

Mindful Eating: A Practical Approach to Optimal Eating and Health



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Eating is a natural, healthy, and pleasurable activity for satisfying hunger and fueling the body. However, in our food-abundant, diet-obsessed culture, eating is too often mindless, consuming, and guilt-inducing instead. Mindful eating is a mindfulness-based practice with profound implications and applications for resolving problematic eating behaviors and developing self-care practices that support optimal health.





An Introduction to Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an ancient practice that has become increasingly popular over the last three decades. A simple definition of mindfulness is nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment.¹ Mindfulness may be cultivated through purposeful increased attention, awareness, and non-judgment in daily life.² More structured methods of developing mindfulness include certain forms of meditation, yoga, and psychotherapy.

A rapidly growing body of evidence indicates that the practice of mindfulness may improve many aspects of physical and psychological well-being, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, chronic pain, immune function, blood pressure, cortisol levels, and cognitive functioning.¹ Recent research using neuroimaging has demonstrated that consistent mindfulness practice changes the structure of the brain and positively affects self-regulation, decision-making, emotional resilience, and other attributes that support optimal well-being.³ Mindfulness training is considered a viable intervention for the workplace⁴ and many employers now offer mindfulness-based programs to their employees.⁵

What is Mindful Eating?

Mindful eating is the application of mindfulness to eating behaviors and one's relationship with food. Simply stated, mindful eating is eating with intention and attention: eating with the intention of caring for one's self and eating with the attention necessary for noticing food and its effects on the body and mind.⁶

Often understood narrowly as “eating slowly” or “eating without distraction,” mindful eating may also encompass the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors throughout the entire process of eating. The goals of mindful eating can be summarized as follows.

Simply stated, mindful eating is eating with intention and attention.

- Cultivating awareness of physical and emotional cues
- Recognizing non-hunger triggers for eating
- Learning to meet non-hunger needs in more effective ways than eating
- Choosing food for both enjoyment and nourishment
- Eating for optimal satisfaction and satiety
- Utilizing the energy consumed to live healthfully and vibrantly

Empirical Support for Mindful Eating

Research on mindful eating and mindfulness as it relates to eating behaviors is accumulating quickly. A greater degree of mindfulness in everyday life is associated with increased physical activity, increased fruit and vegetable intake, improved self-efficacy,⁷ less impulsive eating, reduced calorie consumption, and healthier snack choices.⁸ A variety of studies have shown that mindfulness training results in improved nutrient intake,⁹ decreased food cravings,^{10,11} and less emotional eating.^{10,12,13,14} Studies on mindfulness training in diabetes treatment show improved dietary intake, modest weight loss, and improved glycemic control.^{15,16} Mindfulness has also been proven to effectively reduce eating disorder symptomology,^{17,18} particularly binge eating.^{12,18,19,20,21,22} While full-syndrome eating disorders are relatively uncommon in the adult population, problematic eating behaviors such as fasting, overeating, and loss of control over food are quite prevalent.²³ The positive impact of mindfulness on these widespread behaviors is promising, as they often go unaddressed despite the fact that they contribute to significant emotional distress and increased medical costs.



How Does Mindful Eating Help?

Many people who struggle with food react mindlessly to their unrecognized or unexamined triggers, thoughts, and feelings. In other words, they *re*-act, repeating past actions again and again, feeling powerless to change. Mindfulness increases awareness of these patterns and creates space between triggers and actions to choose the optimal response. In this way, mindful eating empowers individuals to break old automatic or habitual chain reactions and discover options that work better.



Further, problematic eating behaviors may be a symptom of unmet needs in other areas of one's life. Mindful eating increases nonjudgmental awareness of these patterns. This creates space between the triggers and the responses, allowing for more intentional choices and greater likelihood of meeting one's true needs.

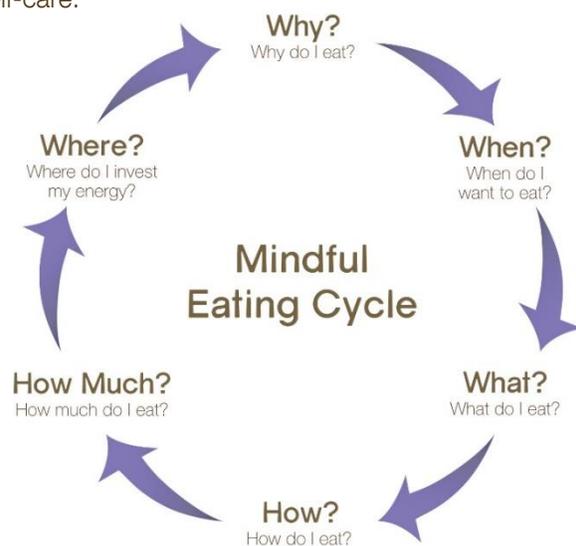
Perhaps the most effective way to understand how mindful eating helps is to become familiar with the Mindful Eating Cycle, a powerful decision-making model developed by the founder of Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Programs and Training, Michelle May, M.D.

The Mindful Eating Cycle

The Mindful Eating Cycle is used in all of the Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Programs to help participants become aware and take charge of the hundreds of decisions²⁴ they make about eating every day. It provides the necessary structure for learning mindful eating concepts that might otherwise feel vague or abstract and applying them to all aspects of eating, and eventually, self-care.

The six decision points in the Mindful Eating Cycle are:

- Why? Why do I eat?
- When? When do I want to eat?
- What? What do I eat?
- How? How do I eat?
- How much? How much do I eat?
- Where? Where do I invest my energy?



Why Do I Eat?

The underlying reasons a person is eating will drive every decision that follows. However, many people lack awareness and understanding about why they eat the way they do. For example, if a person is eating primarily for fuel and nourishment, they may be interested in energy balance and nutrition. If they're eating in response to environmental or emotional cues such as stress, boredom, or a need for reward, they're more likely to choose foods that are convenient, energy dense, and highly palatable.²⁵ When eating doesn't adequately address the underlying need, they may eat food to excess, yet still feel unsatisfied.

Conventional approaches to health teach *what* and *how much* people "should" eat without addressing *why* they are eating in the first place. As a result, they don't learn to recognize and effectively cope with their triggers or meet their true bio-psycho-social needs.^{26,27,28} Through exploration of this first decision point in the Mindful Eating Cycle, Am I Hungry? program participants learn to recognize the triggers that drive them to eat when they aren't hungry and continue to eat past the point of satiety.

When Do I Eat?

Many traditional approaches to eating give people rules to follow about when to eat, such as eating on a predetermined schedule. These rules disconnect them from their natural fuel needs and encourage them to ignore or distrust their internal signals of hunger and satiety.

Physiological hunger is a reliable method of regulating dietary intake.^{29,30} Pausing to ask the question, "Am I hungry?" whenever they feel like eating helps participants re-establish their fuel needs as the primary cue for eating. This simple but powerful question and the process of discovery that follows, helps them differentiate hunger from environmental and emotional triggers. Once they are able to accurately identify hunger, participants fine tune their awareness and gauge how hungry they are. Through observation and experience they discover that waiting to eat until they're sufficiently hungry increases satisfaction, while waiting too long can lead to overeating. When they recognize that the desire to eat is not due to hunger, participants identify opportunities for meeting their needs in more effective ways than eating.



What Do I Eat?

The traditional approach to food selection is frequently restrictive in nature, requiring individuals to maintain willpower indefinitely in order to comply with the rules. Research has shown that dieters exhibit increased preoccupation with food, feelings of deprivation and guilt, and resignation when they “break the rules.” These feelings of failure, lowered self-esteem, and decreased self-efficacy typically lead to more overeating. May calls this pattern “the eat-repent-repeat cycle.”⁶ This often leads to weight-cycling and disordered eating, both of which have negative physical and psychological consequences.³¹

Mindful eating recognizes that “normal” eating includes consumption of a variety of foods, including those eaten for pleasure. The “all foods can fit” approach empowers individuals to make choices about what they will eat based on the principles of balance, variety, and moderation rather than strict external rules that are unlikely to be sustained. When deprivation is no longer a factor, there is less drive to overeat even favorite foods. Participants naturally gravitate toward balanced eating when supported by education and personal experience regarding the effects that different foods have on their body, mood, and energy level.



How do I eat?

Many people eat quickly and while distracted by other activities such as watching television, driving, or working. This sets the stage for overeating because feelings of satiety and satisfaction are missed when one eats too fast or doesn't pay attention to the food or their body. Participants in Am I Hungry? programs learn to devote purposeful attention to the activity of eating, usually practiced during the program with an experiential mindful eating activity.

By exploring the relationship between the many decisions that are made about eating, participants learn strategies for becoming more mindful before and after eating as well. As they experience the benefits of eating mindfully, they often transfer these concepts to other areas of their lives including their work, relationships, and self-care.

How much do I eat?

Most traditional interventions focus heavily on how much participants are “allowed” to eat using external, control-based methods for determining quantity such as counting calories or points or measuring food in advance. These behaviors consume an unsustainable amount of time, energy, and willpower. They transform eating into a mechanical experience that feels disconnected from one’s internal signals and may foster problematic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors rather than reducing them.

Through mindfulness training, Am I Hungry? program participants learn to determine the appropriate amount to eat by paying attention to cues of satiety and clarifying situational goals. They set an intention to feel better after eating than they did before they started. They implement a variety of techniques to optimize their ability to eat an amount that is “just right” based on their body’s wisdom. They learn that when the amount of food they eat aligns with the amount of fuel their body needs, they feel better, more satisfied, and able to more effectively meet their long term health and quality of life goals.

Where do I invest my energy?

A mindful relationship with food is reinforced by investing the energy that food provides in self-care that meets one’s physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and other needs. Am I Hungry? program participants explore this connection between mindful living and optimal health, identify areas of self-care that need attention, and develop personalized strategies for meeting their needs. As they focus on these other aspects of optimal health, triggers for overeating decrease and well-being improves.

A mindful relationship with food is reinforced by investing energy in self-care that meets one’s physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual needs, leading to optimal health.

As part of their self-care strategy, many participants recognize the desire to incorporate regular physical activity into their lives. Chronic dieting and widespread messages about “calories in, calories out” have led many people to equate exercise with punishment for eating or for earning the right to eat. In addition, many other factors such as lack of time, low energy, or physical discomfort contribute to negative associations and avoidance of physical activity. Mindfulness helps shift participants’ perspectives about exercise from “have to” to “get to” as they become aware that activity makes them feel better. It also creates the opportunity for appreciation of mindful movement⁶ that brings intrinsic satisfaction to activity rather than guilt or pressure to follow regimens that don’t align with their preferences or lifestyle. This process incorporates a personalized, small steps approach with the goal of rediscovering joy and vitality in movement.

Myth vs. Fact: Clearing the Confusion

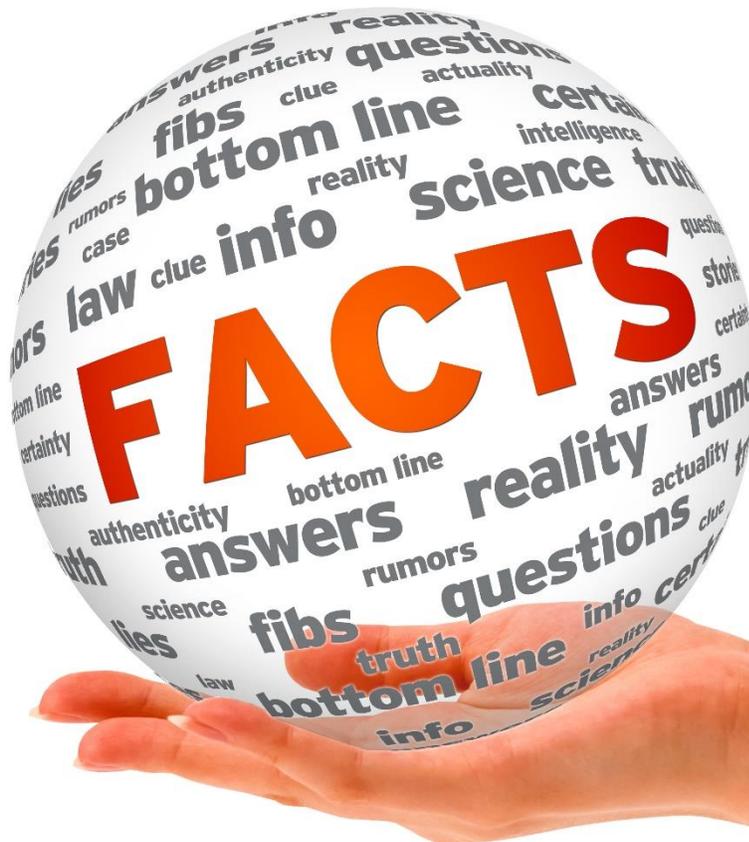
The concept of mindful eating is growing rapidly in awareness and popularity. At the same time, there are many myths and misunderstandings about mindful eating that are important to clear up.

Myth: Mindful eating is just a fad.

Fact: Mindfulness is a practice that has existed for over 2,000 years. By simply watching a toddler eat, it is clear that mindful eating is human nature. Young children eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. They touch, taste, and explore their food while experimenting with the act of eating. Practicing mindful eating as an adult involves re-learning these innate behaviors that have been lost along the way.

Myth: Mindful eating can be used to follow a diet.

Fact: Unfortunately, the phrase “mindful eating” is misused by some as a way to talk about restricting food intake or following rigid rules such as chewing food a certain number of times before swallowing. That is the opposite of mindful eating! Through the practice of mindful eating, individuals are freed from restriction and its troubling consequences. They develop the ability to respond to their body’s wisdom and instinctively eat to balance enjoyment and nourishment.



Myth: Mindful eating is “woo-woo.”

Fact: In contrast to multi-tasking or mindlessly going through the motions of eating, it can feel somewhat spiritual to focus on just one thing at a time. While mindfulness has ancient roots, it is imminently practical in our modern, overwhelming, hurried environment. Unlike the rare acts of meditating, visiting a place or worship, or reading spiritual works, everyone eats. Bringing mindfulness to the table is a useful way to tap into the calming effects of the present moment multiple times each day.

Myth: Mindful eating is too hard.

Fact: Mindfulness is simply placing your full focus on the present moment, and that can be challenging in the early stages of learning mindful eating. Although it may feel easier to eat mindlessly at first, the effects of mindless and emotional eating create more difficulties in the long run. Every bite is an opportunity to practice.

Myth: Mindful eating is mechanical.

Fact: As with the adoption of any new skill, it’s helpful to break the process into distinct steps when learning to eat mindfully. With practice, mindful eating becomes natural, requiring little effort or energy. In fact, mindful eating actually frees individuals from restrictive practices such as counting, measuring, and weighing that can turn eating into a mechanical experience disconnected from one’s internal signals.

Myth: Mindful eating is “just” eating with awareness.

Fact: Many people teach mindful eating as simply “eating slowly, without distraction.” That’s certainly an important part of it, but Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Programs encompass the entire process of eating: awareness of body cues; recognition of non-hunger triggers for eating; selection of food for both nourishment and enjoyment; eating for optimal satisfaction and satiety; and using the fuel you’ve consumed to live vibrantly. This broad application makes mindful eating a powerful tool for developing a healthier, happier relationship with food.



Who Benefits from Mindful Eating?

Mindful eating is a simple concept that can be applied in any situation—home, work, dining out, traveling, and special occasions. It is a flexible approach that doesn't depend on a limited list of foods so it works well across cultures and socioeconomic conditions. It doesn't require weighing, measuring, reference lists, logging, or other time-consuming techniques, so it fits into even the busiest lifestyle. Unlike dieting which becomes more difficult over time, mindful eating becomes easier and more natural with practice. And most important, mindfulness is self-reinforcing because it brings more pleasure to eating and other aspects of one's life. In short, anyone who eats can benefit from bringing intention and attention to their decisions.

In addition, mindful eating is an effective approach for resolving issues related to food and physical activity that diminish well-being and quality of life for people across the health spectrum. Those who are at risk for or affected by chronic conditions impacted by nutrition, such as metabolic syndrome and diabetes, benefit greatly from learning sustainable self-management skills through mindful eating. Those who have struggled with yo-yo dieting or weight cycling and have tried numerous programs (including weight loss surgery) are especially likely to benefit from this approach because it does not require restriction, deprivation, and indefinite willpower.

Mindfulness also has universal applications for people who feel overwhelmed, stressed, or simply distracted. In addition to the benefits directly associated with mindful eating, learning the process and experiencing the benefits opens the door to mindful living. Step by step, individuals claim and experience a more mindful, vibrant life!



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480-704-7811, ext. 401
 P.O. Box 93686
 Phoenix, AZ 85070-3686
[wwwAmIHungry.com](http://www.AmIHungry.com)