
Mindful Eating

How do you usually eat? Do you sit at a table? If you have family or housemates, do you all sit down to eat together? Do you find yourself snatching something while you are on the move, or scrolling on your phone, or watching a movie? Do you remember how the meal tasted once it is finished?

Food is a complex and emotional issue for people — it is a fundamental part of our lives, and in many cultures there are extra layers of significance attached to eating, hospitality, and socializing. Over the holidays, especially, food can be a touchstone issue. Perhaps your perceptions around food and eating have also been prey to societal messages about body shape and diet, and you know your relationship to food is complicated as a result.

We are still subject to our evolutionary urges around food: deep-rooted fears of scarcity prompt us to fill up, even though there are more calories within easy reach now than our ancestors could ever have dreamed of.

If we want to incorporate mindful practices into our everyday lives, eating is a rich area to explore. Remembering that the root of mindfulness is attention to the present moment, we can choose to devote our attention to the act of preparing and eating a meal in a way that nourishes us in more ways than one.

Usually, the definition of mindfulness also adds that we should pay attention without judgment, but there are so many sensual possibilities with food that we can demote this aspect for some of these practices. We can allow ourselves to focus on the pleasure that food can bring us, while trying to steer clear of self-criticism.

So the first mindful practice we can bring to food is fully engaging our senses, when we prepare food, cook it, and eat it. Take the time to look at colors and shapes, touch and feel textures, smell whatever flavors and aromas are arising, listen to those evocative sounds of crackling and sizzling, and, finally, of course taste using all your taste buds..

One widely used exercise takes this a step further: Take one raisin, or one piece of candy, and take your time to engage all the senses before you actually pop it in your mouth. First, we bring curiosity to the object itself, seeing it fully; then we notice more acutely, with this single morsel, the message our taste buds give, and how the deep pleasure centers of our brain are getting activated. We notice how easily we want to reach for another piece, and how hard it is to restrict ourselves to just one, when we are used to grabbing whole handfuls to prolong the feelings of pleasure, sometimes long past the point of being satiated.

In Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen monastic community, they practice another powerful mindful eating technique: taking a forkful or spoonful of whatever you are eating, putting it in your mouth, and putting the spoon or fork down while you completely chew and savor that one mouthful, and swallowing it before you pick up the spoon or fork to prepare the next mouthful. You can learn that you don't have to rush your food or move your focus on to the next thing without giving this present one your full attention.

At Buddhist temples, meals are often accompanied by rituals and chants, underlining the importance of making eating an integral part of a mindful day. One translation of one of the chants begins, "Innumerable labors brought us this food, may we know how it comes to us." In this interconnected world of global supply chains, do you know where your food has come from, or what was involved in getting it to your plate? Even if you bought something from your nearest corner store or farmers' market, many people will have worked hard to ensure that you did not go hungry. You can try taking a few moments to think about this effort for each meal you have.

Other practices you can try out are to minimize your food waste — do you buy much more than you ever get around to eating? Do you buy things you think you ought to be eating, but then turn to more comforting fare when you are busy or tired? Do you take portions that are larger than you really need at that moment, just to fill the plate? One famous Zen text encourages the monastic kitchen workers not to waste a single grain of rice. Can you imagine being that scrupulous with your supplies?

I was once given a wonderful piece of advice by a Zen abbess: If you still feel hungry at the end of a meal, try waiting for 20 minutes. If you are still hungry then, go and get some more food. We all know the temptation of immediately going for a second portion just because the first one tasted so good, but do we really need it?

Perhaps one or two of these practices resonated for you. Give yourself time to try them out and see if you can make them a habit. And, as suggested at the beginning, you could also try to practice sitting down at a table to make eating a sole activity, with no reading, and no screens, to allow you to focus better on the food — and if you have company, to enjoy and appreciate it together, mindfully. Let each meal become a more special occasion.

Further reading:

[Mindful Eating](#) from The Nutrition Source of Harvard School of Public Health

[Mindful Eating: The Art of Presence While You Eat](#) from Diabetes Spectrum