



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 2½ 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 multitaskers, 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 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's 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.