
Mindful Eating: Get Out of Autopilot

By Michelle May, M.D.

Have you ever finished a candy bar and wished you had just one more bite? Are you surprised when your hand hits the bottom of the popcorn bucket at the movies? Do you ever feel completely stuffed and miserable after you eat?

These are all symptoms of unconscious or mindless eating.

Many people eat while they watch TV, drive, work—even while talking on the telephone. And many people eat too fast, so busy filling the next forkful that they don't notice the bite in their mouth. Since your brain can only really focus on one thing at a time, you'll miss the subtle signs of fullness so you won't stop until you feel uncomfortable or until you run out of food. Most importantly, you won't enjoy your food as much so you have to eat more to feel satisfied.



Eating Mindfully

Eating is a natural, healthy, and pleasurable activity for satisfying hunger. Choosing to eat “mindfully,” in other words, giving food and eating your full attention, will allow you to have optimal satisfaction and enjoyment without eating to excess.

Mindful eating makes it possible to notice the subtle difference between contentment and fullness. Mindful eating also enables you to feel more satisfied with smaller quantities of food. Learning to savor your food simply makes eating more pleasurable.

Practice the following strategies to help you identify your body's signals and truly enjoy your food.

Start by recognizing whether you're hungry before you begin eating. If you aren't hungry, you won't be as interested so it will be harder to stay focused. Besides, if a craving doesn't come from hunger, eating will never satisfy it.

Don't wait until you're famished. One of the keys to conscious eating is to keep your body adequately fed to avoid becoming *overly* hungry which increases the likelihood that you'll slip into mindless overeating.

Next, decide how full you want to be when you're finished eating. When you eat with the intention of feeling *better* when you're done eating, you're less likely to keep eating until the food is gone.

Choose food that will satisfy both your body and your mind. Our society is so obsessed with eating right that we sometimes eat things we don't even like. Enjoying food without guilt contributes to satisfaction.

Set the table in a pleasant manner. Creating a pleasant ambience adds to the enjoyment of eating and to your level of satisfaction. Besides, you deserve it.

Eat without distractions. If you eat while you're distracted by watching television, driving, or talking on the telephone, you can't give food or your body's signals your full attention. As a result, you may feel stuffed but unsatisfied.

Eat when you're sitting down. Choose one or two areas at home and at work to eat. Avoid eating while standing over the sink, peering into the refrigerator or sitting in bed.

Take a few breaths and center yourself before you begin eating. This will help you slow down to give eating your full attention.

Express gratitude. Appreciate the occasion, the company, or simply the fact that you have

food and that you're giving yourself the opportunity to sit down and enjoy a meal.

Appreciate the aroma and the appearance of your food. Notice the colors, textures, and smells of the food.

Decide which food looks the most appetizing and start eating that food first. If you save the best until last, you may want to eat it even if you are full.

Savor the aromas and tastes of your food as you eat it. Put your fork down between bites and be conscious of all the different sensations you are experiencing.

If you're not enjoying what you chose, choose something else. Eating food you don't like will leave you feeling dissatisfied.

Pause in the middle of eating. Check-in then estimate how much more food it will take to fill you to comfortable satiety.

Push your plate forward or get up from the table as soon as you feel satisfied. The desire to keep eating will pass quickly. Keep in mind that you'll eat again when you're hungry.

Notice how you feel when you're finished. If you overate, don't punish yourself. Instead, be aware of the physical and/or emotional discomfort that often accompanies being overly full and create a plan to decrease the likelihood that you'll overeat next time.

Once you've experienced the pleasure of eating mindfully, you may be inspired to be mindful during other activities too. Living “in the moment” will increase your enjoyment and effectiveness in everything you do!

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