

Mastering the Mindful Meal

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Eating while multitasking, whether working through lunch or watching TV while eating dinner, often leads us to eat more. On the other hand, eating "mindfully," savoring every mouthful, enhances the experience of eating and keeps us aware of how much we take in.

Our fast-food culture is one where meals have become yet another task we squeeze in during the day. It is all too common to hear of people grabbing breakfast on the run or attending a lunch meeting, where business is front and center and food is merely the bait to get people there.

Adults in the United States devote an average of 1 hour and 12 minutes per day to eating, yet spend between 2 ½ and 3 hours per day watching television. Our kids are rushed too. Studies have shown that school lunch periods provide an average of 7 to 11 minutes for students to consume their lunch.

The speed at which we eat isn't the only problem. As a nation of multi-taskers, we often pair eating with other activities, such as driving or working at our desks. It is rare that we're simply eating when we're eating. In fact, 66% of Americans report regularly eating dinner in front of the television. With obesity at epidemic proportions, it is essential that we take a closer look at not just what we eat, but *how* we eat.

The Effects of Mindful Eating

It may come as a big surprise to learn that "mindless" eating, or eating without awareness, can have negative health consequences. Scientists are beginning to evaluate and better understand the complex role of the mind-body connection in eating behavior. It turns out that when our mind is tuned out during mealtime, the digestive process may be 30% to 40% less effective. This can contribute to digestive distress, such as gas, bloating and bowel irregularities.

Gas and bloating aside, overeating and obesity are perhaps the most significant health problems caused, at least in part, by mindless eating. The mind-body connection plays a pivotal role in our ability to accurately assess hunger and fullness.

While the precise mechanisms of hunger and fullness are not completely understood, we do know that the brain and central nervous system receive signals from the body when food is desired or needed. These signals can be caused by many triggers, including psychological states such as our mood. Once eating is under way, the brain has a key role to send out a signal when fullness is approaching. If the mind is "multi-tasking" during eating, critical signals that regulate food intake may not be received by the brain. If the brain does not receive certain messages that occur during eating, such as sensation of taste and satisfaction, it may fail to register the event as "eating". This scenario can

lead to the brain continuing to send out additional signals of hunger, increasing the risk of overeating.

How to Practice Eating Mindfully

Eating mindfully means eating with awareness. Not awareness of what foods are on your plate, but rather awareness of the experience of eating. Mindful eating is being present, moment by moment, for each sensation that happens during eating, such as chewing, tasting and swallowing. If you've ever practiced mindfulness in any way, (such as meditation, relaxation or breathing exercises) you are familiar with how easily our minds wander. The same happens when we eat. When you begin to practice mindful eating, one important thing to remember is not to judge yourself when you notice your mind drifting off the experience of eating. Instead, just keep returning to the awareness of that taste, chew, bite or swallow. If this concept is new, try the following exercise.

Do this exercise with a friend. You will need one small slice of an apple for each person. One person reads the instructions listed below while the other person completes the exercise.

1. Take one bite of an apple slice and then close your eyes. Do not begin chewing yet.
2. Try not to pay attention to the ideas running through your mind, just focus on the apple. Notice anything that comes to mind about taste, texture, temperature and sensation going on in your mouth.
3. Begin chewing now. Chew slowly, just noticing what it feels like. It's normal that your mind will want to wander off. If you notice you're paying more attention to your thinking than to the chewing, just let go of the thought for the moment and come back to the chewing. Notice each tiny movement of your jaw.
4. In these moments you may find yourself wanting to swallow the apple. See if you can stay present and notice the subtle transition from chewing to swallowing.
5. As you prepare to swallow the apple, try to follow it moving toward the back of your tongue and into your throat. Swallow the apple, following it until you can no longer feel any sensation of the food remaining.
6. Take a deep breath and exhale.

You may find it interesting to talk with your partner about your experience. What did you notice while chewing? Why did you swallow? Was the food no longer tasty? Did it dissolve? Were you bored?

The point of this exercise is not to suggest all your meals be consumed this meticulously as this experiment. Rather, by doing this exercise you may discover some things about your own eating habits. Some people find value in doing a shorter version of this exercise with the first bite of each meal. This helps set an intention of being mindful through the course of your meal. Listed below are a few other suggestions for introducing mindfulness while eating. Try them and see what you discover!

Simple first steps toward introducing mindfulness while eating:

- Eat with chopsticks.
- Eat with your non-dominant hand.
- Chew your food 30 to 50 times per bite.
- Eat without TV, newspaper or computer.
- Eat sitting down.
- Put the proper portions of food on your plate and try to make the meal last at least 20 minutes.