

Mindful Eating:

Enjoying Food with All Your Senses

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Do you eat until you are stuffed and continue to eat even though you are full? Do you just keep on eating simply because food is on your plate? Ever thought you were hungry and gobbled down your food only to realize you were not as hungry as you first thought? These examples are all signs of mindless eating, which is eating without really considering what you are doing.



Mindful eating is selecting foods your body needs for good health and learning to enjoy the experience of eating it.

When you eat mindlessly you are more likely to overeat and gain weight. You tend to enjoy your food less because you don't really notice its flavors and textures. When you try to enjoy your food, you will learn to be satisfied with smaller amounts.

What is Mindful Eating?

Mindful eating means paying attention to the process of eating. It is giving full attention to the smell, taste, and texture of food and the environment in which it is served. It is also a growing awareness of what your body is telling you. As you pay more attention to the food you are eating and what you put on your plate, you may find yourself more aware of whether or not you are truly hungry. This awareness will help you to avoid overeating to the point that you feel uncomfortable. Mindful eating is selecting foods your body needs for good health and learning to enjoy the experience of eating it.

A Look at the Japanese

In Okinawa, Japan, most residents are at a healthy weight and more than a quarter live to be 100. What is the secret of their long life? The answer may well lie in Hara Hachi Bu.

Hara Hachi Bu, a tradition that started in Okinawa, means to eat until you are 80 percent full. It can be practiced at any time and any place we eat. The Japanese pay attention while eating and when they feel they are mostly full, but could still eat a little more, they stop eating. In this way, they are paying attention to exactly how satisfied they are during the process of eating.

Eating until you are 80 percent full helps you to stay in tune with your body and maintain a certain level of fullness. The more you fill your stomach, the more it will stretch. Overtime, this stretching of your stomach causes it to get bigger, making you less in tune with when you are actually full. The principle of Hara Hachi Bu prevents this stretching from occurring.

A Lesson from the French

The French usually take about two hours for dinner, which is the largest meal of the day. They see dinner as an opportunity for family and friends to spend quality time together recounting the events of the day. A typical dinner in France consists of six courses: a pre-dinner drink and small appetizers; a main course of meat, poultry, or fish; a salad; a selection of cheese; fresh fruit; and coffee. This meal may sound like a lot of food, but French portions are about 25 percent smaller than typical American sizes and they have smaller snack and beverage sizes. Their smaller portion sizes and slower eating may factor into why the French can eat long meals and still stay slim.

The meal is normally eaten at a leisurely pace. Eating food at a slower pace allows the food to get from the esophagus into the stomach in between courses. This slow pace helps them realize how full they are. No course is rushed through. French meals are designed for enjoyment and time for the family to be together.

Benefits of Slowing Down

It takes 20 minutes for food to reach the first part of the small intestine. When that happens, chemical signals are sent back to the brain that tells the body, “Whoa! Stop eating!” When we eat too fast, our body does not have time to recognize the signals that are telling us that we are too full and we have had enough to eat.

When we eat slowly, we have time to savor each bite. Have you ever noticed how the first bite of food we take brings an enjoyable burst of flavor, but by the third or fourth bite the flavor sensations decrease? If we eat slowly—pausing until one bite is completely chewed, swallowed, and wait until the taste is almost gone from our mouths—then the next bite we take would be enjoyable again. We end up getting more pleasure out of ten bites instead of enjoying only the first two bites and eating twenty bites more in search of that original delicious flavor.

While it is not necessary to have a structured meal like this every night, following certain principles can help control appetites and cravings. The lesson we can learn from the French is to take our time when eating. It is not necessary to rush and eat large amounts of food at one meal.

Experience Mindful Eating

Here are eight steps to mindful eating, using a grape as an example:

1. Take the grape, and put one in your mouth. Close your eyes, but do not begin chewing yet.
2. Try not to pay attention to anything else; just focus on the grape in your mouth. Roll the grape around with your tongue. Notice anything that comes to mind about the taste, texture, temperature, and sensations going through your mouth.

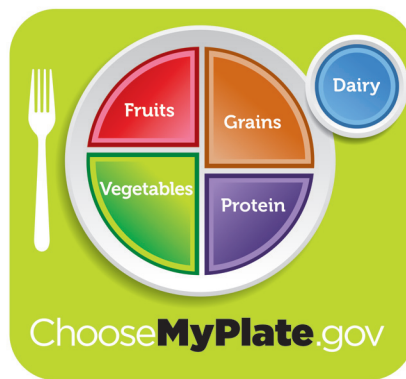
3. Take the first bite; notice the juicy burst as your teeth sink in. Try to feel the sensation of what that bite is like, the flavor, the color, the texture, and smell of the grape. Roll it around in your mouth a second time, experiencing the new flavors and textures.
4. Begin chewing the grape slowly, carefully considering the new flavors and textures each time. Try to chew the grape at least 12 times, each time experiencing the flavors and changes in texture.
5. Pay close attention to what chewing the grape feels like. Focus on the movement of your jaw.
6. At this point, you may find you want to swallow the grape. Pay attention to the subtle transitions between chewing and swallowing.
7. As you swallow the grape, try to follow its movement toward the back of your tongue and into your throat. Swallow the grape; follow it until you no longer feel any sensation of the food remaining.
8. Take a deep breath and exhale.

More Tips for Mindfulness

Here are additional ways to make sure your eating is mindful:

- Eat only when you are hungry. We often think, “It’s 5 p.m. Time to have dinner.” When we do this we allow the clock to determine a good time to eat rather than hunger.

- Try not to wait until you are famished to begin eating. It increases the chances of over-eating. Pay attention to your body and listen for signals of hunger.
- Create an appealing environment. Set the table nicely; add some flowers and other decorations for a pleasant atmosphere.
- Avoid distractions. Do not eat in front of the television, and resist the urge to take telephone calls during the meal, unless it is an emergency.
- Have meals at the table with the rest of your family.
- Take some time to enjoy the aroma and colors of the food. This moment is a good time to be thankful for the meal. Many people go without food each day, and you are privileged to have something to eat. Be thankful!
- Take small bites of your food and appreciate the texture and flavor. Chew your food properly.



Building Your Plate

Here are five tips to use at mealtime:

- Start with a smaller, nine-inch plate.
- Cover half of the plate with fruits and vegetables. Remember: The more colorful your fruits and vegetables, the more nutrients they contain. Try to eat a variety of colors from both fruits and vegetables.
- Fill one-quarter of the plate with whole-grain or whole-wheat products.
- Add a small amount of protein to the rest of your plate
- Include milk or a dairy product.

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