



Mindful Eating: *Food for Thought*

A National Business Group on Health publication



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Mindfulness is the practice of being fully present in each moment—having awareness of body, feelings, mind and all that is around us. Mindfulness can be incorporated into our day in eating, in moving and in breathing.

Mindful eating is a practice that involves bringing one's full attention to all the tastes, smells, hunger, fullness, thoughts and feelings that arise around eating and food. Meditate with food. Expand consciousness by paying close attention to the sensation and purpose of each bite. Mindful eating is about experiencing food more intensely—especially the pleasure of it. When we learn to be present and aware, it can help us rediscover the natural joy of eating and help us develop a more compassionate attitude toward our mind and our body.

Mindful eating studies show:

- Effectiveness in preventing weight gain and reducing daily caloric and fat intake¹
- Increases in physical activity and reductions in BMI²
- Decreases in binge eating and its related symptoms³

¹ Timmerman, GM, Brown A. The Effect of a Mindful Restaurant Eating Intervention on Weight Management in Women. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2012.

² Tapper, K, et al. Exploratory randomized controlled trial of a mindfulness-based weight loss intervention for women. *Appetite.* 2009.

³ Kristeller J, Sheets V. Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) for binge eating: a randomized clinical trial. *Mindfulness.* 2013.

Early scientific studies on mindfulness focused on stress management showed that mindfulness practice can help people alleviate and manage their stress. Recent studies demonstrated mindful eating to be a promising approach in establishing a healthy relationship with food and eating—forming a conscious awareness of body, mind, emotions and behavior. These studies also indicated that mindful eating may reduce food cravings in overweight and obese adult populations.

Seven Practices of Mindful Eating

1 Honor The Food

We take food for granted in a land of abundance. We seldom think about where our food is coming from. As you eat, contemplate the origin of the food you're enjoying, as well as who and what brought it to you: the sun, the rain, farmers, drivers, grocery store clerks. You may begin to feel deep gratitude.

2 Engage All Your Senses

Sight, Taste, Aroma, Sound, and Texture

Notice the beauty of your food. Breathe in its aroma. Explore with touch and texture. Notice the sounds your food makes when you're preparing it... when you're eating it... Consider what's in your mind when you look at your food.

3 Be Mindful of Portion Sizes

Do not take too much. Start with a modest amount, choosing a dinner plate that's no larger than 9 inches. Research shows that larger plates cause us to eat more.

4 Chew Your Food

Chewing helps us to digest our food. The physical process and the enzymes in our saliva break it down into digestible pieces. Taste comes from having our food in the mouth cavity—the space that surrounds our tongue. Once we swallow it, we no longer taste it. So, chew thoroughly to enjoy.

5 Eat Slowly

This allows us to enjoy the food and taste it better, and we eat less as a result—as [research shows](#).

6 Don't Skip Meals

Skipping meals can backfire. If you skip lunch, for example, by the time you come home from work and start dinner, you're most likely very hungry and tired. You would eat much more in one sitting than you would have in multiple meals, spread throughout the day. Make sure to have an energy-sustaining breakfast by choosing whole grains and healthy proteins such as yogurt, nuts and beans, or an egg and whole fruits.

7 Eat A Plant-Based Diet

Research shows that eating red meat increases our risk of heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer. A recent study by Harvard School of Public Health also found that red and processed meats may contribute to weight gain.

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Getting Started with Mindful Eating

Experts suggest starting gradually with mindful eating by eating one meal each day or week in a slow and attentive manner. Here are some tips (and tricks) that may help you get started:

- Set your kitchen timer to 20 minutes, and take that time to eat a normal-sized meal.
- Decorate your table. Use flowers and candles. Rituals that create a serene environment help foster moments of gratitude and pleasure.
- Eat with minimal distraction. Put away/turn off all electronics (cellphones, tablets, television).
- Try eating with your non-dominant hand; if you are right-handed hold your fork in your left hand when lifting food to your mouth to help slow down eating.
- Another way to slow down is to try chopsticks if you don't normally use them.
- Eat silently for the first few minutes of the meal without conversations, as often as you can. Think about what it took to produce that meal, from the sun's rays to the farmer to the grocer to the cook.
- Take small bites and chew well.
- Before opening the fridge or cabinet, take a breath and ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" If the answer is no, do something else, like reading or taking a short walk.



Mindful Eating for Families

Some tips to start practicing mindful eating together as a family:

- 1 Set a time for dinner as a family.
- 2 Involve the entire family in setting the table and preparing the meal.
- 3 Serve [food and drinks](#) that are good for your health and good for the planet. (In general, a plant-based diet is better for your health and the planet.)
- 4 Clear the table for the meal by removing homework, mail, etc. Turn off all electronics (cellphones, tablets, television).
- 5 When you sit down to eat, practice conscious breathing a few times to bring your bodies and minds together.
- 6 Do not argue at the table. Let your meals be times of enjoyment and nourishment for the mind, body and soul.
- 7 When serving and eating your meal, pay attention to the sounds, colors, smells, and textures and your reaction to them.
- 8 Use a small dinner plate (no more than 9 inches) and fill it only once. Chew thoroughly and eat slowly by putting down your utensils between bites.
- 9 Don't skip meals because that makes it harder to make mindful choices. When hunger consumes us, the strong forces of "habit energy" may lead us to grab whatever foods are close at hand and those foods may hinder our healthy-eating or weight-loss goals.
- 10 It is also important to create an environment that supports healthy eating and active living: Don't stock sugary drinks at home, remove the television from your children's bedrooms, limit children's recreational screen time to no more than two hours a day, and encourage your children to be active for an hour each day.



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Practicing Mindful Eating in the Corporate Setting

Enabling mindful eating at work supports employees who want to explore the practice and reinforces a culture of health. Although based on limited corporate experience to date, mindful lunch participants state they are more present and aware, satisfied, more relaxed, grateful and happy. Mindful eating works best when a variety of healthful plant-based options are available to employees, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and foods with healthy fats, like olive and canola oil, nuts and fatty fish.

To initiate a mindful lunch at the work site, a team of two to three individuals is recommended to organize, plan and lead the program. This would ideally include someone involved in the food preparation (chef), a wellness leader or employee champion to organize and promote the program, and an experienced practitioner to guide and explain. Use the following steps to get started:

- 1 Reserve a separate room, not the main cafeteria.
- 2 Communicate with the chef to set the menu (for example: a vegan, buffet style lunch for 30 people).
- 3 Invite employees to lunch (include information on mindfulness meditation as well as the date, time and menu for the event).
- 4 Develop a mindful lunch ritual (see text box).



On the day of the lunch:

- 1 Introduction (5 min.) - Greet attendees, introduce the concept of mindfulness (encourage them to put their forks down between bites, chew slowly, etc.), and proper breathing.
- 2 Chef talk - Introduce the theme for the lunch (Mediterranean, etc.), ingredients, where the food came from (farm-to-table or anything that tells employees about the source of the food).
- 3 Bell ringing - This is the silent part of the lunch. The silence allows employees to focus on the food and not on the conversation.
- 4 Gather the food (5 min.) - Have employees go through the buffet line and sit to enjoy the meal.
- 5 Eating (25-30 min.) - Pass one specific dish that is not part of the buffet.
- 6 Have the mindful lunch leader read an inspirational poem (<1 min.) - Allow employees to connect to nature.
- 7 Ring the bell again. This ends the silent period.
- 8 End the lunch.
- 9 The last part involves the social part of the lunch (10 min.) - Talk about the experience. Ask employees what they learned from the experience.
- 10 Have employees introduce themselves to their neighbor (5 min.).

Content provided by Olivia Wu, Food Community Manager, Google Inc.

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Additional Resources on Mindfulness:

- [Savor the Book](#)
- [Mindful Eating, Harvard School of Public Health video](#)
- [Mindfulness at Google video](#)
- [Mindful Eating as Food for Thought- New York Times article](#)

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