to keep going in His strength and not in our own flesh. It moves us forward toward growth in our spiritual lives, instead of backwards or inwards towards discouragement.²

Right now, some of my own personal struggles may resonate with you. You may feel frustrated with yourself. Ashamed. Stuck. But what good does it do to beat ourselves up? That’s what Satan wants. He is not our friend. He is our enemy, seeking “to steal and kill and destroy” our lives (John 10:10). Instead, we get to acknowledge our areas of sin and weakness to a loving Father who is for us! God promises to cleanse us from all unrighteousness when we confess our sin to Him:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9 ESV

At any time, in any place, we can tell God that we have sinned over the issues of food and our health. He will forgive us! He does not condemn us or treat us as our sins deserve. For that reason alone, my desire to honor Him with my body became a foundational *why* that has helped me to make better choices, one food trigger at a time.

Each of my *whys* was a springboard for change. And now, as an independent certified health coach myself, I know that our *why* is foundational to our long-term success.

Within weeks, Guy and I joined Tammie on a nutrition plan that fit our busy lifestyle. Early on, I knew it was an answer to prayer for us. Within just a few short weeks, our metabolisms were running as they were designed to run, our bodies finally detoxed from sugar and processed foods. Within the first few weeks, the brain fog lifted, we slept better, and the pounds were releasing from our bodies. We didn’t lose them—we never wanted to find them again! We faced food trigger after food trigger head-on—the unhealthy patterns that sabotaged our health—and exchanged them for God-honoring healthy habits. As you work through your own food triggers with me in the pages of this book, you will be

able to do the same, finding hope and victory no matter your age or stage in life.

Here in this first chapter, it's important for each of us to reflect on our own personal *why*. The *why* behind your decision to face and overcome your food triggers is deeply personal. Every action you take has a motive. When it comes to weight loss and getting healthy, some of us want to look better in family portraits or fit back into the clothes we wore two years ago. Maybe we want to stop snoring, have higher energy, or get off diabetes medications. Perhaps we want to achieve a bucket-list item such as completing a charity marathon or going on a vacation that requires a level of fitness we don't currently enjoy. Some of us are simply tired of quick fixes and want to commit to long-term health. Getting healthy is also a spiritual issue for many of us—just as it is for me. Knowing our *why* and keeping it front and center both clarifies and motivates us to stay on track when the going gets tough.

Picture yourself achieving your *why* for a moment. How does it make you feel? What kinds of activities are you doing? What are you wearing? Who is with you?

Keeping that visual in mind will go a long way to helping you achieve your health goals, because the food triggers will come. They are constantly all around us, often confronting us when we are at our most vulnerable. Whether you are addicted to sugar, or you simply come last on the list of priorities after taking care of your family, or you eat to comfort yourself from the discouragements you face in life—whatever the food triggers are for you—you no longer have to give in to them! We are not powerless, destined for tomorrow to look just like today! Take Philippians 4:13 (NKJV) to heart:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Do you believe that? I do. Guy and I are living proof. God would not call us to a healthy lifestyle if it weren't possible. We

can learn to exchange patterns we have allowed to rob us of feeling our best for healthier habits. We can go through a drive-through and order a salad or a lettuce-wrapped chicken burger. We can politely turn down dessert at our mother-in-law's house and we can stop grazing mindlessly from our children's dinner plates. We can commit to walking our dog in the early morning hours and we can put ourselves to bed at a decent hour. We can begin to see our *why* fulfilled!

What is *your* why? Keep it in your mind's eye as you read each of the next thirty chapters. Give your *why* to God and invite Him to face your food triggers with you. Every time I felt weak as I was pursuing my own health journey, the first new habit I established was to pause and remember my *why*. Visualizing myself playing soccer with my boys or wearing a little black dress on the next Valentine's Day as I slid into a booth with room to spare was a strong motivator. Picturing my life free from the constant struggle of overeating and laying down my sin of harmful indulgence at the feet of Jesus, leaving it there with Him so I could walk away free from that bondage, made things like drinking more water and learning healthier recipes a much easier choice for me to make.

Your *why* will motivate you.

Your *why* will inspire you.

Your *why* will stabilize your emotions.

Your *why* will focus you.

Your *why* will enable you to make good choices when temptations come.

Food triggers no longer control us when we think about our *why*. Take your health back, friends. Each meal is an opportunity for victory! Whether your *why* is a simple desire to lose a few pounds, or a longing to feel relief from the constant thoughts about food that flood your mind, you are on the right track this very moment. Your *why* will make the difference between falling

back into unhealthy patterns, or finally, once and for all, embracing God-honoring habits *for life*.

Let's Pray

Lord, You are my ultimate why. I want to honor You with my body. You have given me the privilege of being Your temple, so please help me to be honorable with my eating habits. God, I need Your help. I confess that I have not been doing what is right, and I ask for Your forgiveness. Thank You for being faithful to forgive me and for helping me on this health journey. I come to You now with happy expectation for the good work You will do in me. In Jesus' name, amen!