



Being Mindful of Mindless Eating

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CLUELESS?

Have you ever nibbled on a brownie simply because you were walking by the pan? Or have you looked at the food in the refrigerator or cabinet, even though you weren't hungry? Have you ever grazed on snacks at a party, picked at the cheese tray, or become unaware how often you grabbed another piece or handful? We often reach for a treat or a snack without realizing what we're doing, looking for comfort, to relax, or as an escape for a brief moment. These unintentional uses of food add unnecessary calories to our diet and unwanted pounds to our bodies.

PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU EAT

Mindless eating is a multi-faceted concept. Sometimes people eat without much awareness they are even eating. They may ingest more than they intended, and more frequently than they realize. Mindless eating can be portion distortion, with people often not realizing how much they have eaten, or misjudging a usual serving size, and end up over-consuming. In *Mindless Eating* (Wansink, 2006), Cornell professor Brian Wansink explains the psychological cues that lead people to overeat. The human stomach isn't sensitive enough to notice small caloric differences, and it often doesn't register how much has been eaten until 20 minutes or more after food has been swallowed.

So instead, people rely on their eyes, ears, and noses to tell them when to stop eating. As a result, they often overeat.

FORAGING FOR FOOD

“Grazing” is a common term for this concept. Absent-minded eaters find themselves nibbling and munching their way through the kitchen, during meal preparation, and while cleaning up. Mindless eating can occur when someone eats simply because they stumbled upon food, whether hungry or not, and started eating. It also happens when one continues eating after they are no longer hungry or are full. In this absent-minded state, people misread hunger and fullness (satiety) signals.

WHERE DOES MINDLESS EATING OCCUR?

- In the kitchen
- At a sports event
- In the car
- At a party
- At the bar
- At work

- In front of the television
- At the gas station/convenience store
- At a fast food outlet
- At the coffee and bagel shop
- At a restaurant

We can change our level of awareness and become more intentional in what, how much, and when we eat. Increasing this awareness and intentionality is an important way to eat less and enjoy what we eat even more.

WHEN DOES MINDLESS EATING OCCUR?

- Weekends
- Special occasions
- Holidays
- Late at night
- After work
- Out with friends
- Bored
- Stressed or sad
- Alone



BE MORE INTENTIONAL

1. Practice leaving food on your plate. You don't have to finish everything.
2. Use dishes. Resist the temptation to eat out of a container, jar, box, or bag food comes in. Using a bowl or plate increases awareness and reduces overeating.
3. Eat at a table. Being intentional can reduce the risk of mindless calorie intake.
4. Use a smaller plate and silverware. We eat 92% of what we serve ourselves. Using a smaller plate means a smaller serving.
5. Recognize your perceptions are inaccurate and can add to self-indulgent excuses.
6. Be mindful of the company you keep. Without realizing it, people in a group often eat more.
7. Eat slowly. Try starting and finishing last. Resist the urge to eat and run. Use chopsticks or put your fork down between bites.
8. A nice atmosphere may signal self-indulgent excusing. Watch for low lights, soft music and attentive wait staff.
9. Be intentional about mealtime. Don't work, drive, watch TV, sit at the computer, or play video games while you eat. It increases mindless eating.
10. Watch for good, healthy food choices that can turn into a bad deal: a salad with lots of dressing or a low calorie sandwich with chips and two cookies.
11. Don't use food to punish or to reward yourself. Find other ways to indulge.
12. Eat when you're hungry. Resist the temptation to comfort yourself with food when you are lonely, frustrated, unhappy, stressed, disappointed, or depressed.
13. Emotional eating does not solve underlying psychological reasons. It only brings momentary comfort, escape, or distraction. Eat intentionally and manage your emotions mindfully.
14. Track what you eat. We often forget items or don't count small bites on the fly.
15. Rather than eating it, choose to store leftover food.
16. Remember, you are not responsible to eat your child's leftovers.
17. Do not deprive yourself. Find a healthy comfort food and keep it on hand. If a meal is still some time away, eat a small snack to help you resist overindulgence.
18. Put 20% less food than you think you want on your plate. Dr. Wansink's studies indicate people eat 20% less without noticing the loss.
19. Control your purchases and avoid buying more food than you will eat in two weeks. Over-buying easily leads to overeating.
20. Remove foods you have decided to eat less, or not at all, from your house.
21. When you are done eating a first serving, wait 20 minutes before taking seconds.

DEVELOP HEALTHY HABITS

Being more considerate of portions and serving sizes can take time. This awareness can only be developed as you practice it. Most people begin a program with good intentions but often have a slip within hours or days. Consider adding one or two of the previously mentioned behaviors at a time. Trying all of these new behaviors at once will certainly bring about a level of frustration and possible defeat. Some people prefer trying simple and easy ones first, with the goal of building on successes rather than repeating failures. Even a simple pleasure like eating is made more enjoyable with a good attitude and mindful planning.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hal Baumchen, PsyD, LP, LADC is the President and Clinical Director of NorthStar Regional. He is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist (LP) and a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor (LADC) with over 30 years of counseling experience.

He received his Master's Degree from Wheaton Graduate School, his Doctorate of Psychology (PsyD) from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology, and his Certificate in Co-Occurring Disorders from Adler Graduate School. He serves frequently as a seminar leader, and has taught workshops in the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and India.

He is the author of *Journeys* and *Destinations*, two books on co-occurring disorders treatment, and the co-author of *Finding Hope Again: Overcoming Depression* with Dr. Neil T. Anderson.

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