

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

Imagine if the mind could be stretched, making it more flexible, allowing it to shift and change, helping a person better navigate the unexpected events in life. In this issue of Food for Thought, Char Wilkins, LCSW, and Gretchen Newmark, MA, RD, explain how the practice of mindful eating can bring the concept of flexibility to the table. Donald Altman, MA, has written a wonderful article, which is also a patient care handout, that explains how mindful eating can increase a person's mental flexibility. 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 and explore our current offerings. If you are not a member, please consider joining.

Flex-Ability: Wondering Questions about Eating Behaviors

By Char Wilkins, MSW, LCSW

I hear the word "flexibility" and I think of backbends or Cirque du Soleil or a yoga pose no one should attempt unless it was the only way out of a burning building. When my yoga instructor

Wondering questions use the word "what" rather than "why."

says to put my right foot forward and left foot back, bend the knees, lift the pelvis and tighten the abs while lowering my chest to the ground as my mind remains relaxed and my hands are in pray position – all the neural connections in my brain needed to move my limbs suddenly and

Nurturing the middle road is often a challenging practice for both clinician and patient.

completely misfire. As a child I sailed through the Hokey Pokey. What happened?

Back then it was just a matter of flapping my arms and legs and wiggling around. It was fun. As I grew, so did the shoulds, musts and have-tos – as in “I have to get this right.” It all became work. My mind began to tighten around “right.” And if there was a right, there certainly was a wrong – along with good/bad, all/nothing, too much/not enough. “Rigid mortis” had set in.

This is the condition our clients with disordered eating patterns struggle with every day. As professionals we give this way of thinking a variety of names: depression, anxiety, bulimia, resistance, binge eating and so on. But what they tell us is that they feel “stuck” – caught in a seemingly endless cycle that flings them from one extreme to the other.

Of course when someone has their eating “under control” they want it to stay that way, worry that it might change, and are not interested in being flexible about their straight-and-narrow food plan. And when eating behaviors are out of control, patients want you to tell them what to do “right

now” to change or stop these habituated patterns.

Those of us in the helping professions may feel we are being pulled, pummeled or manipulated by those we are trying to help, and that may trigger reactive thoughts and feelings for us. Nurturing the middle road is often a challenging practice, for both clinician and patient. As professionals it is important that we embody flexibility so patients might see that there is life between the highs and lows that is neither unsafe nor dull; it’s simply different from what they’ve known. Flexibility is inherent in mindfulness practice, and just like other aspects of mindfulness, it can be cultivated.

There are many ways to encourage flexibility through the mind and the senses. One way is for the clinician to foster a non-judgmental curiosity about whatever the client brings to a session. Recently a client announced to me that she had failed again because she’d binged after two “good” weeks. She said she knew she was going to binge because work had been “just too awful.” As she drove home she was aware that she was

ruminating about what, where and how she’d eat. When she got home she went straight to the freezer for her ice-cream stash. “Why, why, why do I do that?” she agonized.

As a clinician the temptation is to go with her question and wonder with her why she did do that. But the more I sit with people struggling with food, eating – any habit they don’t want – the more I hear The Critic in a “why” question. Why this, why that, why didn’t you, why did you? What I have found is that a question that starts with “why” is usually just a disguise for right or wrong.

I invited her to put both feet on the ground, take a breath in and out, and see if she could notice any sensation on the bottom of her right foot: the feel of the shoe against her foot, the texture of her sock, a tingling warmth or coolness in her toes. This is a

simple way to interrupt a runaway thought-train through the use of physical sensation. It creates a pause during which I can offer what I call a “wondering question.”

Wondering



questions use the word “what” rather than “why.” Unlike a wooden yardstick, rigid in its measurements, “what” questions open the heart and help the mind feel more spaciousness in which to consider a more flexible approach. Setting aside any agenda we might have to help clients see what we see as the best direction allows us to travel *with* the client rather than be a backseat driver. In adopting a “what” stance we can inquire in many directions. We might ask what about work turned her mind towards this familiar pattern. What might have been the emotion that drove this behavior, and were there any physical sensations in her body that she noticed? We could wonder what she might have really needed in that moment. What is she experiencing now as she tells this story? What was it in her that knew she was going to binge? In this way, we help point her to her own inherent wisdom.

Your client may or may not be able to answer these questions in the beginning, but just as a lens can go from a narrow focus to an expanded landscape, you are suggesting that there is another way to be with habitual patterns. You model and offer her the possibility of being curious rather than critical about reactive automatic behavior, and more flexible in responding to difficulty and disappointment.

It’s the all-or-nothing, good-or-bad, right-or-wrong thinking that

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keeps us and our clients feeling frustrated and helpless. When there are no bad foods, stupid choices or failings, and when compassionate curiosity replaces the critic, then every experience becomes useful rather than something to be ashamed of or gotten rid of. Our clients’ minds and hearts can open and are no longer rigid with fear, and neither are ours.

Char Wilkins, MSW, LCSW, is a mindfulness-based psychotherapist specializing in women’s issues. She is a certified MBSR instructor and trains professionals nationwide in mindfulness modalities. She can be contacted at info@amindfulpath.com.

Take a Bite on the Wild Side

By Donald Altman, M.A., LPC

Are you using your taste buds to their fullest extent? The human tongue has more than 10,000 taste buds that can sense sweetness, saltiness, bitterness, sourness and umami – which is a meaty, broth-like flavor. This nuanced taste apparatus enables us to savor and sample from food’s amazing diversity. Did you know, for example, that there are thousands of varieties of apples? The average grocery store contains thousands of items, and

yet, how many of us stick to buying the same things or eating the same meals over and over... and over? Booorrring!

The antidote to food boredom is flexibility and curiosity, and your taste buds are ideal for experimenting with different foods and food combinations. One way to “take a bite on the wild side” is to use an attitude of openness and curiosity in your next meal or snack. Even one new food a week (or daily) can broaden your awareness and open you to the possibility of eating new and exciting foods.

Once a day for the next week, stop and notice what you might habitually eat at mealtime or for a snack. Then, take a moment of pause and give yourself permission to choose a different food or a different flavor. Suppose you are in the grocery store looking for a dip for crackers or chips. You might choose something like hummus (ground

chickpeas with a variety of tasty ingredients ranging from garlic to lemon juice) instead of your regular choice. When dining out, replace that standard burger with a wrap



or another dish that is new to you. If you are stuck on the same green veggies night after night – such as broccoli, asparagus or spinach – experiment with cooking with kale or sugar snap peas. Use arugula in your salad instead of romaine. You may discover there's something to the adage "Variety is the spice of life." It's also a mindful eating practice. Enjoy it often.

Donald Altman, LPC, is a psychotherapist, former Buddhist monk, award-winning writer, and author of the new book One-Minute Mindfulness. He currently serves as Vice President of TCME. His website is www.mindfulpractices.com. Contact: info@mindfulpractices.com.



Mindful Eating Is Not Just Another Diet

By Gretchen Newmark, MA, RD, LD

As you help your clients cultivate mindful eating, you may notice a familiar phenomenon: attempts on their part to use the guidelines of mindful eating as just another set of diet-imposed rules. You might hear the client say, "I was bad and didn't wait until I was hungry to eat," or "I should be eating more slowly, but I just can't do it all the time," or "You're not going to like this, but I kept eating even after I felt full."

Words like "should," "ought," "have to," "need to," "good" or "bad" suggest that your clients view mindful eating as a new weight-loss diet that they "have to stick to" or else they are "doing it wrong." Our culture is obsessed

with weight-loss schemes that spawn countless rules, so it is very difficult for people to develop a different way of approaching food without experiencing it as one more set of inflexible prescriptions, another list of "oughts" and "shoulds."

It may take several gentle reminders for your clients to recognize that mindful eating means letting go of externally forced rules for the honest, compassionate self-guidance provided by paying attention to the process of eating. You can remind them, for example, that once learned, mindful eating is possible regardless of speed or that most people overeat sometimes and it can be useful to experience how it feels to be too full. For some chronic dieters, it may help to bring attention back to their actual experience of eating many times before they can truly understand that every meal or snack is another opportunity for curiosity and learning, not a do-or-die attempt to follow yet another diet.

Gretchen Newmark, MA, RD, LD is a Registered Dietitian specializing in eating disorders in private practice and a spiritual director in Portland, Ore., with over 30 years of experience in meditation and yoga. Her website is www.gretchennewmark.com.



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!

\$40 Professional Membership: *Learn more about mindful eating and ways to bring this wisdom into your daily work. Become a member today! See our Web site or application for details.*

\$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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