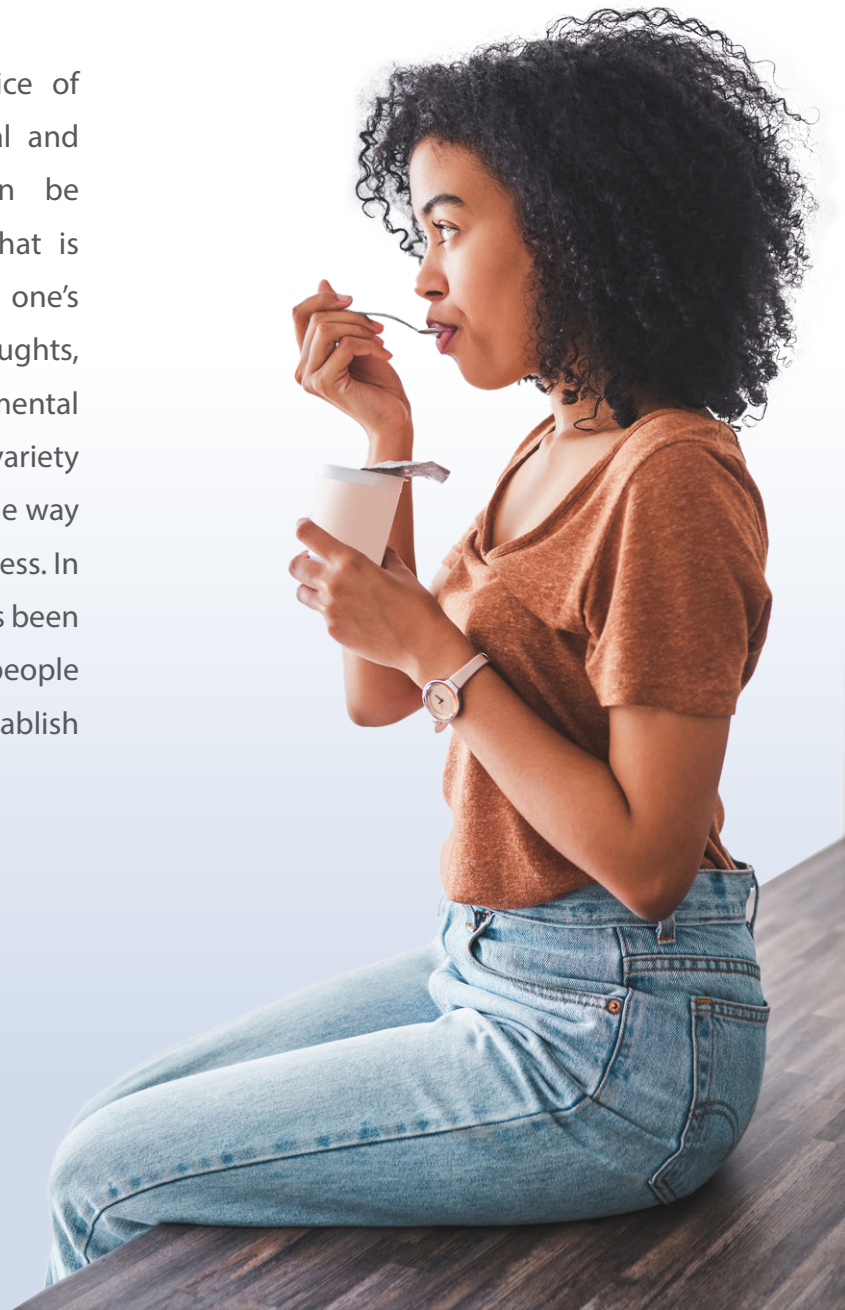


Your Guide to Mindful Eating

Mindfulness is an ancient practice of being present with our internal and external environments. It can be defined as a “quality of consciousness that is characterized by continually attending to one’s moment-to-moment experiences, thoughts, and emotions with an open, non-judgmental approach.”¹ Mindfulness has been used in a variety of therapeutic settings, as it can improve the way we process emotions and help us reduce stress. In recent years, the practice of mindfulness has been translated to the world of nutrition to help people increase awareness while eating and establish nourishing eating patterns.



WHAT IS MINDFUL EATING?

Mindful eating is about listening to our physical sensations—like hunger, fullness, and satisfaction cues—and taking time to notice our thoughts and emotions while eating so that we can have a more enjoyable and healthful eating experience.¹

Mindful eating involves:

- Noticing the smells, tastes, and textures of our food
- Reducing the speed of our eating so we can focus on our food

- Savoring our food choices without guilt
- Becoming aware of physical hunger, fullness, and satisfaction cues to decide what, when, and how much to eat

While more studies are needed, research has demonstrated that mindful eating can decrease unhealthy eating behaviors such as binge eating, emotional eating, and external eating.

RESEARCH

Binge eating

Two literature reviews on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have found that these interventions decreased the incidence of binge-eating episodes (recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food often very quickly and to the point of discomfort and feeling of a loss of control while doing so).^{2,3} These results were seen when mindfulness-based interventions specifically addressed eating behaviors and were combined with one of the following mindfulness training implementations: cognitive-behavioral therapies (which involve learning how to change unhelpful thinking patterns and/or behaviors), mindful eating programs and/or acceptance-based interventions (which encourage acceptance of thoughts/

feelings and commitment to change). It's worth noting that results did not improve when the intervention employed a general mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program without including content related to eating behaviors.



Emotional eating

In a systematic review of MBIs, the majority of studies that targeted emotional eating (the tendency to overeat in response to negative emotions) found an improvement in this eating behavior.⁴ Another review found similar results except when they contained participants who were not recruited for emotional eating concerns and/or reported low levels of emotional eating at baseline.² Generally, the MBIs were most effective when they included both a mindful eating intervention and a cognitive-behavioral or acceptance-based intervention. Those with only the MBSR did not significantly improve emotional eating outcomes.

External eating

Findings from a literature review on mindful eating, mindfulness, and intuitive eating indicate that mindfulness can help reduce external eating (eating in response to non-hunger cues) by reducing the responsiveness of individuals to external cues such as appealing food packaging or advertisements and time of day.³ This review also suggested that mindful eating techniques are most effective when paired with acceptance-based interventions.

Weight management

The available evidence on mindfulness and weight loss suggests that mindfulness training alone, without supplemental behavioral weight-management strategies or guidance, may not

produce significant or consistent weight loss.⁴ While some individuals lost weight with interventions that were primarily mindfulness-based and for which weight loss was a goal, weight loss generally was not observed with mindfulness interventions that focused on other outcomes such as binge eating or general stress management. However, because limited studies targeted weight loss as a specific goal of the intervention, additional research is needed to fully determine the impact of mindfulness on weight change, particularly in combination with weight-loss strategies.



BENEFITS OF MINDFUL EATING

Mindful eating can create a positive mindset around food.

Sometimes, our thoughts related to food may impact our well-being. For example, negative thoughts about weight gain or eating unhealthy foods can lead to fear or anxiety around food. When we eat more mindfully, we are practicing how to respond more positively to our food choices and overall eating pattern. Instead of condemning our thoughts, we practice using nonjudgmental language related to food. This nonjudgmental tone can increase our self-compassion, which can improve our psychological well-being.⁵

Mindful eating can help us have a more peaceful experience with food.

Research shows that undereating, restricting calories, and/or cutting out certain foods can cause us to overeat them later.⁶ When we eat mindfully, we are taking time to notice what kinds of foods we are eating and how much of them we need to feel full and satisfied. By frequently checking in with and

responding to hunger, we don't let ourselves get ravenously hungry. In this way, eating mindfully can help reduce overeating as we become more aware of physical hunger and satisfaction cues.²

Mindful eating can reduce mindless eating or eating food when we aren't hungry.

There are distractions all around us, and sometimes they can interfere with our eating experience. Removing distractions—or at the very least acknowledging them—can help reduce mindless eating.³ We do not need to always be hyperaware of everything we eat; but paying attention to our food environment can prevent us from eating when we aren't hungry or from eating past fullness.



HOW TO EAT MINDFULLY

Turn Off or Silence Your Devices

Taking a break from your devices can help minimize distractions. Those videos, texts, tweets, emails, and posts will still be there once you've finished. Take time to relax and enjoy your food without all the interruptions.

Take a Moment To Clear Your Head

Appreciate the food that's in front of you. It takes a lot to prepare and produce the food you're about to eat. Slow down your pace and be intentional. You may consider pausing for a moment of gratitude.

Check In With Your Hunger

Consider how long it's been since you last ate. Are you feeling hunger pangs, or a slight headache? Are there other bodily signals you might be noticing? Are you drinking enough water?

Use Your Senses

Mindful eating involves all five senses, so take note of the appearance, aromas, textures, flavors, and sounds of your food. You may notice more about the food than you ever have before!

Name the Flavors

As you eat your meal or snack, consider the five basic tastes and determine which ones you're experiencing. The five basic tastes are umami

(savory), bitter, sweet, salty, and sour. Sometimes foods contain more than one—can you tell the difference?

Notice the Texture

Is your food crunchy or creamy? Dry or moist? Paying attention to the texture of each bite you take may help make your eating experience feel more intentional. Maybe you'll discover that you prefer crunchy and dry over creamy and moist.

Set Down the Fork

In between bites, place your utensils down on your plate; or, simply place your hands down to help slow your pace. Mindful eating is an experience, not a race! This habit may help prevent overeating, too.



IN SUMMARY

Mindful eating is all about awareness while eating. Available research shows that mindful eating can help decrease behaviors such as binge eating, emotional eating and external eating, while there is limited research on how mindfulness alone impacts weight management. Overall, mindful eating can help us have a more positive experience with food.



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