

Seven Tips to Mindful Eating Practice

From Chapter 2, Well Nourished: Mindful Practices to Heal Your Relationship to Food, Heal Your Whole Self and End Overeating, July 15, 2017, Fair Winds Press

By Andrea Lieberstein, MPH, RDN © Andrea Lieberstein 2017

Many people use food to nourish themselves when what they are really hungry for is other forms of nourishment. What if we were living a life where we felt well-nourished emotionally, intellectually, physically, psychologically, spiritually, socially, and creatively? What if we were mindfully present to receive, experience, plan for, and engage in nourishing activities, moments, and practices regularly that fed us on many levels. What if we were able to maintain an inner sense of balance and nourishment even when things are not perfectly in balance, and have the tools and practices to do so rather than turn to food at those times?

Mindful eating enables us to experience greater pleasure and nourishment from our food. Through mindful awareness we become more attuned to our body's signals of pleasure, hunger, and fullness. We notice the food thoughts and beliefs that don't serve us and encourage those that do. We notice what is beneficial, nurturing these with our attention. We make choices that support our health and well-being and those of the planet. We practice kindness toward ourselves and our cravings and forgive ourselves for the difficult moments.

When we slow down, chew mindfully, and savor our food, we reduce stress, experience flavors fully, and improve digestion. When we focus on enjoying our food, worries fall away because we are no longer thinking about them. We tune in to and listen to signals from our body when we have had enough, thus helping us eat to a comfortable level rather than overeating.

Eating mindfully, with kindness, a nonjudging mind, and full awareness, can be learned and practiced daily with snacks and meals. I recommend beginning with just one snack or meal at first. Consider practicing when you are alone to make it easier to give your food your full attention, even if it's just for the first few bites. Notice when your mind has wandered and bring it back to the experience of eating as outlined in the seven tips below.

The steps to mindful eating are simple yet will take gentle and consistent practice.

With time they will become a conscious habit. You can actually come to the point where you are eating mindfully most of the time and don't have to work to remember.

But realistically no one stays present with eating all of the time. It's a practice to return to again and again, just a breath and a bite away. Ultimately, mindful eating can be practiced at different paces to be part of your life with the varied situations you will inevitably encounter. Mindful eating is flexible and can become part of your life—whether you have a busy family or live alone.

Following the seven tips will help you begin to cultivate your own mindful eating practice. Although all the tips are presented here, we'll focus on cultivating nourishment and pleasure first. In chapter 4 we'll take a deeper dive into the subtleties of hunger, fullness, and taste awareness and how they help moderate quantity.

First, the Brief Version

To begin with we always practice slowing down the process of eating. Take a few mindful breaths to become centered and present. Feast on the sight, colors, and textures of the food. Breathe in the aroma of the food. Take a moment if you'd like to feel a sense of gratitude for the food in front of you and reflect on where the food came from and what went into making that food, such as the people, the earth, the sunshine. Tune in to your hunger and fullness level before and several times during the meal to help guide you to eat the right amount for you during the meal. Savor the taste and texture as you eat and chew fully before swallowing. Stop when you are comfortably full or satisfied.

The Seven Tips

1. Take a Mindful Check-In. Before or during a snack or meal, bring your awareness to your breath, pause, and then notice any thoughts or feelings that may be present, particularly any in relation to the food you are about to eat. This may be just a brief moment or up to a couple of minutes. It is the first step to increasing awareness, releasing any potential reactivity that may be present, and raising the possibility of true nourishment.

Begin by taking a few deep, relaxing breaths. Now simply tune in to the movement of your in breath and out breath. Expand your awareness to include the whole of your body and notice without judgment what thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are present. Note how this may inform your choices about how

much, when, and what to eat, and desires or cravings for food. Practice this at least once a day to begin with. Eventually it will become a more conscious habit. The Mindful Check-In begins the mindful eating practice but will also be a foundational stand-alone practice that we will visit again throughout the chapters in various capacities.

2. Check in with your hunger and fullness level before eating. While practicing your Mindful Check-In, tune in to your level of physical hunger. We enjoy our food the most when we have some hunger or are moderately hungry. When we are too hungry we tend to eat fast and even overeat.

Ask yourself, How hungry am I? Listen to the sensations and experiences that your body is giving you. Is this physical hunger or something else? If it's not physical hunger (and you will get better at discerning this), ask yourself, What am I really hungry for?

Tune in to your level of physical fullness. Ask yourself, How full am I? Listen to the sensations and experiences that your body is giving you. If you are full, then eating right now would probably not be a very kind or nourishing choice. What kinds of choices make sense with what you became aware of? What would most honor your body?

3. Gaze at the food and take a moment to reflect upon it. How did the food get to you, what went into making it, who and what were involved (people, sun, earth, water, farmers)? Consider the quality and sources. Feel a sense of appreciation or gratitude for the food before you.

4. Enjoy your food with all your senses.

~ Feast your eyes visually on the food. Notice color, texture, shape.

~ Smell the food, breathing in the aroma, noticing the nuances with both nostrils.

~ Taste the food, first savoring without chewing it, noticing the flavor, texture, and sensations.

~ Then chew the food, staying as present as possible with each bite to fully enjoy the experience.

~ Mindfully swallow when ready.

Notice any associations that arise, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Bask in any pleasant associations or positive memories if you'd like, while still staying present with the full experience.

5. Taste mindfully. Pay attention to the taste, savoring fully, noticing when it diminishes and when enjoyment lessens. Use this awareness to help inform decisions about how much and how little to eat, when to stop, and when to eat more, as is helpful. This can help particularly with moderating the amount of highly processed foods.

6. Check in with hunger and fullness levels occasionally throughout the snack or meal. Refer to number 2. Use these to guide when you have had enough.

7. Practice, practice, practice. At first we eat slowly when we practice mindful eating. The slow pace can be likened to the training wheels we use to learn to ride a bike. As we become more practiced and hone our attention skills, mindful eating becomes more natural. We can learn to eat mindfully not only slowly but at different paces, settings, alone and with others.

With attuned awareness we can eat in a way that becomes satisfying, guilt- and struggle free, and with the quantities and quality that support our optimum health and well-being.

“Seven Tips to Mindful Eating Practice” was excerpted with permission of the author from *Well Nourished: Mindful Practices to Heal Your Relationship with Food, Feed Your Whole Self, and End Overeating* by Andrea Lieberstein M.P.H., R.D.N. (2017 Quarto Publishing Group USA). The book shows readers how to develop a mindful relationship to food and craft a well-nourished life with step-by-step examples, tools, and mindful practices that can be individualized to their unique needs. www.yourwellnourishedlife.com, www.mindfuleatingtraining.com