

Mindless to mindful eating

01 April 2016

Eating mindlessly may be contributing to the ever-expanding waistlines across the globe. Research into mindful eating has largely focused on weight control and helping people to develop a better relationship with food. How can you eat more mindfully?

Mindless eating

A scientific review found that people who were given larger food packages, bigger restaurant portions, and larger-sized plates and bowls, ate an average of 30% more food on that occasion, compared to people who were given smaller-sizes.¹ However, over 70% of people believed they had eaten the same amount as they normally ate, and 94% firmly believed that they were not influenced by the package, portion or plate size. The findings from this review suggest that external factors can cause people to mindlessly.¹

Likewise, a recent meta-analysis found that eating while being distracted, such as watching television or playing a computer game, leads to greater acute food intake.² It may be that the distraction takes away the perception of food attributes such as flavour, texture and appearance, which delays the onset of the feeling of “having enough” that triggers a person to stop eating. Distracted eating may interfere with memory of recent food intake, and can also lead to increases in subsequent snacking.^{2,3} By contrast, redirecting attention to the food while eating decreased the amount of subsequent snacking in lean young women.³ This suggests that paying attention to what we eat, i.e. mindful eating, may be useful in reducing inadvertent overconsumption.

Mindful eating

Mindfulness is deliberately paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It reflects an ancient Buddhist meditation practice.⁴ Mindful eating simply means being attentively aware while eating. This entails: focusing on the sensory attributes of the food such as the taste, smell and texture, acknowledging subjective responses to eating a food such as likes and dislikes, and paying attention to internal cues of hunger and satiety.⁵ Mindful eating encourages the body to follow its own inner wisdom to choose foods that are both satisfying, enjoyable and nourishing.

Mindless to mindful

There is an increasing number of studies examining the impact of mindfulness on a range of health and lifestyle issues including deleterious eating behaviours (e.g. irregular eating patterns, emotional eating) and weight control. A review of 21 studies of mindfulness-based interventions to change obesity-related eating behaviours found that 86% of the studies reported improvements in eating behaviour, dietary intake and body weight.⁶ Another review, focusing on weight loss, found that six out of eight short-term intervention studies documented significant weight loss among people eating mindfully.⁴ There is also promising work

that suggests that mindful eating can help prevent inadvertent or mindless overeating by people with a healthy weight.^{2,3} Mindful eating has also been effective in self-management of diabetes.⁷ However, longer term studies are needed to see if the effects are lasting. It is proposed that mindful eating increases awareness of hunger and satiety cues, interrupting habitual and stress-related eating patterns and improving control of food intake.⁶ Further work is needed to understand the psychological, behavioural, and biological mechanisms underpinning the process, and the most consistently effective interventions.⁴

Since food choice is complex and may be outside of conscious awareness, some scientists believe that awareness and education is not enough to change mindless eating.¹ However people may benefit from following suggestions to help them mindfully eat better.^{8,9}

Tips for eating more mindfully^{8,9}

- Before opening the fridge or cupboard, take a breath and ask yourself how you feel. Are you really hungry? Or thirsty? Stressed? Bored? Think for a minute and differentiate between your needs and wants.
- If you don't need to eat, do something else like go for a short walk.
- Don't eat on the go - it's difficult to be aware of how much you are eating. Have a seat.
- Resist eating straight from the bag/box. Serve your food – you'll be able to see and appreciate what and how much you're eating.
- Use smaller plates which could help your portion control.
- Remove distractions. Turn off the TV and everything else with a screen, like computers, phones, etc.
- Set a timer, allow yourself 20 minutes to eat a meal.
- Eat silently for five minutes, thinking about what it took to produce that meal, from the sun's rays to the farmer to the shop to the cook.
- Try eating with your non-dominant hand, or with chopsticks, to achieve eating slowly.
- Take small bites and chew well, while focusing on the smell, taste and texture of the food. Try to get 30 chews out of each bite.
- Try putting your utensils down after each bite. Don't pick them back up until you've swallowed what you already have in your mouth.
- Don't try to finish the whole plate. If you feel full, safely keep the food leftover. In a restaurant, ask for 'doggy bag' to take-away.

References

1. Wansink B (2010). From mindless eating to mindlessly eating better. *Physiology and Behaviour* 100:454-463.
2. Robinson E, et al. (2013). Eating attentively: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of food intake memory and awareness on eating. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 97(4):728-742.
3. Higgs S (2015). Manipulations of attention during eating and their effects on later snack intake. *Appetite* 92:287-294.
4. Olson KL & Emery CF (2015). Mindfulness and weight loss: A systematic review. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 77(1):59-67.

5. [The Centre for Mindful Eating. Principles of mindful eating. Accessed 02 September 2015.](#)
6. O'Reilly GA, et al. (2014). Mindfulness-based interventions for obesity-related eating behaviours: a literature review. *Obesity Reviews* 15:453-461
7. Miller C, et al. (2013). Comparison of a mindful eating intervention to a diabetes self-management intervention among adults with type 2 diabetes: A randomized controlled trial. *Health Education Behaviour* 41(2):145-154.
8. [Harvard Health Publications \(2011\). Mindful eating.](#)
9. [Harvard Health Publications \(November, 2015\). 10 Tips for Mindful Eating-just in time for the holidays.](#)