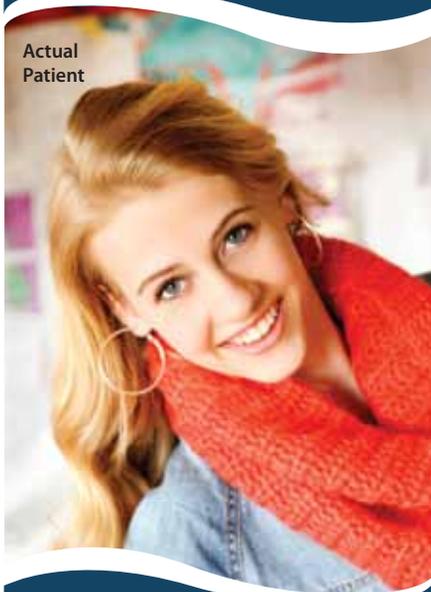


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MINDFUL EATING

by Julie Humphreys

SO HOW OFTEN DO YOU open a bag of chips or cookies, start popping a few in your mouth as you watch TV, and pretty soon most of the bag is gone? Or, do you find yourself continually reaching for the appetizers at a gathering while you talk and socialize without even thinking, and before you know it, you've eaten the equivalent of a meal? Those are examples of auto-pilot eating, the polar opposite of *mindful eating*, which if engaged can change the way you eat and view food for the rest of your life, for the better!

That's the goal of those who preach, teach and endorse this relatively new way of eating, which centers on eating with intention and attention. Sound a little new age and out there? Michelle May, M.D., founder of the *Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Workshops* says it's not; rather, she asserts, mindful eating complements traditional health models and dietetic standards. "It's an extension of cognitive behavioral therapy. (A psychotherapy treatment used to help people understand the thoughts and feelings that influence their behaviors.) Mindful eating works toward changing thoughts and behaviors about food and eating that we've held for a long, long time. In essence, being mindful helps us recognize habitual, ineffective behaviors that take us down paths we don't want to go and which lead to results that we don't like or don't want."

Local dietitian and certified wellness coach Jane Joseph is a licensed facilitator for the *Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Workshops* in Spokane. She says it's really a simple concept. "Think about what you eat, when you eat, why you eat, and ask yourself each time before you eat, *am I hungry?* It helps you look at your eating patterns, habits and triggers, and once you are aware of them then you can change them. If we aren't even aware of our eating patterns, we can't change them."

Weight loss and smaller pants sizes are not the goal of mindful eating but they can be the result. Mindful eating is not a diet. There is no calorie counting, there are no journal entries. Joseph says "It's changing the whole paradigm of eating. There are no forbidden foods, but ideally you are hungry or at least not full when you eat. The goal is to have a better relationship with food. So many people are tortured by food; it has an incredible amount of power over them. I find as people learn to have a new relationship with food and eating and become more self-aware, it's very freeing for them."

That's exactly what a 39 year old, Spokane mother of two young children discovered. Nicole says she has tried every diet out there and has dieted habitually since she was a teenager. In fact she says she didn't know how to think like a normal person when it came to food until she took the mindful eating class. Food was always an issue with her and took up a tremendous amount of her energy and time.

"It's a complete brain switch to get rid of all the dieting rules and realize you can eat anything you want." says Nicole. "Once you start asking yourself consistently on a scale of one to ten, how hungry am I and how much food (energy) do I need for what I will be doing, you don't need rules, you just need to engage your brain and make good choices that become habits." Nicole adds, "I never thought I could have moderation with food but I found I can!"

If eating anything you want and no forbidden food sounds too good to be true, consider that as you become more aware of when you are hungry and what your body really needs, you naturally desire better foods, foods that fuel and nourish your body. And because there are no foods that you can't have, food loses its hold on you. Joseph's clients often tell her they can now have chocolate in their house because it no longer taunts them. Then, she says, when we do choose to have a piece of chocolate it's important to sit down, look at your food, savor it and enjoy the experience. "In fact, with all meals and snacks, we should strive to sit down, eat with attention and without distraction so we can truly enjoy eating!"

So how do you get there? Here's an example of what Joseph teaches in her eight-week classes. She says each class builds on the previous one. Participants explore the Mindful Eating Cycle and three different eating

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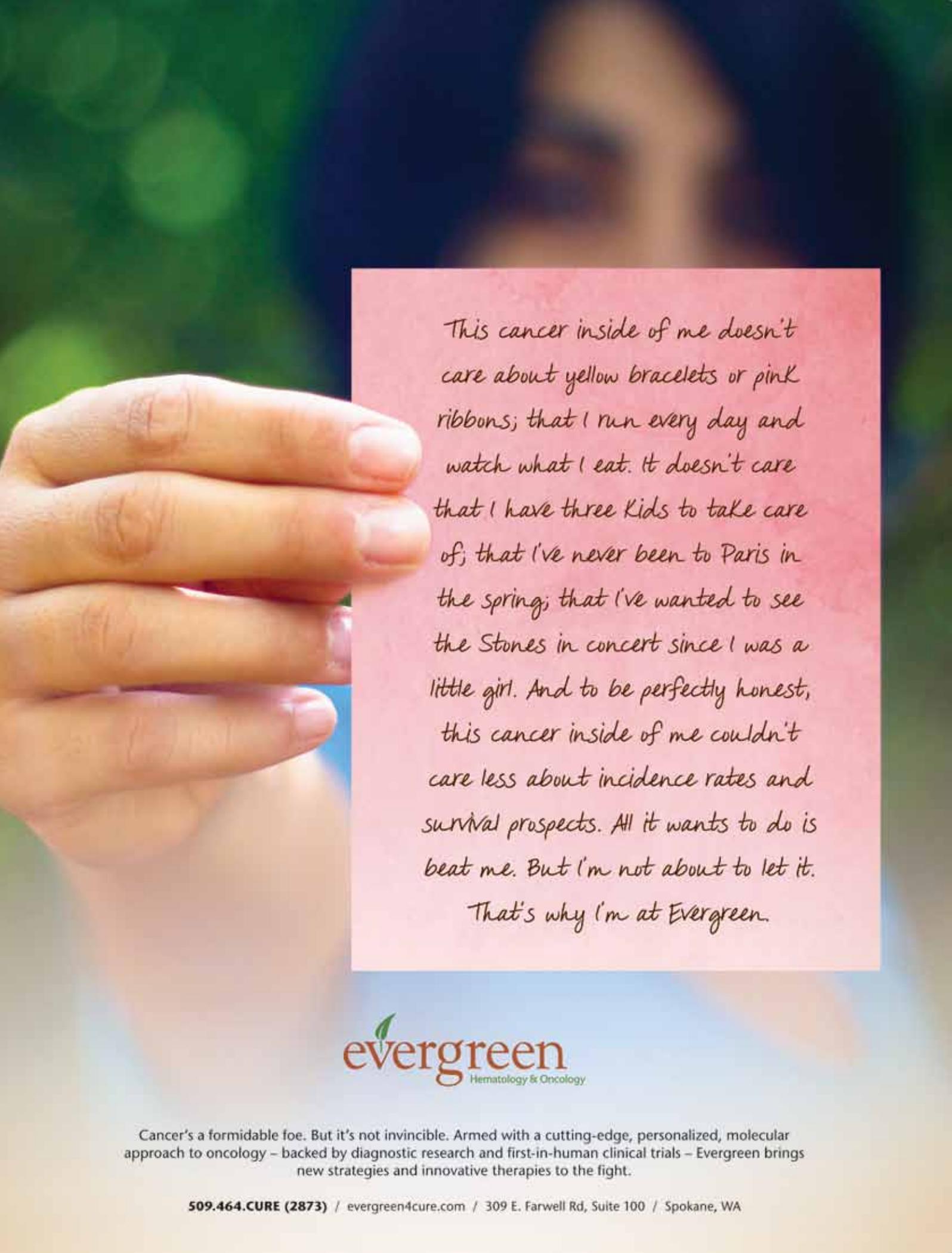
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A close-up photograph of a hand holding a pink card. The background is a soft-focus green and blue, suggesting an outdoor setting. The card contains handwritten text in a cursive script.

This cancer inside of me doesn't care about yellow bracelets or pink ribbons; that I run every day and watch what I eat. It doesn't care that I have three kids to take care of; that I've never been to Paris in the spring; that I've wanted to see the Stones in concert since I was a little girl. And to be perfectly honest, this cancer inside of me couldn't care less about incidence rates and survival prospects. All it wants to do is beat me. But I'm not about to let it. That's why I'm at Evergreen.



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cycles which are: 1) *Instinctive eating*; you are hungry so you eat until you are no longer hungry and feel better. The best example of instinctive eating is a toddler who screams when he is hungry and pushes away food when full. 2) *Overeating*; you eat because of certain triggers like stress, anger, boredom, time of day. Why you are eating has a major effect on what and how much you eat. 3) *Restrictive eating*; you eat what the diet tells you to eat but you get easily bored with the restrictions and feel deprived. Restrictive eating is all about external rules. Since most people won't follow a diet indefinitely, the goal of mindful eating is to relearn to eat instinctively...get back to the basics of what we knew before we knew any other way! Each class focuses on one decision point (why you eat, when, what, how, how much, and where do you put the energy from the food you eat) in the Mindful Eating Cycle to help you break your "eat-repent-repeat" cycle.

"It's a good amount of work" says Nicole regarding the effort to change her eating behaviors. "But it becomes less work over time whereas most diets become harder over time. Creating a new habit is like working a muscle. Once you exercise it and get it in shape, it's easier to use it. Eventually thinking about what you eat, why, and when becomes more routine. I feel like now that I've succeeded in creating new food habits so much less of my brain is used up constantly thinking about food."

The mindful eating philosophy can include meditation to help people achieve their goals.

Meditation is common in the mindfulness movement and is perhaps best exemplified by a program called Mindful Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn some 35 years ago. Today there are clinics around the world teaching the idea of being present and expanding the awareness of your surroundings and circumstances through meditation. Kabat-Zinn's work is said to be a contributing factor in the growing movement of mindfulness into mainstream institutions like medicine, health care, schools, corporations and more.

Carey Charyk, a registered nurse with a masters in psychology, has been teaching Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction class-

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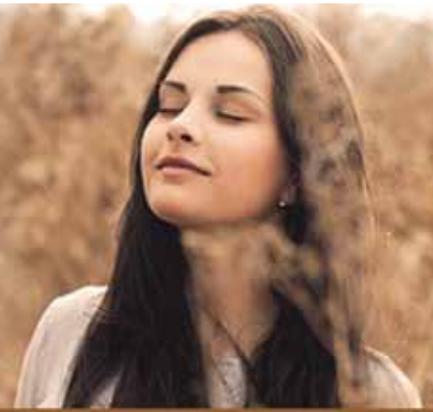
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es at the Providence Center for Faith and Healing for the past eight years. Joseph, who is a science based registered dietitian took one of Charyk's classes and credits it with moving her into the mindful eating arena. Charyk says, "We practice mindfulness meditation by being still and paying attention to emotions, sensations and our thoughts moment by moment. This awareness allows us to choose how we would like to respond versus reacting habitually on auto-pilot. It's a way to look at our interior landscape and our mental health."

Joseph took that mental health piece and applied it to eating in her classes. Meditation, she says can help people look at their eating practices and is a first step to making change. "Mindfulness Meditation is like pushing a pause button when you are faced with an automatic behavior. A pause lets us think more about our choices and make them more consciously. Joseph starts each class with a short meditation to bring participants into the present moment."

For Nicole and many others who have successfully retrained their brains on how they view and react to food, the work is not over. She says "My mindset is forever changed but I do have to continually check in on managing my stress, being present and avoiding the triggers that had me stuck in bad eating habits for most of my life; however, I know this is sustainable and I finally feel like a normal eater!" **■**

For more information on local mindful eating classes, contact Jane Joseph at (509) 953-9097 or visit www.wellcoaches.com/jane.joseph. For more on mindful stress deduction classes, contact Carey at www.awarecare.net. For a free copy of the first chapter of Michelle May's book *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat: How to Break Your Eat-Repent-Repeat Cycle* visit <http://amihungry.com/eat-what-you-love-book.shtml>

Julie Humphreys is a health reporter and board member of Step UP and Go, a community effort encouraging people to be more physically active and to eat healthy. Visit www.stepupand-go.org for free resources.

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