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Mindful Eating

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Intuitive Eating as a Strategy for Achieving and Maintaining a Healthy Weight

Intuitive eating means be able to enjoy what you are eating while being aware of how you are eating it. When you eat intuitively you are guided by your hunger and fullness cues, that is, you eat when are hungry and you stop when you feel satisfied. Because it takes time for our bodies to respond to the feeling of fullness, it is possible to eat more food than our hunger requires. That being so, mindful eating is an essential part of intuitive eating.

What is Mindful Eating?

Consider this example, you get home late from work, completely famished and warm up a plate of leftovers for dinner. You decide to get a jump start on some of your emails, sit down to the computer and begin to type away. After you have cleared out a few messages from your inbox you get up to grab a drink. You come back a few moments later and look at your dinner plate and wonder, “who ate my dinner?” Now before you blame your spouse, your kids or your dog, consider that you were so distracted by your emails that you just didn’t notice; you ate the entire plate and don’t even feel satisfied. To fill your dissatisfaction, you start looking through the cupboards for something to eat, not knowing what you are looking for. What happened you ask... distracted eating.

Flip that scenario around to where you get home late from work; you feel hungry, but since you had an afternoon snack, you aren’t famished. You warm up a plate of leftovers for dinner and sit down to the table. You take a few breaths to relax and have a sip of water. You take a forkful at a time, savor each mouthful, and stop when there is still some food on your plate (or not) because you feel perfectly satisfied; no longer hungry and not too full. You leave the table feeling refreshed, nourished and ready to get on with the rest of your evening. This is mindful eating.

Mindful eating assists weight loss efforts

If you struggle with distracted or emotional eating, having this awareness is a great first step. Practicing mindful eating by using the seven strategies outlined below, will keep you on track for your weight loss goals. You can practice mindful eating by:

1. Learn Your Hunger and Fullness Cues.

Do you know when you are hungry? Can you tell when you have had enough to eat? Some people feel a rumble in their stomach, lose their ability to concentrate, feel agitated or grumpy, or experience an increased sense of smell when they are hungry; others don't feel anything. If you have disregarded any of these signs of hunger in the past, especially for a long period of time, your body stops sending the signals and you lose your ability to notice. In terms of fullness cues, it takes up to 20 minutes for your body to tell your brain that you have had enough to eat. If you eat fast you are more likely to eat beyond your hunger and feel uncomfortably full after eating. Learning your hunger and fullness cues takes practice; responding to them plays a big role in the practice of mindful eating.

2. Recognize your triggers.

Negative emotions can lead to overeating; that is, eating for reasons other than hunger and eating beyond our fullness cues. Whether the emotion results from events related to a long commute to work, an upsetting meeting with your boss, or your health problems, emotions can trigger overeating.

The food and mood connection:

- Eating foods, like chocolate or ice cream for instance, temporarily increases the amount of mood-elevating hormones in your body. This sensation, along with the pure pleasure of eating chocolate, is enough to enhance your preference for chocolate.
- Food itself can also be a distraction. Think about your favourite comfort food. Because of the positive feelings associated with your favourite comfort food, eating it can take away your worries temporarily. However, once you have finished the food, your worries return.

Knowing your triggers and “naming them” by saying out loud or to yourself, “I’m not hungry, I just [stressed, anxious, bored, worried],” creates the awareness that is needed to change your response to your triggers. You can then ask yourself, “what is it that I need to do to feel less [stressed, anxious, bored, worried]?” On occasion you may still choose to eat instead of doing something else, but at least you have done so with awareness.

3. Find “non-food” ways to nurture yourself and meet your needs.

Write down a list of 5-10 things that you can do to nurture yourself without food. Once you have created this list post it in your kitchen and keep it in your wallet to remind yourself of ways that you can nurture yourself and meet your needs without food.

Some people find, getting out of the house helpful, calling a friend, writing an email or sending a tweet. Others find that asking a simple question such as, “am I hungry?” or “what do I need?” is enough to help them create the awareness of what is going on and what they need to do.

4. Clean out your kitchen.

What you buy is what you will eat. Food choices are guided by many things, one of which is availability. If healthy, nourishing foods are available that is what we will eat. On the other hand, if high fat, high salt and low nutrition foods are nearby, those are the foods that will be eaten. It is not to say that you should never have less healthy foods in the house (some of my most enjoyable foods are less than healthy) it is just that there needs to be a balance. Normal, healthy eating allows for the occasional “treat” i.e. a single-sized serving of your favourite bite a couple of times a week.

5. Eat well, eat often.

Breakfast really is the most important meal of the day. People who eat breakfast tend to eat better throughout the rest of the day and meet their nutrient needs when compared to non-breakfast eaters. Breakfast doesn't have to consist of typical breakfast foods per se – just eat something within 2 hours of waking. Choosing foods with protein, carbohydrate and healthy fat along with fibre provides long-lasting energy and a great boost to your morning. Eating healthy foods every few hours and drinking enough water keeps your energy level even throughout the day. See links and resources below for meal and snack ideas and recipes.

6. Move your body, rest your mind.

Stress wreaks havoc not only on your body by increasing inflammation but also derails weight loss efforts. Increased levels of cortisol, the body's main stress hormone, affects the way our bodies use and store energy. High circulating levels of insulin; seen in people with insulin resistance and diabetes, turns off the production of glucagon, the hormone that allows the body to release stored energy (body fat). Moreover, spikes and dips in blood glucose (blood sugar) effects energy levels and can trigger food cravings. Managing stress and maintaining optimal blood glucose levels throughout the day are two important strategies for weight loss.

Physical activity of any kind helps to decrease the body's level of stress hormone and has numerous other advantages, including; aiding in weight loss, increasing cardiovascular and bone health and preventing the development of chronic disease.

7. Work on improving your sleep!

Among other things, poor sleep quality disrupts the body's ability to recognize hunger and fullness. Inadequate sleep and poor sleep quality; as seen in people with sleep apnea, disrupts the body's balance of hormones that regulate hunger and fullness cues. Working on your sleep is an excellent way to foster the balancing of these hormones which will help you to eat exactly the type and amount of food your body needs.

What about slip ups?

Normal, healthy eating is flexible; some days you might eat more than your hunger allows just because what you are eating tastes so good, but the next day (if you allow your body's cues to guide you!), you will find that you won't be as hungry – this is your body's way of compensating for the additional calories from the day before. The important thing is to notice and be aware of your eating; you have choice.

Where can I go for help?

Am I Hungry?™

Mindful eating, books and resources

www.amihungry.com

Ellyn Satter Associates

Healthy relationship with food and eating,
books and resources

www.ellynsatter.com

Dietitians of Canada

Healthy eating, breakfast ideas and recipes

www.dietitians.ca

HealthLink BC

Online health information, handouts
and toll free health information line

www.healthlinkbc.ca

Toll free: 8-1-1

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