

# Food *for* Thought



A quarterly newsletter from The Center for Mindful Eating

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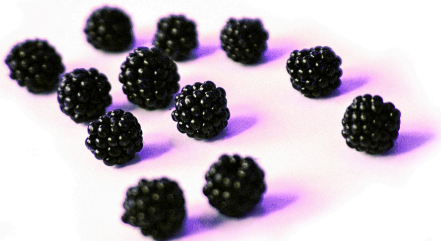
## Member Support

Your \$40 TCME membership is how TCME is funded. We appreciate your tax deductible donation.

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## Welcome to The Center for Mindful Eating

TCME is a member-supported forum for professionals interested in understanding the value of mindful eating. TCME identifies and provides resources for individuals who wish to help their clients develop healthier relationships with food and eating, and bring eating into balance with other important aspects of life. Mindfulness practices have been shown to have a positive impact on many disease states and health concerns, and mindfulness approaches are increasingly being applied to eating and food choice. The benefits of mindful eating are not restricted to physical health improvement alone. Practitioners may find that mindfulness and mindful eating can affect one's entire life. The Center for Mindful Eating does not promote a singular approach to mindful eating but is committed to fostering dialogue and the sharing of ideas, clinical experience, and research.



[www.tcme.org](http://www.tcme.org)

## About This Issue

How can mindful eating benefit people who are considering or recently have undergone bariatric surgery? This issue explores how awareness could help rebuild a person's relationship with food. Ronald Theborge, Ph.D., shares how mindful eating interrupts many of the habits that contribute to overeating. Megrette Fletcher, RD, describes how thoughts can significantly change the eating experience. This article has been made into a patient handout to help you introduce the topic to clients. To access, click on Newsletter on the TCME website.

We express our gratitude to the many individuals who have become members of TCME over the past year. Their tax-deductible donations allow us to continue to provide valuable services. Visit [www.tcme.org](http://www.tcme.org) and explore our current offerings. If you are not a member, please consider joining.

## Mindful Eating and Bariatric Surgery

*By Ronald Theborge, Ph.D.*

Bariatric surgeries are approved by the FDA as the only "permanent" means of weight reduction, and the rates of bariatric surgeries have doubled in the past six years, according to the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery. For many people who have such surgeries, the outcome usually includes remarkable weight loss and significant reduction in obesity-related health problems. Of course, there may be unintended consequences, such as pain and other complications, while other effects, such as caloric malabsorption, decreased appetite and dumping syndrome from eating sweets, might be intended for therapeutic benefit.

Bariatric surgery may seem contrary to the intentions and principles of mindful eating. Where one may imagine mindful eating to be "natural," "holistic" or "intuitive," bariatric surgery may appear to be a "mutilation" that is "imposed" on

one's body. It might seem to be a "lazy shortcut" to managing weight, or maybe an attempt to avoid learning self-regulation. Whatever ideas a patient or professional has about mindful eating or bariatric surgery, consider tempering them with the words of Zen master Shunryu Suzuki: "Not always so." Those who have committed themselves to the practice of mindfulness know that it can simultaneously be a difficult and rewarding path. Those who undertake bariatric surgery may likewise report that the consequences may be difficult, as well as rewarding, sometimes in ways they did not anticipate.

As professionals interested in cultivating the practice of mindful eating, we may increasingly encounter individuals living with or considering some type of bariatric surgery. When we do, it is helpful to remember that mindful eating practices do not come with prerequisites regarding weight, surgical status or likes and dislikes. People can arrive as they are and embark on a journey of mindful eating. Bariatric surgery presents a priceless opportunity to discover what mindful eating is about.

Consider a story told by Jack Kornfield, a noted meditation teacher. When he was a monk in Thailand, there was a time when he struggled to stay awake while meditating. No matter how hard he tried or felt determined to stay awake, he inevitably fell asleep. His teacher suggested a solution: meditate while sitting on the edge of a well with a 40-

foot drop! It turned out to be an effective tool for staying awake.

In many ways, it is not unlike the struggle to stay awake while trying to manage one's relationship to food.



There are some individuals who decide to have surgery, perhaps believing that it will allow them to continue to sleepwalk through their relationships with food. It is as if surgery looks like a nice place to sit, not noticing the 40-foot drop. Others, however, might believe that something so invasive is what it will take for them to "stay awake" and change what they are doing. They know the drop is there. Will these people feel so fearful of falling into the abyss that it's hard to concentrate? Will they doze off and realize too late that they are about to crash? Will they learn to skillfully stay awake?

For someone who is considering bariatric surgery, introducing mindful eating practices ahead of time can be invaluable. Standards for pre-surgical evaluation and preparation of patients can be highly variable from one surgical practice to another, but probably include some amount of interviewing, patient education and documentation of health issues. This can be a good

opportunity to introduce the idea of skillful ways for relating to food.

Once people become aware they are sitting on the precarious edge of a well, they can suddenly feel very motivated to do remarkable things. They may be motivated to "do whatever it takes," though they may not know what "it" is. In contrast, they may feel overwhelmed and react unskillfully. Mindful eating, with its emphasis on nonjudgmental awareness, deep caring and letting go of extremes, can be quite helpful for getting through a whirlwind of expectations, emotions and decisions.

As a professional who assists patients with preparation for what may lie ahead, consider ways in which post-surgery dos and don'ts for eating can be incorporated into mindful eating exercises. For example, chewing thoroughly is an important post-surgery eating requirement that lends itself well to a mindful eating practice: taking a bite, noticing the thoughts, feelings and habits, such as the impulse to swallow quickly and move on to the next bite. What happens

*"Bariatric surgery presents a priceless opportunity to discover what mindful eating is about."*

when one decides to interrupt that automatic behavior?

If an opportunity to introduce mindful eating arises after a bariatric surgery, then that is the best time for it, because it is still the present moment. In all likelihood that person is there because of a struggle of some

kind. The opening for introducing mindful eating usually defines itself. It may be a request for accurate information and practical guidance. Confusion or strong feelings, such as anxiety, anger or desperation, may be a part of the struggle. "This is not what I expected from surgery." "I don't know why I'm having so much trouble." "I've completely lost interest in food." "I'm trying so hard, but I can't keep anything down." "Even after surgery, I'm eating too much!" In his poem "The Guest House," the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi mystic Rumi gives this advice about the powerful emotions and calamities of being human: "Welcome and entertain them all!"

The practical reality is that a bariatric surgery brings immediate changes that are hard to ignore. Whether one's pre-surgical eating included pint-sized portions or super-sized binges, bariatric surgery results in a "ready or not" shrinking of stomach volume, down to about 2 to 4 ounces. There are lots of reasons to stay awake when sitting on the very narrow edge of that well. Compassionate, knowledgeable instruction that includes mindful eating may help prevent a lot of problems. With a mindful eating practice, even the occasional "disaster" becomes an opportunity for awakening.

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## Thoughts That Flavor the Meal

*By Megrette Fletcher, M.Ed., R.D., CDE*

It is amazing to notice how much thoughts can influence whether a situation is viewed as "good" or "bad." It is common for those scheduled for bariatric surgery (and even after surgery) to have worries about the unknown, hopes and expectations for the future, and questions related to the surgery itself. If these types of thoughts are present when eating, consider trying this suggestion.

*Eating in a mindful way allows you to "wake up" and notice new things.*

Before you take a bite, pause and fill your lungs with air. Then slowly let the breath out. Now, observe the food before you. Look at it, noticing any labels of "good" or "bad," "allowed" or "forbidden." If this is hard to do, take another breath and slowly exhale – relax. Allow yourself to be a witness to the experience of eating a meal: Its shape, color and texture. Now, take a bite. Let it rest in your mouth for a moment before chewing.

With your next bite, notice how the food feels in your mouth. Is the bite size comfortable? Does it feel too big to chew easily or too small to really taste the flavor? If the size of the bite was not pleasant, adjust the amount you select so you can actually taste the bite, chewing it a little bit longer each time before you swallow. Experiment with sizes and how long you chew each bite.

Now that you have had a few bites, ask yourself: Did slowing down and chewing my food feel new, different, or maybe a bit uncomfortable?

Eating in a mindful way allows you to "wake up" and notice new things. These things may include taste, texture, or even how much food is selected for each bite. Frequently the information received does not stop there. When a person eats mindfully, she may notice how some thoughts can trigger anxiety, anger and desperation, making these emotions part of the meal.

If uncomfortable feelings are present while eating, take a deep breath. Fill your lungs with air, and then slowly let this air out. Remind yourself that you are not "bad," "stupid," "a failure" or "wrong." These are just the thoughts and feelings that are with you. They are not facts.

For many individuals, the thoughts that are present when eating contribute a large part to how the meal tastes. An important question to ask is: Are these thoughts helping me enjoy the food in my mouth?

Practicing eating in a mindful way is more than seeing what and how much you eat. It is learning to welcome the thoughts that are present when you eat. This process of opening up can profoundly change the taste of the bite. At times you may realize it is your thoughts that are actually flavoring the meal. Noticing each bite can help you season the meal with thoughts you enjoy.

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## Teaching the six phases of eating

By Megrette Fletcher, MEd., RD, and Ronald Theberge, Ph.D.

Whether preparing for bariatric surgery or adjusting to it after it is done, clients are at an opportune time for learning about mindful eating. There is no single way to go about it. Awareness and nonjudgmental intention, however, are essential ingredients. Consider this approach to eating as six related segments:

The first segment is non-eating. Perhaps the person is not yet hungry, or he intentionally decides to wait. There may be many reasons. Exploring these may generate helpful discussion and foster new insights.

The second segment is preparation for eating when food is gathered, prepared or selected. In this phase, helping a client explore awareness of choice can be very helpful.

The third segment is pausing. Food is available, but has not yet entered the mouth. Explore with clients the experience of an intentional "pause" before eating. This might include awareness of the food, attention to hunger or other bodily sensations, and mental states from anxiety to eagerness. The pause could include taking a moment to cultivate positive mental states, such as appreciation, gratitude and contentment.

The fourth phase is actually eating. Mindful attention to eating helps increase one's awareness of its many facets. Intentionally explore seeing, selecting, smelling, tasting and feeling each morsel of food.

The fifth segment is experiencing the end of eating. There is a choice about stopping. How does one decide when to stop? Is it about satiety? No more food? Guilt?



The sixth step is finishing the meal. In this segment, there is recognition that eating has ended. Finishing the meal is an opportunity to notice both mental states and physical sensations associated with the end of eating. This is the transition to the beginning of the cycle: non-eating.

### Our Mission

TCME is a nonprofit, nonreligious organization whose purpose is to incorporate mindful eating into new and existing programs. We offer a variety of resources, including *The Principles of Mindful Eating*, which is available at our Web site and is free for reproduction for educational purposes.

**TCME is a member-supported organization. JOIN TODAY!**

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**\$25 Student Membership:** TCME welcomes individuals who are enrolled in a degree-granting program to learn more about mindful eating. Verification of current enrollment required. See Web site or application for details.

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