

Food for Thought

A quarterly newsletter from The Center for Mindful Eating

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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.

About This Issue

This issue of Food for Thought discusses deprivation. Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D., explains, "The moment we recognize that we're prisoners of our desires, we are actually free from their grip." TCME President Char Wilkins, LCSW, expands this understanding, and her article has been made into a patient-care handout that is free on the TCME Web site. Please feel free to share it with your clients. And last, Brian Shelley, M.D., offers suggestions when Working With Desire. "Attending to this desire, instead of denying it, may help you feel less deprived as you set about a new way of eating." 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 and explore our current offerings. If you are not a member, please consider joining. It's as easy as clicking "Join Now" at the bottom left of our home page.

Stuffed and Starved: The Dynamics of Deprivation

By Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D.

A friend describes the feelings of desperation that precede her cookie binges as "intolerable." Her mind criticizes and demands: "I'm fat. Don't eat any! Be mindful! Stay with the feelings!" But desperation and panic prevail. "I pace around the kitchen like a starving tiger circling its prey. Then I pounce, mindlessly and compulsively, stuffing several cookies down my throat. The relief is immediate. I love cookies and, in that moment, I believe the cookies are going to love me back. It doesn't take long for the fantasy of requited love to fade and for generous dollops of guilt and self-loathing to rise. The cycle keeps spinning out of control." With a sigh of surrender, my friend acknowledges, "I'm stuffed and starved."

For professionals trying to help

clients learn mindful eating skills, this self-defeating scenario probably sounds all too familiar. Clients intentionally deprive themselves of pleasure, such as a bite of dessert, in hopes of securing a sense of control over their appetites. Others may overindulge, by eating dozens of desserts. But neither of these approaches provides physical or emotional satisfaction.

Depriving oneself of pleasures only gives an object more allure. It becomes more and more tantalizing, to the point where clients lose perspective and start to believe that the object holds the keys to love and satisfaction. So they indulge—and indulge, and indulge again. But this frantic deprivation followed by overindulgence always backfires—it only deepens the despair because, of course, fulfillment can't be found in a cookie. So then it's back to deprivation as the path to fulfillment. Moderation, the choice to eat mindfully and experience the benefits of enjoying quality over quantity, is not seen as an option.

This mindless ricocheting of extremes is why many spiritual luminaries have compared life and

our desire for fulfillment to an insatiable appetite or an unquenchable thirst. In other words, our quest for wholeness is

by its very nature a form of deprivation—depriving ourselves of the opportunity to realize that the contentment, balance, peace and fulfillment we long for comes from a deep sense of

acceptance of what the present moment is offering. The moment we recognize that we're prisoners of our desires, we are actually free from their grip. Choices arise that were otherwise obscured through the lens of extremes. The Middle Way - the path of moderation, wisdom, wise restraint - has the opportunity to evolve.

Breaking the cycle

What keeps clients imprisoned and feeding the cycle they are so desperate to break? There are a variety of factors and forces, but one of the most common is the misguided belief that certain behaviors, foods and eating patterns have the power to satisfy physical and emotional hunger. Eat the right foods and eat them mindfully. Exercise regularly. Weigh less. Follow this script and

hunger will be conquered and feelings of satisfaction will be sealed in an airtight container of contentment, without an expiration date. Yet it's exactly these types of assumptions that actually help launch the next round of the stuffed-and-starved cycle.

The cycle sustains itself with the belief that there is always something "out there," often just out of reach, that holds the key to sustained feelings of fullness and wholeness, and that these feelings, once attained, are lasting. But any sense of escape or relief they dish up is fleeting. Sooner or later, we are back to trying to heighten and intensify those feelings of pleasure; craving more cookies (or drugs, sex or alcohol) in the hope of experiencing pleasure that endures. Of course, it doesn't. Pleasure, as with any feeling state, is impermanent. No matter how hard we try to annihilate intolerable feelings of deprivation (a common form of spiritual hunger) and sustain feelings of wholeness, stuffing and starving, bingeing and loathing are always paired. Our minds try to hold on to the lovely feeling of being sated. This is normal. But there is no required love in a bag of cookies—or in anything that changes.

Awareness of change is an important part of a mindful eating practice: a piece of pie starts disappearing with the first bite; we anticipate a celebratory meal

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(which may or may not live up to expectations), and then it is over. All tastes and sensations arise, and then pass away.

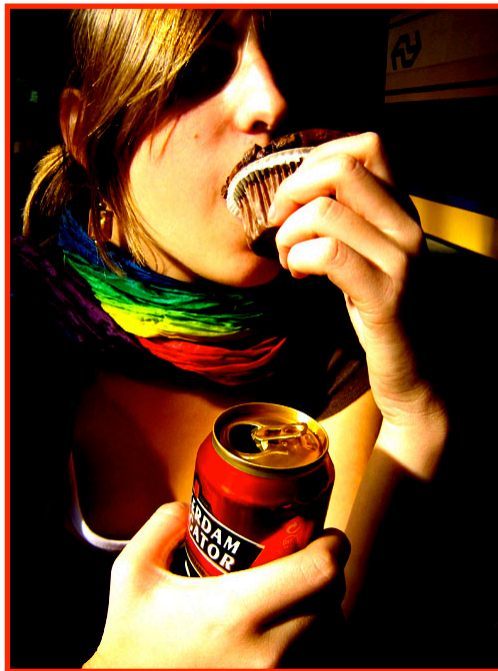
When we mindfully investigate change, we see for ourselves what the sages have taught for thousands of years: Feeling unsatisfied, deprived, that something is amiss, is not a personal defeat. These feelings are part of our common humanity and a doorway to enduring contentment, indifferent to the ebb and flow of hunger and fullness, deprivation and indulgence.

In fact, it is our unrealistic longing for constant physical and emotional fullness that gives this cycle power. Once we accept that feelings of deprivation are an intrinsic part of the human condition, a sense of contentment naturally arises as compulsive consumption loses its grip. The futile drive to control things that change transforms into the skillful desire for eating in moderation and the dignity that accompanies it.

Deprivation can exist and persist only when we are unaware of its presence. The purpose of mindful investigation is not to force deprivation out of our lives, but to invite it to disappear into our lives. Deprivation can actually become a

source of nourishment instead of depletion. Only by making peace with whatever our appetites are feeding us can we experience a sense of fullness, feeling complete and whole, neither stuffed nor starved.

Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D., is a TCME Board Member. She works with individuals, groups and professionals interested in exploring the vast and rich terrain of mindful eating. She can be reached by e-mail: info@mindfulmanagement.com.



The Power of Permission

By Char Wilkins, LCSW

When we deny ourselves foods we enjoy, we are usually trying to push away

“bad” things or unpleasant thoughts or hang on to “good” times and thoughts. Both take a lot

of energy and attention. We become obsessed about not eating a particular food by endlessly thinking about how not to eat it. Or we imagine how “good” we are because we aren’t eating the forbidden foods, which keeps us thinking about how not to eat them. We end up spending huge amounts of time thinking about food – exactly what we don’t want to do!

Surprisingly, giving ourselves permission can take the “fight” out of it and change our relationship to that forbidden food. Simply becoming aware that we are engaging in a battle of imaginary wills is an important first step. When we deprive ourselves, we initially feel strong. But when we “cave in,” we feel weak, as though the food itself has power over us. Becoming mindful of this cycle, we can begin to see how this keeps us yo-yoing from one extreme to another: strong, then weak; powerful, then powerless.

Giving yourself permission to have chocolate isn’t the same as “giving in” or “giving up.” Permission is a mindful agreement with yourself to allow yourself a favorite food. This requires slowing down, acknowledging feelings, sensations and thoughts, exploring choices, and making a decision. This process is very different from mindless behavior on autopilot.

What would it look

What would it look like to give yourself permission?

like to give yourself permission? It might be reminding yourself that you can have some of that favorite later. Or maybe that you can have a small amount now that really satisfies your craving, comforts or soothes you. It could mean sitting down and allowing yourself to enjoy each bite of the desired food, savoring it with all your senses. Taking the fear, anger and anxiety out of eating by offering yourself mindful, kindly permission can help you feel less powerless and more in control.

Char Wilkins, MSW, LCSW, serves on the TCME board and is a mindfulness-based psychotherapist. She is the owner/director of the Center for Mindful Living in Connecticut. She can be contacted at www.amindfulpath.com.

Working with Desire

By Brian M. Shelley M.D.

Here is a short mindfulness exercise that may be helpful. Sit comfortably and begin to notice your breathing. Settle into this for

“Attending to this desire, instead of denying it, may help us feel less deprived.”

a few minutes, just breathing. Allow the thought of a “forbidden food” to come into focus. Notice that the thought of the food, any desire or longing for the food and the food itself are three related but distinct things. Explore the desire

for this food without acting on it. Can this desire be satisfied in some other way? Does the desire last, or does it come and go?

Perhaps the desire points to a nutrient your body needs in some way, including fat or salt or sugar.

Can these nutrients be found in other foods? Perhaps the desire is for a satisfying sensory or emotional experience. What are other ways to provide those?

Attending to this desire, instead of denying it, may help you feel less deprived as you set about a new way of eating.

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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.

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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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