

## Practice: Mindful Eating

As much as any activity, eating captures the concept of living on autopilot. Even with our favorite foods, most of us hardly notice the taste after the first few bites. We decide when, where, and how to eat based mostly on when, where, and how we've always eaten before—even when we know better.

When we don't devote attention to eating, we enjoy it less and are less healthy about it. We eat not only when we're hungry, but also because we're upset or just see an appealing dessert. We eat quickly and miss the slow-moving "I'm full" signal from the stomach. Recognizing these patterns as habit (and therefore not as permanent as they may seem) is a first step to altering them.

Below are instructions for a formal mindful eating practice—a common initial practice in mindfulness programs. Select any food, ideally something you can hold in your hand. Imagine you have no idea if it's edible or dangerous as if you're encountering it for the first time. Take time with the process below, exploring each sensation along with whatever thoughts and emotions you notice.

Begin with vision: What does the object look like? What colors are present? What does light do when it hits the surface or when you move the object around? What else do you see?

What does the object feel like? Does it have any weight? What changes as you move it around?

Does it have an aroma?

Does it make a noise when you move it around?

Pause for a moment and notice: Where have your thoughts gone? Are you feeling anything in particular? Are you bored, restless, or feeling awkward? Are you excited about trying this out, or doubtful that it could be helpful for you? Recognize those experiences too, then return your attention to this exercise.

Choose the moment when you'd like to place the object between your teeth. And then pause before proceeding.

Now put the object in your mouth, adding the sense of taste. Observe taste, as well as what changes with each of your other senses.

Chew just once, then pause. Review the details of your experience, including the five senses, your thoughts, and your feelings. When your attention strays, return to the practice again.

Continue chewing with the some intention. As you chew, does the taste, smell, or physical sensation change?

Before swallowing, pause and decide when it's time to do so. Then swallow. Can you feel the food moving all the way down to your stomach?

Taking the some approach to each bite, continue until you decide the practice is done.

You always have the option of paying attention to eating. Practice putting down your utensil between bites and consciously deciding when to take another one. Pause before making food choices—not to give yourself a hard time, but to be aware that you actually have a choice. Likewise, when preparing food pay full attention to the process, allowing your mind to focus on the activity instead of being caught up in worries, plans, or other thoughts. In this way, you can use an everyday experience to build your capacity for giving life the full attention it deserves.

### **A Few Tidbits about Eating Mindfully**

- Don't have time for eating an entire meal in this way? Just take the first few bites with awareness.
- Use a snack, coffee break, or something similar anytime during the day to set aside some time for yourself and focus on what you're eating or drinking; it doesn't even have to be quiet around you. When you get caught up in distracting thoughts or difficult emotions, bring attention back to your immediate experience: For all of the noise and chaos going on around me, here I am, sitting with a hot cup of coffee.
- Use smaller plates or bowls, encouraging a pause between refills.

- Turn off the television and smartphones during meals to decrease distracted eating and ensure you're giving direct attention to whomever you are with.

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