

Food for Thought

What is mindful eating?

- Allowing yourself to become aware of the positive and nurturing opportunities that are available through food preparation and consumption by respecting your own inner wisdom.
- Choosing to eat food that is both pleasing to you and nourishing to your body by using all your senses to explore, savor, and taste.
- Learning to be aware of physical hunger and satiety cues to guide your decision to begin eating and to stop eating.
- Acknowledging responses to food (likes, neutral or dislikes) without judgment.



Free Handout for Individuals from The Center for Mindful Eating

The Benefits of Committing to a Daily Eating Meditation Practice

By Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D.

The initial experience of mindfully eating a blueberry, a piece of chocolate, a potato chip, or any other food is often a revelation. Perhaps for the first time, you woke up to the full experience of what is commonly called "eating." Just one moment of conscious eating often triggers many insights. "I never realized how satisfying one morsel of food could be." "I appreciated what I was eating in an entirely new way." "Slowing down helped me observe all the thoughts, fears and criticisms that were jumping around in my mind." Typically, a first experience of mindful eating may also include the wish or the determination to eat mindfully all the time.

Then you find yourself in a hurry or with a group of people, and you notice, as you stare down at an empty plate, that you haven't been conscious of eating at all. That earlier determination to always eat mindfully vanishes in a flash, and you think, why bother?

So how do you overcome the desire to give up or turn away from mindful eating? The answer is simple: Commit to a daily mindful eating practice.

Mindfulness allows you to observe what's happening moment to moment from a wider perspective. When difficult thoughts arise, you learn to witness rather than obey them. In so doing, you begin to realize that your thoughts and feelings aren't really who you

are. They come and they go, and if you don't react, they lose their power. You can learn how to be with your experience, but not be caught by it.

With daily practice, you strengthen the capacity to stop and notice habituated, unskillful patterns with clarity. This awareness helps dissolve autopilot behaviors. You realize that "Oh, this is what feeling out of control is like," or "Feeling like a failure feels like this." If you don't run away from these feelings but rather recognize and accept them with compassion, you may find that you don't need to drown out these uncomfortable feelings with food.

A daily eating meditation practice also helps awaken you to the thought patterns and habits that tend to keep you feeling trapped and demoralized, such as the belief that "I'll never be able to change," or the intense feeling that leads to the thought "I have to have this cookie." Daily practice helps develop confidence, a feeling that is often absent when in the grips of craving or strong emotions. Awareness gives you the option of choosing which habits to develop and which to abandon, and this freedom to choose helps develop the confidence that change is possible.

Mindful eating doesn't always awaken insight and delight. Sometimes the commitment feels meaningless and not worth the effort. Ups and downs are inevitable. But over time, your commitment will bear fruit, no matter how many times you feel like giving up. There's a Zen saying, "Fall down seven times, get up eight."

When you wake up to an experience like shoving handfuls of candy into your mouth, don't make it into a problem. Just stop and notice that you're doing it, and notice what you're thinking or feeling. If criticism and judgments arise, and it's likely they will, let them be. Hold yourself with kindness and compassion. Eventually, all experiences pass, regardless of whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. As the poet Rilke observes, "No feeling is final."

Shifts in eating habits don't happen through control and willpower. If that were the case, all diets would be wildly successful and there would be no eating challenges. Only by noticing and accepting what's happening in each moment is it possible for new habits to emerge.

A regular mindful eating practice has the capacity to usher in a transformation. When you observe swallowing or chewing, in that moment you've dissolved the habit of blindly engaging in these processes. Pay attention to simple actions like opening the refrigerator or slicing a carrot or the impulse to take another bite before you've even finished whatever you're eating. Every moment of mindfulness adds up and inspires more practice.

The ultimate feeling of fullness is connection and intimacy with this moment. So, put down this handout, turn your attention inward and ask, "What's happening now?" And in this moment, you've begun your daily practice. Awareness is an ongoing source of nourishment ... so feast on every moment.

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