

Savoring the Eating Experience: The Art of Eating Mindfully

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Have you ever found yourself eating a bag of popcorn while watching a movie only to realize you have eaten all of it before you made it past the previews? This is an example of mindless eating, or eating without even realizing it.

Mindless eating occurs when you eat with distractions or are unaware of the amount of food you are eating (Figure 1). When this happens, you tend to enjoy food less because you are not paying attention to the flavors, textures, or smells. Mindless eating can lead to feelings of guilt or shame around eating, creating a cycle of negative thoughts and often leading to overeating. Over time, overeating may result in increased weight gain, digestion troubles, or the development of other diet-related health conditions.

You can shift mindless behaviors toward more mindful approaches. Mindfulness is defined by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, as “maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens.” Mindfulness practices have proven beneficial in decreasing stress and improving blood sugar and cholesterol levels. Mindfulness can be incorporated throughout the day in many areas including stress management, physical activity, sleep, and even eating experiences.

Mindful eating is “the non-judgmental awareness of physical and emotional sensations while eating or in a food-related environment,” according to *Mindful Eating: Principles and Practice*. Mindful eating is a practice that emphasizes the eating experience with an awareness of thoughts and feelings toward food choices. It brings attention to the smell, flavor, and texture of the food and the environment you are in without judgment or guilt. Mindful eating helps you become more aware of what you eat and why. Over time, this practice may help you reconnect with your internal signals about hunger and fullness and have more self-compassion. As you pay more attention to the food you eat, you may find yourself more aware of whether you are truly hungry, or if you are eating for another reason. Overeating is a normal part of life—we all do it. But eating mindfully may help avoid overeating to the point you feel uncomfortable on a regular basis.

MINDLESS eating	MINDFUL eating
DISTRACTED, MULTITASKING WHILE EATING	FOCUSED ON FOOD WITH NO DISTRACTIONS
EATS QUICKLY	EATS SLOWLY
IGNORES HUNGER AND FULLNESS CUES	HONORS HUNGER AND FULLNESS CUES
LABELS FOOD AS 'GOOD' OR 'BAD'	JUDGMENT- AND GUILT-FREE
EATS WITHOUT APPRECIATING FLAVORS, SMELLS, TEXTURES	NOTICES FLAVORS, SMELLS, AND TEXTURES

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Figure 1. Mindless vs. mindful eating behavior.

Why Mindful Eating

Mindful eating is about more than what you do or do not eat—it focuses on how you eat. Eating mindfully pays particular attention to your senses, including the taste, the smell, and the texture of the food you are eating. This leads to a satisfying experience, and often slows you down to enjoy the food and recognize when you are approaching fullness.

Slowing your eating behavior is important since it can take 20 minutes or more for your stomach to signal to your brain when you are full. When you eat too fast, your body does not have time to recognize the signals that indicate you have eaten enough. When you slow down, you are more likely to recognize when you are physically full. This allows for better digestion, which may lessen the cycle of overeating and overrestriction. When you slow down, you can savor each bite and develop a greater appreciation for the foods you enjoy.

Research indicates mindful eating is also beneficial for overall health and wellness. Over time, you may see

improved diabetes self-management and weight management. Additionally, you can see trends toward healthier eating habits including greater intakes of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and less uncontrolled eating behaviors.

How to Eat Mindfully

Mindful eating takes practice, but we can incorporate it into daily life to cultivate a healthy relationship with food. Here are seven practical steps to increase mindful eating in your life (Figure 2). If these tips are new to you, try to incorporate them into your daily routine one at a time.

Notice what is on your plate.

Before you take a bite of food, take a moment to observe what you are eating. How much is there? What ingredients are included? What does it smell like? Imagine you are a food critic describing the food to someone else.

Express gratitude for what is on your plate.

Take a moment to pause and think about the things for which you are grateful. This can help you slow down and truly appreciate every bite of food. Consider the hands who harvested or prepared the food and the resources used to get the food from farm to fork.

Slow down.

We often eat on the go or quickly so we can move onto the next tasks. Slow the pace of eating and take time to be present to enjoy the food. Pay attention to the texture and flavor of the food. Take a break between bites or try to chew more slowly. Putting utensils down between bites can help.

Limit distractions.

It can be easy to turn on the TV or scroll through social media on your phone, but this keeps you from connecting with your food. The same is true for eating lunch at your desk while responding to emails or eating while driving. If your mind is preoccupied, this can interfere with the amount of food you eat without even realizing it. Make eating the main event, instead of a sideshow. When you remove the distractions, you can be more aware of your food. Sit at a table, put down the distractions, and put the food on a plate or bowl to limit mindless munching. Really look at the food and consider what is in front of you.

Consider your body.

Eat with curiosity. Pay attention to how the food you are eating makes you feel, how hungry you are, and what emotions you are feeling. Does the food give you energy? Does it make you feel sluggish? Remember, all foods can be part of a balanced diet. Choose foods that are pleasing

to you but also nourishing for your body.

Eat only when you are hungry.

Do not let the clock determine when to eat. Pay attention to your body and what it needs. We do not want to wait until we are famished to begin eating, as this can increase our chances of overeating. Use a scale of 1 to 10 to measure your hunger, with 1 being famished and 10 being overfull. We want to eat at around a 3 or 4, right before our stomach starts to grumble. We want to stop when we reach a 7 or 8, satisfied but not physically full, as this can give your brain time to catch up with your body's cues for fullness.

Focus on complete meals and snacks.

Incorporate a variety of foods that include protein, carbohydrates, and fats. Each macronutrient has a different purpose in your body and when you consume a mixture of the three, you are best able to nourish yourself. Start with smaller portions. You can always get more.



Figure 2. How to eat mindfully.

Incorporating Mindfulness: Jon Kabat Zinn's Raisin Exercise

Perhaps the most popular mindful eating exercise comes from mindfulness expert Jon Kabat Zinn: "Raisin Meditation." While Zinn uses a raisin in his example, you can try this activity with any food you enjoy. Here's how it works:



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Holding:

First, take a raisin and hold it in the palm of your hand or between your finger and thumb.

Seeing:

Take time to really focus on it; gaze at the raisin with care and full attention. Imagine that you've just dropped in from Mars and have never seen an object like this before in your life. Let your eyes explore every part of it, examining the highlights where the light shines, the darker hollows, the folds and ridges, and any asymmetries or unique features.

Touching:

Turn the raisin over between your fingers, exploring its texture. Maybe do this with your eyes closed if that enhances your sense of touch.

Smelling:

Hold the raisin beneath your nose. With each inhalation, take in any smell, aroma, or fragrance that may arise. As you do this, notice anything interesting that may be happening in your mouth or stomach.

Placing:

Now slowly bring the raisin up to your lips, noticing how your hand and arm know exactly how and where to position it. Gently place the raisin in your mouth; without chewing, noticing how it gets into your mouth in the first place. Spend a few moments focusing on the sensations of having it in your mouth, exploring it with your tongue.

Tasting:

When you are ready, prepare to chew the raisin, noticing how and where it needs to be for chewing. Then, very consciously, take one or two bites into it and notice what happens in the aftermath, experiencing any waves of taste that emanate from it as you continue chewing. Without swallowing yet, notice the bare sensations of taste and texture in your mouth and how these may change over time, moment by moment. Also, pay attention to any changes in the object itself.

Swallowing:

When you feel ready to swallow the raisin, see if you can first detect the intention to swallow as it comes up, so that you consciously experience this even before you actually swallow the raisin.

Following:

Finally, see if you can feel what is left of the raisin moving down into your stomach and sense how your body as a whole is feeling after you have completed this exercise.

Mindfulness encourages compassion, bringing awareness to the emotions you experience without judgment. Mindful eating patterns give you permission to feel while also being more intentional with your behaviors. Taking the time to pause and reflect, to explore “why,” helps you connect with your body, making you more aware of your hunger and fullness cues. This allows you to be more mindful of your reactions and helps you to be proactive in your eating behaviors.

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