

## **Ways dietitians are incorporating mindfulness and mindful eating into nutrition counseling.**

By Megrette Hammond M.Ed., R.D., CDE, LD

The concept of Mindful Eating has an intuitive appeal that dietitians are now incorporating into their nutrition counseling. "Most clients don't want to weigh and measure – they want to find their own way." offers Josephine Connolly Schoonen, MS, RD, clinical assistant professor at SUNY Stony Brook NY and author of *Losing Weight Permanently with the Bull's-Eye Food Guide*. "Meal plans are a crutch while they are learning how to recognize the experience of hunger and fullness."

Dr. Ronna Kabatznick, mindfulness expert and author of *The Zen of Eating*, goes on to explain, "People who misuse food are not experiencing the sensual pleasure of food. They don't understand hunger or satiety cues and they are left in the world of thought. Before they know it they have lost the whole experience of eating. When an individual misses the direct experience of eating, he returns to the experience of eating to try to get it again, only to get lost in thought. This cycle of eating, missing the experience of eating and eating again, can become a compulsive pattern."

### **What is mindful eating?**

Mindful Eating is not a specific and definable term. This is because the intent of mindful-awareness is to notice the ever-changing moment. This lack of a clear definition may be confusing for dietitians who are trying to utilize this emerging technique. Mindfulness is not limited to finding a point in time, or a specific response. The following three elements were identified as necessary to provide mindful eating counseling: providing eating experiences, directing an individual's attention to the act of eating, and witnessing without judgment or goals the emotional and physical responses that resulted before, during or after the experience.

Kathie Swift, Nutritionist at The Center for Mind-Body Medicine said, "One of the things we can do to promote health is to eat in a calm, mindful manner." Mindful eating can include eating in silence. This may be done to help focus the individual's attention to the meal. Stillness and silence surrounding an eating experience are helpful but not necessary to have a mindful eating experience. The reduction of eating distractions, whether they are physical or mental can enhance the individual's attention to and awareness of the eating experience. Additional techniques to teach mindfulness may focus a person's attention to a specific area, such as the breath or the bite in the mouth. This limited scope can be helpful to begin a mindful eating practice.

Experts interviewed stated that with practice individuals could learn to be attentive to eating in a variety of settings. Two prominent programs that teach mindful eating in social situations are Dr. Jean Kristeller's MB-EAT (Mindfulness Based, Eating Awareness Training) program and Dr. Lisa Kaufmann MD, Center For Health and Meditation, Mindful Eating program. These two programs include opportunities for participants to become aware of how to eat mindfully in social situations as well as when they eat alone.

When asked about the concept of Mindful Eating professionals offered related terms: normal eating, enlightened eating, intuitive eating, spirituality and food, or connecting

with the life force that surrounds the planet. Whatever it is called, Connolly Schoonen is clear that eating mindfully “Helps the patient reshape their relationship with food.”

When asked to describe mindful eating, Dr. Kabatnick explains “It is a simple practice of paying attention. It can be on different levels, seeing, tasting, hearing, feeling--all sensors. But, most of the time we space out. We are in the world of thoughts. We are in a disconnected mode. It is rare for us to be conscious of whatever is happening in our lives.” This failure to become aware of the direct experience is what mindful eating is trying to teach. “However, most of us are lost in the world of thought while we do our most basic tasks like: eating, walking, washing the dishes, whatever it is, we are not present.” And when we are not present, “We are not really living our lives.”

This failure to be present is why "There are some people who eat an orange but don't really eat it. They eat their sorrow, fear, anger, past, and future. They are not really present, with body and mind united." Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh states. The awareness of suffering caused by our inattention is something many dietitians have also come to realize.

### **How can mindful eating help a client?**

“Health is a process of transformation” Explains Dr. Susan B. Lord, MD, “And not about telling people what to do. It won’t work.” Dr. Lord, Food is Medicine Course Director at the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington DC goes on to say, “Part of the process is to have the individual understand what food means to them. Mindfulness is an important tool to do this. It helps individuals understand how they view food. When people become mindful, via a guided meditation or other techniques, they become aware.” Awareness, or that ah-ha moment, is a powerful force for change. Dr. Lord laughs, “We have a lot of ah-ha moments at our workshop” Lord continues to describe The Food is Medicine course that she coordinates as a comprehensive 7-day workshop that blends current research and nutrition science with many profound mindful eating experiences. “People have to make a choice about food, to choose a piece of fruit or a piece of chocolate, and in that choice, people can become aware of their reactions, preferences, tastes, and habits. This moment of awareness” she states, “is a good example of mindfulness.”

“Yet the greatest gift we give our clients when we teach them to eat mindfully is to do this non-judgmentally.” Dr. Kabatnick explains “The heart of mindfulness is not just to pay attention, but to pay attention and do it without judgment.” Dr. Kabatnick asks, “Are your clients responding with aversions, grasping, craving or just spacing out, when they eat?” There is a pause, and then Kabatnick says, “Let me explain it another way. When a client describes an eating situation and says something like: I am so mad at myself, how many times do I have to experience this? I went through this already! This is judgment.”

“You see,” she continues “somehow the client thinks she is supposed to be perfect, but that is not the point of becoming mindful.” It is the commitment to return to the bite, the moment, the direct experience of eating. That is the intent of a ‘mindfulness practice’. “All mindfulness asks us to do, is to observe -- not to judge -- but to return to the experience of eating. No matter how many times we leave the experience and no matter how many times we judge ourselves, we make a commitment to return to the direct experience of eating. It is not about judging, or getting lost, but creating the awareness that both experiences can happen during a meal.”

Donald Altman, author of *The Art of the Inner Meal*, agrees, “Food is something you do every day. There is always another meal.” It is this repetition of the eating experience that can create an opportunity for people to connect to the act of self-kindness. “If you can learn to eat without shame and blame it can open the door to the awareness of what you are feeling. If you are hungry and craving, just know that is present. If you are restricting, know that you are restricting.”

### **How does mindfulness creates opportunities for change?**

Having the ability to recognize what mental states are present offers an individual the ability to change their current mental states when eating. This awareness of choice can be very profound for a person. Altman, who writes extensively about the power of gratitude says, “The second we bring gratitude into eating there is a shift into sacred space – it connects us to all the people who brought us this food. It can bring a sense of cooperation. Just having a sense of gratitude gives us a space, a moment to transcend that impulse or craving. Gratitude can set the stage for mindfulness to occur.”

### **Learning from other dietitians**

Donna Gleeson, M.O.Ed, RD dietitian at Elliot Center for Weight and Health in Manchester NH shared how her interest in mindful eating came about. After attending a Geneen Roth workshop where she participated in an eating “...a chocolate kiss, I think?” She chose to develop a weight loss program that used the mindfulness techniques that she learned. Gleeson has also received additional mindfulness training that was provided by her hospital. “Getting a basic foundation in mindfulness was an important step.” In both mindfulness workshops, eating activities were included. “The experience was very powerful,” Gleeson explains “It was a combination of guided imagery and being very present with this small amount of food that had a profound influence on me.” Adding to her knowledge Gleeson says, “I like to read.” Books that she found challenged her thinking included: *Nourishing Wisdom*, by Marc David and *Minding The Body, Mending The Mind*, by Joan Borysenko. In these books there was a shift in how a person views food and nutrition. The reader is asked to think about where the raisin came from, who picked it, the climate that it was grown in, the resources to transport it--the whole process. “It was very mind expanding to consider how food gets to our table. Most people, I suspect, don’t give this a second thought.”

Gleeson offers some specifics regarding the 16-week program she created called *Choosing the Right Weight*. “Well, first I have a one-hour interview with each person who has signed up to take the course. I can get a better sense of his needs and begin to introduce him to the concept of mindfulness.” Gleeson continues to explain that during this initial interview, “I’m looking for stress. I see stress in people’s life as a real issue that mindfulness can help. I ask people how much time to they currently devote to eating.” If the client appears to be in a ‘stress’ mode I gently begin to talk about mindfulness. “I focus on the pace that people eat. People can understand that.” She uses a handout created by Eat Right Montana (ERM), (See web-resources) called *Slowing Down to Eat and Feel Better*. In the initial class she spends time explaining hunger and fullness cues. “I like the Debra Waterhouse book *Why Women Need Chocolate*. I find it helps to explain that if a person eats rapidly, she is more likely to overshoot the mark, with regards to fullness.”

In her class, Gleeson has mindful eating activities as part of the program’s experience. “You learn a lot.” Her candor is refreshing as she shares an example of her own

learning. “We had a client struggle when asked to eat a chocolate kiss.” At the next session the individual discussed that the activity was very difficult for her. The individual realized that if she had eaten the kiss, instead of declining to participate in the activity, she would have binged. “We are more aware of these kinds of food issues and make an effort to offer clients a choice.” Gleeson states ““Choice, is very important.”

During these activities the instructor has to help each participant remember what the intent is for an eating experience. Gleeson explains, “That the purpose of eating activities is to focus in on what his body is trying to tell him.” So having a client realize that she was going to binge if she participated was very helpful. “Most are on automatic pilot.” Her experience including mindful eating has made her sit with some discomfort as well. “Not everyone is engaged during these activities, but even the people who seem to think this kind of exercise is ‘dumb’, usually report back saying that they are a lot more aware of how they are eating at home.” Gleeson states “The group format works well for me to conduct mindful eating activities. It is woven into the 16-week program. I have to use my clinical judgment with regards to mindful eating in a one-on-one counseling but it is worth making the effort.”

“Awareness training is not suitable for everyone.” Dr. Kaufmann explains “Most people are at rock bottom when they come to our Mindful Eating class.” Explains Dr. Kaufmann. “Teresa Polodak RD, CDE and I introduce individuals to the concept of mindful eating even before they begin our 10-week course.” This format helps Kaufmann have very few dropouts. “We hold an information session where we have people have a mindful eating experience. From this, we explain the program in more depth.” Some people take this course two and three times, which just increases the client’s commitment to become aware. In addition to eating mindfully Dr. Kaufmann also teaches each individual to meditate. Dr. Kaufmann, who has a 30-year meditation practice, explains that her program is more effective if a meditation practice is maintained by both the participants and people who teach mindfulness based classes. The two kinds of meditation offered are focused on the breath, and self-kindness. (See Table 1, Internet Resources for information on these types of meditation.) As part of their Kaufmann and Polodak have created a CD of guided meditation that participants can purchase to listen to at home. In addition to the CD’s, this Mindful Eating program uses two books to help support clients’ learning. The first is Intuitive Eating by E. Reish and E. Tribole. Polodak explains that “It is the best book available for our program.” The next is Breaking Free From Emotional Eating, by G. Roth, which helps clients explore the emotions that food and eating can create.

### **Mindful Eating Counseling**

This concept of teaching more than just what a person is eating, but how to eat, is catching on. An increasing number of resources are available to include elements of mindfulness and mindful eating during counseling sessions. Additionally, the formation of The Center for Mindful Eating, a multidiscipline, non-profit organization, offers the Principles of Mindful Eating. These Principles were created to provide guidance and support for health professionals who are interested in including mindfulness and mindful eating as part of their counseling sessions.

Professionals who currently offer mindful eating counseling agree that it is more than a technique to help people choose a piece of fruit over a cookie. Dr. Lord points out “When people become mindful, they can begin to tap into a larger life force so their choices are for life as opposed to just avoiding disease.”

**Table and Reference:**

The table and references above reflect the responses of a list-serve request for information regarding dietitians who incorporate mindfulness/mindful eating into their work. The following resources were identified to help individuals learn more about mindfulness and mindful eating.

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