

MINDFUL EATING: ENHANCING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR FOOD

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

“Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience. It isn’t more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it.”

–Sylvia Boorstein

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), emphasizes, in addition to nonjudgmentally being in the present, the following principles he associates with being mindful:[1]

- Cultivating patience within ourselves
- Experiencing life with a beginner’s mind
- Developing trust in ourselves and our bodies
- Letting things unfold without an agenda
- Letting go of attachments
- Showing gratitude for the present moment and avoiding taking life for granted[2]

For general information on mindfulness, refer to the [“Practicing Mindful Awareness”](#) Whole Health tool.

WHAT IS MINDFUL EATING?

Eating mindfully is one way to bring mindful awareness into your everyday life. Rather than focusing entirely on WHAT you eat, mindful eating helps you gain insight into HOW and WHY you eat.[3] It is not about judging your food choices but instead focusing on the HERE and NOW of eating. By paying close attention to taste, textures, and sensations, you can savor each bite and get more enjoyment out of your food.

Most of us are not as aware of our food as we could be while we are eating. Here is an example of what happens for many of us when our eating patterns are not mindful:

Think of the first bite of a food you love...maybe it is a piece of chocolate. You have been looking forward to enjoying it, and the saliva builds in your mouth as you unfold the wrapper. You bite into it and are immersed in its sweetness, richness, and smoothness. It is delicious, and you are happy to be eating it. Then you begin to talk with the person you are sitting with, or glance up at the TV, and the awareness of the flavor in your mouth decreases. At this point, you chew the food without noticing the chocolate at all. Suddenly, all the chocolate has disappeared before you realize it. Mindful eating is about recreating that “first bite” consciousness and delight with each subsequent bite of our food. When our

minds are disengaged from eating, we are not aware of when we are full, and we are likely to seek more food even though we are actually satiated. When we connect with our eating experience and reflect on the source of our food, those who prepared it, those eating around us, and the sensations in our bodies, we may feel more satisfied, regardless of what or how much we are eating.[4]

Mindful eating can make anyone's eating healthier and more nurturing, regardless of weight or nutritional status. Mindfulness-based interventions targeting eating behaviors have become increasingly more popular. In a literature review of 21 papers focusing on mindfulness with regard to binge eating, emotional eating, and external eating (eating in response to external cues), 18 (86%) of these studies found positive outcomes.[5]

Another meta-analysis of mindfulness-based interventions for weight loss examined 18 studies, studying a total of 1,160 participants. The results showed that mindfulness-based interventions are moderately effective for weight loss and largely effective in reducing obesity-related eating behaviors.[6] More research is needed to determine the type of mindfulness program that is most effective for weight loss and to establish the effectiveness of mindfulness for weight maintenance. Still, the growing body of evidence about mindfulness certainly concludes it is a helpful component of any weight loss effort.[14] Furthermore, it is a low-cost intervention with no negative side effects.

WHY EAT MINDFULLY?

There are many reasons to incorporate mindful eating into a Personal Health Plan. For example:

- It can lead to positive and lasting change because eating mindfully is not about restrictive diet choices that are difficult to sustain long-term.
- It can lead to weight loss. An ongoing randomized control trial with 16,500 participants showed weight reduction with mindful eating as an intervention.[7]
- It changes our relationship with food. Food becomes something to enjoy, rather than a temptation or regret.[8]
- Similarly, it can help us *let go* of previous unhealthy or negative associations with certain foods.
- It slows down the pace of our meals, allowing our brains time to hear the "I'm full" signals from our stomachs, which may also help with weight loss.[9] In this way, we become more aware of the physical signs of hunger in our bodies.
- It optimizes digestion. Some research has shown that when our attention is not focused on eating, our digestive process is 30%-40% less effective than it should be, which leads to gas, bloating, and discomfort.[10,11]
- Mindfulness can reduce binge eating episodes and improve eating behavior in obese individuals.[15,16] One 2019 study of 101 post-menopausal, obese women, found that increased mindfulness was associated with significantly less binge eating and significantly less severe loss of control while eating. The study also found that the most mindful participants had the least amount of binge eating episodes in the past 28 days.[12]

- Mindful eating can reduce emotional eating. Emotional eating involves using food to address their emotions rather than satisfying hunger. This includes eating when we are feeling stressed, depressed, lonely, tired, or even happy. A study of female university students during Covid19-related university closures demonstrated that over 90% of respondents had displayed emotional eating in response to stress over the prior 28 days.[18] Other studies have similarly found high rates of emotional eating in the general population.
- Mindful awareness can increase our awareness of the source of our food, which encourages buying local and/or organic food.
- Mindful eating with family members fosters deeper social connections. It also allows us to model healthy eating behaviors for our children. (No “clean plate” club!)

MINDFUL EATING: AN INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE

The best way to learn more about mindful eating is to try it.[13] For this exercise, all you need is an apple slice. It may be easier and more enjoyable to try this with a friend.

- Take a bite of the apple slice and close your eyes. Before you chew, notice the taste, texture, and temperature in your mouth.
- Begin chewing slowly. Notice any other sensations.
- Try to stay present. It is normal for your mind to wander. If you notice you are thinking about other things, gently return your attention to chewing.
- Notice each tiny movement of your jaw.
- Pay attention to the subtle transition from chewing to swallowing. Follow the apple’s movement toward the back of your tongue and into your throat. After swallowing, follow the apple’s progress down to your stomach for as long as you can.
- Take a deep breath and exhale.

Reflect: What did you notice while chewing? Why did you swallow? Was the food no longer tasty? Did it dissolve? Were you bored?

In the future, follow this with the first bite of each meal, and you will lay the groundwork for mindfully eating the rest of your meal.

MORE WAYS TO EAT MINDFULLY

Here are several easy ways you can slow down your meals and be more mindful[8]:

- Eat with chopsticks.
- Use your nondominant hand.
- Sit down to eat.
- Eat without a TV, newspaper, book, or computer distracting you. Additionally, turn off all of your other electronic devices (cell phone, smart watch, etc.).

- Check in with yourself prior to your meal to decide if you are really hungry. Learn to recognize the difference between physical hunger and boredom-driven eating.
- Before you eat, sit quietly for at least 30 seconds. Smell your food, and think about where it came from. Picture it growing or roaming in its environment. Think about the steps that food took to end up on your plate...planting, growth, harvesting, processing (hopefully not much), transportation, purchase, and preparation. Give thanks.
- Alternatively, go around the table and say something you are grateful for—a great activity for kids!
- Be mindful of negative thoughts you might have regarding your relationship with food. These may include common phrases such as, “I feel so fat” or “I can’t stop eating unhealthy food.” Think about how these phrases might trigger unhealthy eating habits, and let these thoughts go.
- Concentrate on your arm movements as you bring your food to your mouth.
- Chew your food 10-15 times per bite. Pay attention to taste and texture and how it changes. Swallow when the food is uniformly smooth.
- Set down your utensils between bites. Rest for a few seconds before gathering the next morsel. This is known as creating a pause point in the meal and can help you feel satiated faster.
- Between bites, name the flavors you are tasting.
- Take a sip of water, tea, or black coffee between bites.
- Put the proper portions of food on your plate and try to make the meal last at least 20 minutes.

A WORD ON INTUITIVE EATING

Recently, intuitive eating has gained momentum as another way to change one’s relationship with food. While intuitive eating and mindful eating share some principles, there are differences between these approaches. Specifically, intuitive eating focuses on a weight-inclusive, non-judgmental approach to reforming our relationship with food and regaining our natural instincts on when and how much to eat.[19] Ten principles of intuitive eating are often cited, and these include[20]:

- Rejecting the diet mentality
- Honoring your [physical] hunger
- Making peace with your food
- Challenging the Food Police, with a particular focus on rejecting the concept of eating a “good” or “bad” diet
- [Re]discover the satisfaction factor with eating
- Feel your fullness
- Cope with your emotions with kindness
- Respect your body
- Move your body
- Make food choices that honor your health

For more information on intuitive eating, please see the [10 Principles of Intuitive Eating](#).

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Recruit others in your household or work environment to learn mindful eating, so you can share your experiences. Accountability is important.
- Remember: There are no absolute rules. Do what makes sense in your life and what brings you joy.
- Laugh with yourself when mindfulness isn't easy. We are more successful when we have fun.
- Mindfulness is difficult to master, but you can't fail if you keep trying.

A wealth of information exists on this subject, and each resource below has a different approach to incorporating mindful eating into your life. Experiment and find something that makes sense to you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

- [Eat, Drink, and Be Mindful](#), Susan Albers (2009), featuring written exercises, and more on the Eating Mindfully website.
- *Mindful Eating A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*, Jan Chozen Bays (2017), includes a CD with exercises
- [The Center for Mindful Eating](#) website features more of Jan Chozen Bay's writing.
- *The Slow Down Diet," March David (2015)*, and his [Psychology of Eating](#) website Karen Koenig.
- The Joy of Mindful Eating, [The Center for Mindful Eating](#).
- *Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*, Thich Nhat Hanh (2011)
- *Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Program that Works*, Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, and accompanying [website](#)
- [Whole Health Library](#) website

RESOURCE LINKS

- [10 Principles of Intuitive Eating](https://www.intuitiveeating.org/10-principles-of-intuitive-eating/): <https://www.intuitiveeating.org/10-principles-of-intuitive-eating/>
- [Eat, Drink, and Be Mindful](https://eatingmindfully.com/): <https://eatingmindfully.com/>
- [The Center for Mindful Eating](https://www.thecenterformindfuleating.org/TCME-Blog/3084341): <https://www.thecenterformindfuleating.org/TCME-Blog/3084341>
- ["Practicing Mindful Awareness"](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/docs/Practicing-Mindful-Awareness-with-Patients.pdf): <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/docs/Practicing-Mindful-Awareness-with-Patients.pdf>
- [Psychology of Eating](https://psychologyofeating.com/): <https://psychologyofeating.com/>
- [The Center for Mindful Eating](https://www.thecenterformindfuleating.org/): <https://www.thecenterformindfuleating.org/>

- [Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Program that Works:](https://www.intuitiveeating.org/)
- [Whole Health Library:](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/index.asp) <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/index.asp>

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