

Mindful Eating

By Rachel Vanden Berg, Naturopathic Doctor

Much attention lately is given to dieting and the foods we eat. Much less attention is given to how and why we eat.

Eating high quality, nutritious foods is a key component to achieving wellness. But optimal nourishment reaches far beyond counting the number of calories you eat and the portions of fats, protein and carbohydrates. Successful nourishment involves understanding that your body's needs are greatly influenced by your genetics, emotional state, exercise habits, environment, relationships, and nutrient intake.

Improving your diet means a permanent lifestyle change. Reaching your optimal body composition and creating a healthy diet should happen in your body and your mind simultaneously. The challenge is to look at *how* and *why* you eat, rather than just *what* you eat.

In the rat race of our productivity-focused society, eating on the run, opting for fast or processed foods, and eating as a part of multitasking have become the cultural norm. One study showed that the average American dedicates just one hour and 12 minutes a day to eating (compared to 2 ½ to 3 hours watching TV), and that school children spend an average of 7 to 11 minutes consuming lunch. Such hurried, mindless eating can lead to overeating and obesity which lead to serious health consequences such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

In the multi-tasking mind, signals that tell your brain when you are hungry and when you are full become muddled and may not be accurately received. If the brain does not receive the sensations of fullness or satisfaction, it may continue to send out messages of hunger, leading to overeating. As well, when the mind is elsewhere, digestive processes can slow by up to 40%, leading to digestive upset such as gas, bloating, and bowel irregularity.

Mindful eating and savouring each bite enhance the appreciation of eating and create an awareness of how much we actually consume. Eating mindfully or consciously means eating with awareness. Not just awareness of what is on your plate, but attentiveness to the experience of eating. This practice fosters a healthy relationship between you and your food.

To practice mindful eating, **create awareness with your emotional self.** Learn to recognize why you are eating. People often eat when they are feeling fatigued, depressed, overwhelmed, powerless, lonely or bored. Eating feels good and provides instant gratification. However attempting to fill an emotional void with food is a band-aid solution and doesn't address the underlying problem. Because the negative feelings persist, a viscous cycle of overeating begins. Next time you are inclined to reach for a snack, ask yourself if you are driven to eat for reasons other than hunger. Oprah suggests

asking yourself whether it is a Butterfinger or a hug that you really want.

Relax before you eat. Eating while relaxed helps you to overcome the unhealthy eating patterns that are often created by tension and stress. It also allows the digestive system to break down food more easily, maximizing the nutritional benefit of your meal or snack.

Respect your food. While eating, take a moment to appreciate the time, effort and energy that went into growing and preparing your meal.

Recognize how your food makes you feel. A good snack or meal should leave you satisfied and energized, not groggy, fatigued, or looking for more. When you discover that you feel good when eating well, you will begin to appreciate the food that is good for you and will be motivated to choose high quality, nutritious foods.

Love the foods that are good for you, so that you are eating the foods you love. Several claims state that restricting the foods you love merely sets you up for a later binge. This may be true in today's trendy weight loss diets. However, food restriction can be an important part of determining which foods are best for you to eat. Practice seeing this restriction as a positive change which leaves you feeling better, rather than a negative deprivation. Motivation to incorporate the right foods into your permanent daily diet will come naturally as a result of feeling great!

How to practice eating mindfully:

Listed below are some practical ways to begin eating mindfully. Try some of these suggestions and see what you discover. Eventually you may find yourself naturally incorporating mindful eating into your lifestyle.

- Only eat when you are truly hungry.
- Eat in a peaceful place, away from your desk, workplace or the TV
- Chew each bite 20 to 30 times
- Relax before eating. This may be as simple as 30 seconds of silence, meditation, or deep breathing
- Acquire a specific eating bowl. Everything you eat must be placed in this bowl first
- When drawing from the bowl, acknowledge the food and eat it purposefully.
- Give thanks for your food

MINDFUL EATING EXERCISE

Here is a simple way to get you acquainted with the idea of mindful eating.

Try the exercise with a bite of an apple, or with the first bite of your next meal. If your mind begins to wander, don't judge yourself. Simply bring your awareness back to the sensation of your food.

- Take a bite. Wait for a moment before you chew. Notice what comes to mind about the taste, texture, and sensation in your mouth.
- Begin chewing. Notice what it feels like. Be aware of each movement of your jaw.
- Notice the subtle transition from chewing to the desire to swallow.
- As you swallow, follow the movement of the bite to the back of your mouth and into your throat, until you can no longer feel any remaining sensation of the food.

- Take a deep breath and exhale.
- There is no need to consume all your food in this meticulous way. What you may find, is that by eating more mindfully you learn something about yourself and the way in which you eat. This awareness will lead to a more positive and healthy way of eating well