

# Mindful Eating: The Art of Presence While You Eat

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■ **IN BRIEF** Mindfulness, a practice based on Zen Buddhism, has become popular as a way of self-calming and as a method of changing eating behaviors. Mindful eating is being incorporated into behavior change programs along with recommended dietary behavior changes. This article describes mindful eating and offers ideas for how to teach the basics of this practice.

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**M**indfulness is a term that has become embedded in our everyday language, but its meaning is more profound than how we use it in our driven, multitasking, social structure. This term has become popular because it urges conscious awareness of whatever the focus might be. It has become a method of encouraging someone to take good care of him- or herself. Likewise, “mindful eating” encourages us to gain awareness of our eating experiences.

The term “mindfulness” was defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (1). Kabat-Zinn was the original developer and leader of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He wrote the book *Full Catastrophe Living* in 1990 to offer guidance on living mindfully based on his experiences with this program since 1979 (1).

The practice of mindfulness has helped thousands of people to live more intentionally and develop the skills necessary to manage chronic pain, disease, depression, sleeping problems, and anxiety. It also has become the focus of an approach

to eating that fulfills the criteria necessary in changing one’s overall approach to eating. It has been recognized for quite some time that, without behavior change, a diet is useless. Although we pay significant attention to studying diets to determine which is the most effective, we still come up with the same answer: they are all effective in the short term, and none is effective in the long term.

Mindful eating (i.e., paying attention to our food, on purpose, moment by moment, without judgment) is an approach to food that focuses on individuals’ sensual awareness of the food and their experience of the food. It has little to do with calories, carbohydrates, fat, or protein. The purpose of mindful eating is not to lose weight, although it is highly likely that those who adopt this style of eating will lose weight. The intention is to help individuals savor the moment and the food and encourage their full presence for the eating experience.

Diets tend to focus on rules of eating (e.g., what to eat, how much to eat, and what not to eat), with the intended measurement of specific outcomes. These outcomes are most likely weight loss or, in the case of diabetes, improved blood glucose values and

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ultimately improved A1C. All diets have the potential of success or failure based on weight outcomes. People may know their outcomes are going to depend on their consumption and expenditure of calories and understand that this has to do with their behavior, but it is rare for individuals to sustain behavior change without seeing results on their outcomes. Their behavior change will be subject to daily stress and outside pressures and therefore difficult to sustain.

Mindfulness is a process-oriented, rather than an outcome-driven, behavior. It is based on an individual's experience of the moment. The individual focuses on appreciating the experience of food and is not concerned with restricting intake. The person eating chooses what and how much to consume. It is not coincidental that, within a mindful approach, the person's choices often are to eat less, savor eating more, and select foods consistent with desirable health benefits.

Many people who practice mindfulness meditation, and an increasing number of health professionals, are coming to believe that mindful eating can make a difference in helping individuals with diabetes change their eating behaviors. Mindfulness is rapidly becoming a recommended way of retraining eating behaviors for those who attend diabetes education programs. Although I practice mindfulness meditation and am a believer in the benefits of mindful eating, it is important to note the results of a study published in 2015. Olson and Emery (2) reviewed 19 studies that used a mindful approach to diet. Although they found significant weight loss in 13 of the 19 studies, the researchers were unable to document a relationship between mindful eating and the weight losses incurred. They recommended further research to study the specific relationship between the behavior of mindful eating and resultant weight loss. This suggests that mindful eating is highly likely to be associated with weight

loss, but future studies will be necessary to examine the exact correlation.

As mentioned earlier, diets for weight loss are usually successful in the short term, but many tend to fail over time. What determines success and failure with such diets? A common thread for those who are successful is the ability to pay attention to the diet and stick with the plan, whatever that plan might be. It might seem obvious, but this is the difference between "mindless" eating and conscious eating. Our suggestions have always been to pay attention to what you are eating, such as "Don't watch TV while you eat," "Serve the correct portions," "Chew 32 times before swallowing," and "Sit down while you eat." These recommendations have always been about paying attention, just as one would through mindful eating. The difference with mindful eating is that it is not about rules or guidelines; instead, it is about individual experience. No one has the same experience with the same food every time. The idea is for people to have their own experiences and to be in the present while having them.

### Practicing Mindful Eating

One of the most powerful meditation experiences I ever had was eating a raisin under the guidance of Kabat-Zinn (1). Here is the raisin-eating experience as I recall it. I invite you to do this while you read or to read about it first and then have your own experience without the distraction of reading. Try this regardless of whether you like raisins.

1. Get a raisin and set it down in front of you. STOP; do not throw a handful of raisins into your mouth. (OK, so there is a rule, but there is a good reason, which you will understand soon.)
2. Imagine you have just been dropped off on this planet, and you know nothing about where you are. You have never experienced anything from Earth. With no experience, there are no judgments, fears, or expectations.

It is all new to you. Take a few deep breaths and relax.

3. Look at the raisin and pick it up.
4. Feel its weight.
5. Examine its surface—the various ridges, shiny parts, dull parts; really look for the first time at this strange object.
6. Smell this object and notice how you react.
7. Roll the raisin between your fingers and listen to hear what sound it makes. Notice its stickiness.
8. Notice what you are feeling about this object.
9. Place the raisin between your lips and just hold it there for a few moments. What do you notice happens inside you?
10. Let it roll back into your mouth, but do not chew yet, just roll it around. Is there a taste? Do you salivate? What do you want to do?
11. OK, bite down, just once. What do you notice?
12. Slowly begin to chew, noticing what each bite brings.
13. Chew the raisin until it is completely liquefied before you swallow.
14. After swallowing, close your eyes for a few moments to notice the consequence of what you just experienced.

The raisin experience is a wonderful example of what mindful eating can be, with its intention to focus on various aspects of the moment-by-moment experience. The focus on the sensual experiences of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste brings about the full awareness of the food in the moment. This process does not tell you what you should experience; it only suggests that you notice your own experience. The exercise exemplifies mindfulness meditation by incorporating many of the attitudes that are practiced in each meditation.

Following are attitudes associated with mindful eating and living mindfully (1):

- **Nonjudging.** The first thing you encounter with this experience is your judgments about raisins. Do you like them or not? We have all had experience with raisins, and therefore we have judgments. To start the process of eating by setting aside our experience of the food is our first challenge. Awareness of our judgments is one critical element of mindfulness.
- **Patience.** It is obvious that one must be patient to eat mindfully. It takes time to be aware moment by moment. Rather than the usual method of eating raisins, which is to throw a handful of raisins in your mouth, chew a few times, and swallow, you are slowing your process dramatically for the full experience, letting the experience unfold rather than racing through it.
- **Beginner's mind.** Approaching your experiences just as a baby does (taking one taste, having one look, feeling an object, smelling it, and listening to it) allows you to experience them anew and to be open to whatever they mean in the here and now.
- **Trust.** With full awareness of our own experience and acceptance of it as true for us, we develop more self-trust. This is our experience; we do not have to have the same experience as anyone else. By noticing and appreciating what we feel and our responses to different foods, we become more accepting of ourselves and therefore more trusting.
- **Nonstriving.** This is clearly in contrast to “diet minded,” which is all about striving for weight loss. Because no specific outcomes are being measured, you as an eater are allowed to be in the moment and to fully appreciate the experience. No effort is required to make something happen; whatever happens for the individual is what happens. There is no expectation of a particular outcome.
- **Acceptance.** Developing a willingness to notice what happens and accept it is at the core of the mindfulness process. This might mean accepting positive things like the amazing taste of just one raisin or accepting more challenging experiences such as our own judgments about our distaste for raisins as we place one between our lips. It is acceptance of whatever comes up in the moment—the difference between full presence and distraction. It is what it is.
- **Letting go.** Mindful eating involves letting go of past expectations such as letting go of resentment we harbor about being made to eat raisins as a child when we really wanted a piece of chocolate. Letting go of whatever we have become attached to allows us new experiences in the here and now without judgment based on past experiences.

These attitudes are interconnected and similar in ways that allow them to work well together. They are important in the practice of mindfulness and are essentially the foundation of mindful eating.

The other primary aspects of developing mindfulness are having a commitment to regular practice and intentionality. Regular practice of mindfulness involves having a planned and consistent mindful activity as part of your regular routine. Examples include:

- Daily mindfulness meditation, a form of sitting meditation using moment-to-moment awareness
- Yoga
- Mindful walking daily
- Mindful eating several times a week
- Body scan meditation—tuning into bodily sensations while in a meditative state
- Noticing your breathing at times during the day to develop awareness of self in your normal routine

Using any of these practices can help to develop a mindful approach to living by bringing full attention to each moment, without judgment, while maintaining a feeling of calm.

Intentionality is the mindset with which one begins this practice. In other words, what do you value? What is the purpose of your practice? How will full awareness of the moment serve you and your life? If weight loss will assist you in living more fully, that is fine; just do not get so preoccupied with that goal that you lose sight of your intention to be more present and involved in your life.

Eating mindfully is about bringing full awareness to each plate or bite of food. It begins with the first thought about food and lasts until the final bite is swallowed and the consequence of the episode is experienced. Some of the following suggestions will be useful in teaching methods to eat mindfully:

- Before reaching for something automatically, stop and take a moment to notice what you are feeling and what you might want to fill you up. Are you stressed, bored, angry, or sad? Are you lonely? Or, are you actually physically hungry? Be mindful of your reactivity and make a choice instead.
- If your desire is not about hunger, do something else more appropriate for the desire.
- Eat intentionally and only eat. Put away other distractions and pay attention to your food.
- In addition to how you experience a food, consider what it took to bring this food to you. Who was involved in the growing process and production? Consider the sun and soil it took to grow the ingredients and ask yourself where in the world it came from. Appreciate all of what it took to bring it to your plate.
- Savor each bite the way you did the raisin in the earlier exercise.

- After each bite, check in with your body to see how you are feeling. Have you had enough? Do you need more? Is it time to stop? Then move on to whatever you have chosen.

Eating mindfully is a practice that requires a commitment to behavior change similar to that needed for any diet or eating plan; at a diet's core is the need to pay attention. It is important to restate that the main benefit of mindful eating is not weight loss. However, it is highly likely that people who adopt mindful eating as a regular practice will lose excess weight and keep it off.

Mindful eating supports practitioners' sense of who they are by assuring them that they are OK in

a nonjudgmental and self-accepting way. It encourages them to appreciate food rather than restricting it and starving, by having a beginner's mind and patiently appreciating each moment with full awareness. It encourages them to trust in their own decisions rather than being restricted by rules about what and when to eat. Mindfulness encourages practitioners to live fully in each moment and appreciate their life as it is.

**Duality of Interest**

No potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article were reported.

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**Suggested Readings**

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