



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 fear. Gretchen Newmark, RD, explores the prevalence of food fear. Her article explores the idea that fear, regardless of the degree, plays an important role in food selection and eating preference. Donald Altman, MA, has provided a wonderful article, which is also a patient-care handout (available on the TCME website), to help gently understand how mindful eating can begin to release a person from the invisible force of fear and the reactionary behavior it creates. Our last article is by Jan Bays, M.D., author of *Mindful Eating*, who provides a way to present the concept of mindful eating to clients.

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.

Afraid of Food?

By Gretchen Newmark RD

I'm at a gathering, and someone discovers I'm a dietitian, so she asks, "What do you think about...?" Sometimes it's the latest diet, but often she is asking about a food fear. Despite the fact that our life expectancy has never been higher, many people harbor some suspicion, from a little mistrust to a lot of fear, about what they eat. What frightens people about foods? Almost everything! Because I'm an eating-disorders specialist, I see a lot of clients who are terrified that a food will make them fat. I can tell when someone began dieting by the vintage of his fears. Fear of fats started in the 1980s, fear of carbs in the 1990s. Some people who tried both diets are afraid of anything containing fat or carbohydrate. But there are enough food fears for everyone, not just those with eating

disorders. Some people fear foods in certain combinations or eating at restaurants or friends' houses without knowing the foods' exact content. People are afraid of sugar or salt, although most guiltily consume them. Some people fear food ingredients such as lactose or gluten and attempt to refrain from most dairy or grain products, or they avoid nightshades – tomatoes, potatoes, peppers and eggplant. Certain people are concerned about caffeine while others consume a lot of it so they don't have to feel hunger or fatigue. Many people feel that they have food sensitivities, although when I ask what symptoms my clients experience when they eat their "no-no foods," they usually can't tell me.

Environmental pollutants are a source of much fear, and certainly it is wise to minimize our exposure when we can. But avoiding all foods that are not produced organically would mean rather severe food restrictions for most of us. Some foods become "politically incorrect" for various reasons: for example, animal products for vegans, foods that are not fair-traded, or non-local foods

that must be "carbon off-set." Even water, the "universal nutrient" without which we would quickly die, is distrusted whether from the tap or plastic bottle. And occasionally there is an outbreak of food-borne illness in foods as diverse as cheese, meat, vegetables or fruit juice. Conspiracy theories abound, especially online, about everything from the FDA to the food industry. The media help create food fears when they report on isolated scientific findings out of context or current fads that conflict and change over time.

Then there is food preparation. Fast foods? Fried? Aluminum cookware? Plastics? Forget it! Would-be "living foodists" or "rawists" shun cooked foods while macrobiotic dieters abstain from raw. Many of my clients who fear eating anything without a nutrition label tend to eat a lot of processed "nutrition bars" while others try to steer clear of processed foods. I have heard microwave ovens described as "modern monstrosities" that "emit death rays." And we hear that roasting nuts or pressing oils

with heat converts healthy fatty acids to "toxins." When a food once viewed as "healthy" becomes a heavily promoted commodity by mainstream

producers, suspicions may arise that all is not well. Nutrition professionals were concerned about research suggesting that soy protein isolates (soy protein powder) might cause benign breast cell proliferation, but it wasn't until conventional stores began to feature soy products that soy began to lose its health food status and started to evoke fear and loathing. Stevia was considered a safe herbal sweetener in the alternative community, but now that Coke has begun to use it, no way!

Why is almost every food scary to somebody? Why do we, blessed with abundant food and water, tend to polarize "good" and "bad" foods when about three-quarters of the world goes hungry and thirsty and any food is better than starvation? I think the answer lies in what the Buddhists refer to as our "dualistic existence," that everything – events, people, situations and certainly foods – can be seen as both "good" and "bad," depending on one's perspective. Seen from this view, nothing is absolutely "either/or"; it's always "both/and." So, from



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one perspective, any food can be appreciated for its taste or other qualities while from another, it might seem risky. It also seems that qualms about foods can be tolerated much more easily than fears about poverty, aging, deterioration or dying. People with eating disorders attribute their fears to their bodies and foods, but I think many others do as well.

Unconsciously, it could feel less frightening to attempt to control one's diet, successfully or not and as painful as it might be, than to try to control the future of the planet, confront unpleasant truths like marital problems or the truth that everything eventually ends, falls apart or dies.

Fear shuts down awareness. When we have rigid ideas about something, it precludes us from being able to perceive what is actually true.

Fearful eating says: "Will this food harm me? Am I wrong for eating it?" or "I am a good (or bad) person for eating as I do" or "I shouldn't be eating this. I should be eating better." Mindful eating means being curious, aware and honest about our actual experience of eating. Mindful eating sounds like this: "Am I hungry? What am I hungry for?" "How does this food taste?" "How do I feel after eating it?" "Is the experience worth the health or environmental implications?" "What makes me

feel best physically and emotionally?" We can be discerning about our food choices without harboring suspicion.

Unconscious fears are unlikely to diminish. Awareness and mindfulness are the antidotes to fear that would otherwise narrow our life without our even realizing it. In this culture, where foods are



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demonized, we can find freedom by asking: Am I afraid of any foods? Which ones? Why? Would I actually enjoy these foods? Do I miss them? Would eating them in moderation really harm me or others? What choices do I truly want to make?

Intentional choice is liberating. There is nothing to fear. Bon appetit! Enjoy!

Gretchen Newmark, MA, RD is an expert in weight management and disordered eating and is a Registered Dietitian in private practice in Portland, Oregon

Overcoming Fear by Knowing Fear

By Donald Altman M.A., LPC

As a former senior mental health therapist at an intensive outpatient eating clinic, I dined often with patients—making sure they ate all their food. I saw individuals filled with anxiety and frozen in fear with the idea of taking another bite or trying to consume a "challenge" food, such as a slice of pizza, a serving of pudding, or a small scoop of ice cream. Do you fear food? If so, you are not alone. There are many chronic dieters and health addicts who have irrational food fears that are restricting their lives and food choices—often to the point of physical and emotional illness.

What exactly is fear? Fear is related to the need to escape or avoid a danger that is real or perceived. Fear can even be the *memory* of a threat.

Giving in to an unrealistic food fear is much like watching a scary movie over and over where the ending is always the same. That's why fear gives us the sense of being stuck and hopeless. So is there a way out of the fear cycle?

Fortunately, mindfulness moves you past fear, and it does this by letting you closely examine and observe fear and anxiety, as if from a safe distance. Imagine this to be like turning on the lights in the movie theatre so you can tell

yourself, "It is only a movie that I'm getting frightened by."

You can, for example, ask yourself these questions: What really triggers my fear? When did it first begin? Where do I notice the sensation of fear in the body? Is my fear connected with an image? If so, try to notice the image in as much detail as possible.

Fear of food is not innate. Show a baby a fat-free salad or a chocolate pie and it will not flinch from either. Fear of food is not innate, but learned. Fortunately, what can be learned can also be unlearned. Remember, scary movies don't really make a whole lot of sense when you turn on the lights of curiosity, clear knowing and seeing.

BIO: Donald Altman, M.A., LPC, is a psychotherapist, former Buddhist monk, and author of The Mindfulness Code and Meal by Meal. Contact: info@mindfulpractices.com and www.mindfulpractices.com

" Become aware of how the mind jumps to conclusions about bodily symptoms."

Fear of Food

By Jan Chozen Bays, MD

Patients have come to me in despair, saying, "There's nothing left that I can eat. Beef contains hormones, chickens are raised under cruel conditions, salmon is endangered, cheese and eggs have too much saturated fat, tofu contains estrogen-like compounds, I

think I'm sensitive to gluten, and all the nightshade family and dairy products give me gas."

Food anxieties may be based on accurate or inaccurate information or on fear of losing control. Often people misinterpret normal bodily symptoms. For example, intestinal gas does not mean allergy to all dairy products and thus the need to avoid them entirely. It may be the result of gulping air while drinking; it may signal the need for lactose-reduced milk, enzyme supplements or a switch to sensible rationing of dairy intake. Even true severe food allergies can be amenable to desensitization, as recent research work with children allergic to peanuts has shown.

Practice for clients: Make a list of "feared foods." Go over the list and categorize them as to source (eg., correct or incorrect information). For one week, become aware of how the mind interprets and jumps to conclusions about bodily symptoms

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.

TCME
The Center for Mindful Eating

P.O.Box 88

West Nottingham NH
03291

603-778-5841

info@tcme.org

(eg., interpreting abdominal discomfort as anything from hunger to allergies to cancer). Return the mind's awareness to the arising and disappearing of physical sensations alone, without any interpretation.

Jan Chozen Bays, M.D., is a pediatrician and Zen teacher in Oregon. She is the author of Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food.