

Mindful Eating

Discovering a Better Relationship with Your Food

What is Mindfulness?

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way. On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. Left to itself the mind wanders through all kinds of thoughts — including thoughts expressing anger, craving, depression, revenge, self-pity, etc. As we indulge in these kinds of thoughts, we reinforce those emotions in our hearts and cause ourselves to suffer. By purposefully directing our awareness away from such thoughts and towards some ‘anchor’, we decrease their effect on our lives and we create instead a space of freedom where calmness and contentment can grow.”¹ This is a definition from John Kabat-Zinn, a famous mindfulness teacher.

Mindfulness is a skill all humans possess. You become mindful when you decrease your thinking and increase your awareness. Focus your attention on the present moment. Let go of any worries about the past or future. Be aware of any thoughts and emotions that pop into your head. Rather than letting them take over your mind, just observe them. Don’t judge them or analyze them, just notice them and then let them float away like clouds.

What is Mindful Eating?

Eating mindfully is not about what you eat, but HOW and WHY you eat.² It is not about judging your choices or yourself but instead focuses 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. You will be in tune with your bodily reactions, helping you to eat just the right amount and type of food that you need at that time. Here is an example of the unconscious eating most of us do:

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 totally immersed in its sweetness, richness, and smoothness. It is so delicious, and you are happy to be eating it. Then you begin to talk with the person you are sitting with, or glance back up to the TV, and the flavor in your mouth decreases. Then you are chewing without noticing the chocolate at all, and it has disappeared before you realize it.

Mindful eating is about recreating that “first bite” delight in each bite of your food. When your mind is disengaged from eating, you are not satisfied and seek out more food, even when you are full. When you connect with your eating experience, reflect on the source of the food, those who prepared it, those eating around you, and the sensations in your body, you will feel more satisfied regardless of what or how much you are eating.³ Mindful eating can make anyone’s eating healthier and more nurturing, regardless of weight or nutritional status.



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Why should you eat mindfully?

- It can lead to positive and lasting change, because eating mindfully is not about restrictive diet choices.
- Food becomes something to *enjoy*, rather than a temptation or regret.⁴
- It slows down the pace of your meals, allowing your brain time to hear the “I’m full” signals from your stomach, which may help weight loss.⁵
- 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.⁶
- Mindfulness can increase your awareness of the source of your food, which encourages buying local and/or organic if you are able.
- Mindful eating with family fosters deeper connection. It also allows you to model healthy eating behaviors for your children. (No “clean plate” club!)

An Introductory Exercise⁷

It may be easier and more fun if you do this with a friend.

1. Take one bite of an apple slice and then close your eyes. Do not begin chewing yet. Try not to pay attention to the ideas running through your mind, just focus on the apple. Notice anything that comes to mind about taste, texture, temperature and sensation going on in your mouth.
2. Begin chewing now. Chew slowly, just noticing what it feels like. It's normal that your mind will want to wander off. If you notice you're paying more attention to your thinking than to the chewing, just let go of the thought for the moment and come back to the chewing. Notice each tiny movement of your jaw.
3. In these moments you may find yourself wanting to swallow the apple. See if you can stay present and notice the subtle transition from chewing to swallowing.
4. As you prepare to swallow the apple, try to follow it moving toward the back of your tongue and into your throat. Swallow the apple, following it until you can no longer feel any sensation of the food remaining.
5. 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?

Each bite does not need to be consumed as meticulously as this exercise. Do this with the first bite of each meal, and you will lay the groundwork of mindfulness for the other bites too.



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Some Misconceptions about Mindful Eating

- **Misconception #1. If I sit quietly at the kitchen table, instead of in front of my computer, I am eating mindfully.**
 - Good first step! However, there is a little more to it. The goal of mindful eating is to quiet your thoughts and fill your brain with the experience of eating. Just because you are not reading a book or answering emails, doesn't mean that your mind is engaged in the eating process. The next step is to quiet your racing mind and simply enjoy food.
- **Misconception #2. If I don't eat mindfully at each meal or every day, then I am backsliding.**
 - A great aspect about this new, healthy approach to eating is an increased feeling of choice. You are not locked into "shoulds" and "should nots". Mindfulness will have more impact in your life and be easier the more often you do it, but you won't undo the work of your previous mindful meals if you revert back to your old habits. Each time you eat mindfully, even for a few bites, you are making progress.
 - Let's be realistic, sometimes you will have to shovel in lunch while you drive to your afternoon meeting. If you know your body needs fuel in order to be ready to give that sales pitch, then you can mindfully decide to eat whatever food you get at the drive-through. If you bring awareness to the HOW and WHY of your eating and make goal-directed choices, consider it a victory!
- **Misconception #3. So there are no rules to follow and no "good" or "bad" foods. This will be easy.**
 - Changing behaviors, especially those that are lifelong, is never easy. It requires awareness of your beliefs, feelings, and actions. This deep look into yourself requires courage and commitment. No change happens instantaneously, but know that if you take it one day at a time with baby steps forward, change will happen.

Am I Hungry?

A huge part of mindful eating is being aware, that is, not eating as a reflex. When you feel hunger, pause, and bring awareness to that moment. Perhaps your mind/body/spirit needs something other than food to nourish it. Breathe deeply a few times, and do your best to determine the source of your appetite. Dr Bays, in her book Mindful Eating: A guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food, describes seven types of hunger.³

- **Eye hunger**: the type of hunger that causes us to eat even when our bodies are full, after seeing the dessert menu, or driving by a billboard of a big, juicy burger. Much research has shown that it is very powerful and can override all other signals of fullness.
 - Serve a meal for yourself as you would for guests, on your best plates and silverware.
 - Look at something beautiful or interesting, truly contemplate and appreciate it for a few minutes, imagine its energy flowing into you and nourishing you.



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- **Nose Hunger:** scents and flavors entice us to eat, such as smelling the movie theater popcorn.
 - Before eating, smell your food. How many smells can you detect? How does the taste change as you breathe in and out? How long does the taste linger after you swallow?
 - Sit quietly and smell a spice, vanilla, or incense. Sniff your partner or your baby's head. Let these aromas fill you up.
- **Mouth Hunger:** the mouth is a “sensation junkie” constantly wanting new flavors and textures. When we do not pay attention to what happens in our mouth as we eat, the mouth feels constantly deprived.
 - Fill your plate with foods of several different textures, e.g. cold, crunchy carrots and warm, creamy potatoes. Focus your attention on the sensations in your mouth. Chew each bite 15-20 times, noticing the intricate movements of your tongue. Swallow and notice how your mouth hunger has changed.
- **Stomach Hunger:** Many sensations contribute to “hunger pangs,” but they are not always a signal that your body needs fuel. Your stomach may ask for food because you haven't eaten all day or simply because it is lunchtime. You may confuse the anxious feeling in your stomach as hunger. Learn more about stomach hunger by delaying eating when you feel hungry. Notice the sensations, feelings, and thoughts you are experiencing. Does the feeling pass? Do you feel stomach hunger at the same time each day? Are you hungry each time a deadline is approaching or when you think of a friend that you miss?
 - If your stomach is asking for something sweet, notice how you feel. Are you tense? Maybe your body is not asking for food right now but needs a break. Stretch and take a few deep breaths, enjoy a walk outside, or slowly savor a cup of tea.
- **Cellular Hunger:** your body craves what it needs to optimally function, but most of us have lost our ability to hear what it is saying.
 - Before you decide what to eat, or while at the grocery store, ask your body what it needs. Maybe it is bright-colored vegetables or some sustaining healthy fat and protein. Perhaps you are just thirsty. This may sound strange or difficult, but just listen to what your gut tells you.
- **Mind Hunger:** Thoughts such as “I should eat less fat,” “I should eat more at lunch because I may not have time to make dinner tonight,” and “I deserve an ice cream cone” are examples of mind hunger. What your mind tells you changes based on the latest scientific study or your life situation. It can cause you to get caught up in extremes of “eat this, not that,” habits which can't be sustained long term. “Dr. Bays writes, “When we eat based upon the thoughts in the mind, our eating is usually based in worry.”
 - This form of hunger cannot be satisfied by food but is satisfied when we quiet our minds.



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- **Heart Hunger:** Feeling emptiness in your heart is part of being human. We all seek out foods that help us feel happy. Perhaps you crave apple pie when you are lonely because it reminds you of holidays when your family was together. According to Bays, “Most unbalanced relationships with food are caused by being unaware of heart hunger. No food can ever satisfy this form of hunger. To satisfy it, we must learn to nourish our hearts.”
 - If you eat a comfort food, take a small serving of it. Slowly enjoy each bite and imagine it filling your heart with whatever it is you need.
 - When you eat, think of all the energy you are getting from your food, from the sun that grew the plants, from the animals, from the truck driver or the cook. Be grateful and feel that energy fill you up.
 - Fill your heart in other ways: call a loved one, nurture your garden, make a gift, listen to music, or play with a pet.

Dr. Bays states that the most important mindful eating exercise is to ask yourself, “What type of hunger am I experiencing?” each time before you eat. Only stomach and cellular hunger are satisfied by food. Other forms of hunger will only be temporarily suppressed. Rather than eating as a reflex, you can use this information to decide whether to eat or not. Even if you decide to eat a cookie, don’t criticize yourself. By being mindful of what it is you actually need, and then also being mindful of how eating affects that feeling, you gather lots of information. Then next time you are hungry you can use what you know to make better decisions.

More Ways to Eat Mindfully ^{4,8}

After reading about the types of hunger, mindful eating may seem like a huge task that requires intense self-reflection. If you are not ready for that yet, you can still slow down your meals and be more mindful in several easy ways.

- Eat with chopsticks.
- Eat with your non-dominant hand.
- Eat sitting down.
- Eat without TV, newspaper or computer.
- Go around the table and each say something you are grateful for. A great activity for kids!
- 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...growth, harvesting, processing (hopefully not much), transportation, purchase, and preparation. Give Thanks.
- 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.
- 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.



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Tips for success:

- Recruit someone else to learn mindful eating, so you can share your experiences.
- Remember there are no “do’s” and “don’ts”. 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.

More Information

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

- The Center for Mindful Eating. www.tcme.org
- “The CAMP System: The Joy of Mindful Eating.” www.mindfuleating.org
- Susan Albers: Eat, Drink, and be Mindful . Written exercises included in book. Website: www.eatingmindfully.com
- Thich Nhat Hanh. “Mindful Eating.” <http://www.chetday.com/mindfuleating.htm>
- Karen Koenig: The Rules of “Normal” Eating Website: www.eatingnormal.com
- Dr. Jan Chozen Bays: “Mindful Eating: A guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food.” Includes a CD with exercises.

References

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3. Bays, Jan Chozen. “Mindful Eating: A guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food.” Shambhala Publications: Boston, MA. 2009.
4. Wansink, Brian. “Mindless Eating: Why we eat more than we think.” Bantam Books. New York, 2006.
5. Hobson, Katherine. “Can Mindful Eating Help You Lose Weight?” www.health.usnews.com March, 2009
6. “Slow Down and Savor the Flavor.” *Harv Heart Lett.* 2008 Nov;19(3):6.
7. Vangsness, Stephanie. “Mastering the Mindful Meal.” *Brigham and Women’s Hospital* 2009.
8. “The CAMP System: The Joy of Mindful Eating.” www.mindfuleating.org

The information in this handout is for general education. Please work with your health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your health.

This handout was created by Debra Koenigsberger M4 and Luke Fortney MD, Asst. Professor in the Integrative Medicine Program, Dept. of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health.

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