Mindful Eating

The following definition describes "normal" eating:

Normal eating is being able to eat when you are hungry and continue eating until you are satisfied. It is being able to choose food you like, eat it, and truly get enough of it; not just stopping to eat because you think you should. Normal eating is being able to use moderate constraint on your food selection in order to consume the right food, without being so restrictive that you miss out on pleasurable foods. Normal eating is giving yourself permission to eat because you are happy, sad or bored, or just because it feels good. Normal eating consists of three meals a day, or it can mean choosing to snack in between. It is leaving some cookies on the plate because you know you can have some again tomorrow, or it is eating more now because they taste so wonderful when they are fresh. Normal eating is overeating at times, feeling stuffed and uncomfortable. It also means under eating at times and wishing you had more. Normal eating is trusting your body to make up for eating mistakes. Normal eating takes up some of your time and attention, but keeps its focus as an important area of your life. In short, normal eating is flexible. It varies in response to your emotions, your schedule, your hunger and your proximity to food (Satter, 1987, pp. 69-70).

Food is important to us as human beings for a number of reasons. First, food fuels our bodies throughout the day as we participate in a variety of activities that require physical and mental energy such as school and work. Second, food is often an enjoyable and satisfying activity. Third, meals are often shared with family and friends, and provide us with an opportunity for social interaction.

There are times however, when food is employed as a means to deal with stress, sadness and/or boredom. Eating mindlessly refers to instances in which we eat more of a particular food faster than usual in response to emotional, cultural and/or interpersonal cues rather than in response to hunger signals from our bodies. As stated in the above definition of “normal eating,” eating inattentively on occasion is to be expected. However, when this pattern becomes the norm rather than the exception, we can begin to experience unhappiness, problems with health and weight, and a sense of lack of control over what we are eating. As such, learning to eat mindfully can help foster a sense of balance in regard to food consumption, and therefore help us to develop a healthy relationship with food.

What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is defined as a means of gaining alternative perspectives on one’s experiences through the process of self-observation (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, as cited in Stewart, 2004). Mindfulness stems from the Buddhist practice of meditation, which focuses on living in the here-and-now (Delmonte, 1987; Stewart, 2004). This “being” in the present moment allows you to free yourself of maladaptive thoughts, and take a neutral, accepting stance of your experiences, in the absence of positive or negative value judgments. This state of “being” or “wakefulness” can allow you to engage your whole self, with the inclusion of body, mind, and spirit in the perception of your surroundings while remaining open to new information.
As applied to eating, “mindful eating” can help to promote:
- healthy, balanced attitudes about food
- consuming sensible portions of all food types
- a sense of control over one’s eating habits
- an attitude about food free of restrictive rules and
- unrealistic expectations

Mindful eating does not involve the practice of dieting or the restriction of certain foods. Indeed, there are certain types of foods which we need to be cautious of (those with high fat contents, trans-fatty acids, foods high in sodium). However, being careful and being restrictive are two different concepts, the latter of which does not fit in with the mindfulness concept. Eating mindfully means being careful about what we put into our bodies, paying attention to what, how much, and how quickly we eat. Restrictive eating on the other hand, usually involves an emotional component to eating behavior that can serve to sabotage one’s diet and eating practices. In the practice of mindful, careful eating, it is ok to allow yourself to eat French fries. But when you do, eat fewer of them, and eat them more slowly. This way, you allow yourself to partake in the pleasurable tastes and feelings that accompany eating these types of food without getting too much of a good thing.

There are a variety of techniques that can help you become a more mindful eater. These include:
- Tasting deeply
- The S.T.O.P. method
- The 25-minute meal

**Tasting Deeply**

Tasting deeply involves paying full attention to the food that you are eating. When tasting deeply, one should make a conscious effort to focus on each bite, while paying close attention to the flavor, texture, and aroma of the food. How is this technique practiced?

1. Choose the bite size carefully, making it smaller than you usually would.
2. Before putting the food in your mouth, smell and enjoy the aroma of your food.
3. Look at the food and notice its color, shape and texture.
4. While chewing, ignore all other stimuli around you and focus only on the bite of food in your mouth; some people find it helpful to close their eyes. Concentrate on the tastes and textures of your food, attempting to utilize all five of your senses to enjoy every aspect of what you are eating.
5. Chew your food until it is completely smooth.
6. Swallow your food and note the aftertaste.

Start off small, devoting one bite per meal to this approach. Then, as you become more accustomed to this technique, devote two bites per meal, then three, and so on, until you can spend an entire meal “tasting deeply.”

**The S.T.O.P. Method**

The S.T.O.P. acronym stands for Savor, Travel, Observe, and Pause.

* Savor: This step refers to the first bite of your food. With this first bite, focus on the flavor of your food, fully enjoying the sensation of eating.
Chew slowly and deliberately, swallowing only the bites of food that you have completely chewed. Focus your attention on the variety of flavors and textures in each bite of food.

**Travel:** This step refers to the second bite of your food. With this bite, allow yourself to think about the source of your food. Travel in your mind’s eye to the fields, farms, lakes, oceans, or gardens from which your food was grown and harvested.

**Observe:** This step refers to the third bite of your food, and allows you to observe yourself as the eater. Here, you become attuned to the movement of your hands, arms, and lips as you eat. Concentrate on the actions and movement of your teeth and your tongue as you chew your food. When you swallow, follow the path of the food as it travels down to your stomach.

**Pause:** This step refers to the fourth bite of your food. At this point pause slightly before putting the food to your mouth. As you bite, pause briefly before continuing to chew. When you finish this bite and prepare for the next, pause again before putting the next bite of food to your mouth (The Camp System, n.d.).

**The 25-Minute Meal**

The 25-Minute meal teaches us how to slow our pace of eating practices down. Eating too quickly can pose problems for our bodies since our digestive systems are not permitted enough time to begin breaking down the food that we’ve eaten. Once we begin eating, it takes approximately 20 minutes before the nutrients in our food make their way to our bloodstream. That is the reason we may not feel completely full from eating for 15 minutes, even though we may have consumed a full helping of food. This ensures that our meal extends beyond the point of the onset of digestion. The goal of this technique is to make your meal last the entire 25 minutes.

1. For this technique, set a digital timer/clock to 25 minutes, or use your watch to monitor your time.
2. Start counting down time once you take your first bite.
3. Chew each bite slowly, carefully, and mindfully. Pay attention to the flavor, texture and color of your food.
4. Pause between each bite in order to extend the time that it takes for you to complete your meal.
5. After approximately 12 minutes, look closely at the food that remains on your plate. You should have approximately half of the meal that you originally started off with. If not, you may have to slow yourself down even more, pausing for longer periods between bites of food.
6. You may find that you have to be extra focused in order to make your meal last the final five minutes of this exercise. Dessert does not count towards this 25-minute period.
7. Once 25 minutes is up, stop eating. If you have no more food on your plate at the end of this period, great. If some food remains, that’s ok too, but you should still stop eating.
8. If you plan on eating dessert, add an extra 10 minutes to your time.

Once you become more comfortable with this technique, feel free to extend the period of time that you take to complete your meals (The Camp System, n.d.).

Remember, mindful eating teaches us how to eat in a manner that most in our society are not accustomed to. Since this is a new skill, allow yourself time and patience in mastering it.
References:


Satter, E. (1987). *How to get your kid to eat...but not too much* (pp. 69-70).