



Mindful Eating: Benefits, Challenges, and Strategies

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Have you ever watched a television show only to realize you do not remember the plot or the storyline? Have you ever had a telephone conversation only to hang up and not remember what was talked about? If you answered yes to these questions, you are like many other people who go through the motions of day-to-day life without paying attention. We have all experienced situations in which our minds wander due to deadlines, upcoming events, family issues, etc., because we often think about past, present, and future concerns. Mindfulness is a practice which focuses on the awareness of thoughts, emotions, and sensations of the body in the present moment, without judgment. Mindfulness has been found to be associated with positive psychological well-being, and has shown to benefit individuals and their eating behaviors (Chang, Huang, & Lin, 2015; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Mindfulness can help us recognize preoccupations and inspire us to return to the present (Armand, 2015).

Mindful Eating

Mindful eating focuses on wellness and how we eat, not what we eat. It involves paying attention and being fully aware of what we are thinking and feeling when we eat. Mindful eating involves eating slower and more deliberately, avoiding distractions while eating, listening to the body's hunger and fullness cues, eating foods that are both pleasing and nourishing, and being aware of and acknowledging our response to foods (Martin,

Prichard, Hutchinson, & Wilson, 2013; Mathieu, 2009).

According to Wansink (2011), we do not necessarily overeat because we are hungry. We often overeat because meals have become a social experience that we share with family and friends. Distractions in the form of televisions, computers, phones, and social media also contribute to overeating because we are not paying attention or being mindful of the amount of food we are consuming. Employing mindful eating techniques allows individuals to become more aware and responsive to hunger and fullness cues, and environmental distractions (Martin, Prichard, Hutchinson, & Wilson, 2013).

Benefits of Mindful Eating

Mindfulness can create a healthy relationship to food and allow us to choose food that is both pleasing and nourishing (Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria Inc., 2014). Incorporating mindful eating practices has been shown to have benefits for individuals including:

- a renewed sense of hunger and fullness
- weight loss management and maintenance
- improved self-esteem
- a sense of empowerment

Challenges of Mindful Eating

Incorporating mindful eating practices can be challenging with the fast paced environments that

we live in day to day. We have challenging work schedules, child care responsibilities, and family commitments. These responsibilities, coupled with the increase and convenience of fast food restaurants, can pose challenges as we attempt to include mindful eating practices into our lives. Living in a world with an emphasis placed on productivity increases the temptation of grabbing fast food for a quick meal or snacking on convenient, unhealthy snacks while we work (Mathieu, 2009).

Strategies for Incorporating Mindful Eating

Incorporating mindful eating practices into our lives can be challenging. We must modify our environment, and alter our thought processes. The following strategies can help you successfully practice mindful eating and create long-term eating patterns (Armand, 2015; Wansick, 2011).

- 1. Ask and Reflect.** Before eating, ask yourself: am I hungry, am I thirsty, what do I want to eat/drink? Reflect on how you feel: rushed, stressed, sad, bored (Armand, 2015).
- 2. Use smaller plates.** The less you see, the less you eat. Smaller plates allow you to more easily control portion size (Armand, 2015).
- 3. Don't clean your plate.** Don't stuff yourself. It is okay to leave food on your plate. Stop eating when you feel full, save leftovers for later, or throw out the last few bites.
- 4. Smaller serving utensils.** The use of smaller serving utensils encourages the consumption of less food.
- 5. Out of sight, out of mind.** You can prevent second and third servings by moving serving bowls and entrees away from the dinner table.
- 6. Easy access.** Keep healthy food choices, such as fruits and vegetables, readily available in cabinets, cupboards, and the refrigerator to encourage mindful healthy eating habits.
- 7. Control portions.** Purchase items in smaller, single serving packages to control overeating. Don't eat right from a large box or bag.
- 8. Eat when you're hungry.** Let hunger cues guide your eating, not your emotions.

Substitute a physical activity for a snack until you are actually hungry.

- 9. Keep a mindful food journal.** Write down what you eat and what was happening at the time to identify food triggers – hunger, stress, excitement or boredom.
- 10. Slow down.** During each meal, chew slowly and savor every bite. Try putting your fork down between bites to slow down your eating. Drinking water between bites also gives the body enough time to signal to the brain that it's satisfied, not stuffed.
- 11. Sit down and pay attention.** Don't multi-task. Remove technology from the dinner table. By eating at the dinner table and not in front of the TV or computer, you can better track how much food you have consumed.

Conclusion

Mindful eating can be a useful tool that aids in focusing on present thoughts and feelings as you eat. By employing mindful eating techniques, you have the opportunity to change your current eating habits by becoming more self-aware and in tune to your body's hunger and fullness cues. Mindful eating can enrich the eating sensory experience as well as reduce less healthy food consumption (Arch, Brown, Goodman, Porta, Kiken, & Tillman, 2016). Because of our fast paced environment, there are challenges that accompany mindful eating that can lead to unhealthy food choices. However, the incorporation of useful strategies helps to combat the challenges and allows for the inclusion of mindful eating practices.

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