

## Mindful Eating 101: Eating in the Present Moment

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Imagine engaging in just one activity at a time, and fully paying attention to your experience in that moment. For example, if you are walking to your car, you are just....walking. Not talking on your cell phone or thinking about the evening's "to-do's." Just putting one foot in front of another, noticing how you don't have to tell your body "Hey, body – walk!" but rather than it knows exactly what to do. You might even be observing sensations in your body (i.e. is that left knee bothering you again? Did your recent workout loosen that knot in your shoulder?). What if you engaged in many activities of your day in this same mindful way? From taking your morning shower to driving to work, from eating dinner to getting ready for bed?

If you are like millions of Americans, you probably don't complete activities with such focused attention, certainly not on a regular basis. Even when we are engaged in just one activity, our minds are often miles away: planning, evaluating, reliving past memories, judging the current one, anticipating what's coming. While multi-tasking may seem like a necessity and may (at least at first glance) boost our productivity in the context of our busy lives, multi-tasking can also have its disadvantages...particularly when it comes to our relationship with food.

Let's use the analogy of driving as another example of how many of us might mindlessly turn to food, eating when we are not hungry or consuming more food than our bodies need. For example, have you ever found yourself driving a familiar route on mental "auto-pilot?" Perhaps you're driving to your workplace in the morning. Because you've driven this route so many times, and because your mind might be engaged in other tasks not related to the activity of driving, you might realize that you've missed your exit or forgotten to stop at the store as planned.

Eating, for many individuals, has become a similar "auto-pilot" activity. We might eat at certain times of the day ("because it's dinner time"), reward ourselves ("I worked hard, it's time for a break"), or attempt to escape from boredom or a painful emotion. We might engage in eating because it's "what I do" when watching television or going to a movie. Yet less frequently do we eat based upon our body's cues of hunger and satiety (or fullness), and often we are woefully out of touch with these cues.

The opposite of mindlessness or living our lives on "auto-pilot" is called *mindfulness*, which has been defined as paying attention to our experience (thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations) in the present moment, with intention, curiosity, and even compassion. Over the past two decades, emerging research in the fields of medicine and clinical psychology has strongly supported the use of mindfulness skills to help individuals combat stress, depression, anxiety, and even food-related struggles such as out-of-control (or "binge") eating. Throughout my career as a psychologist, I've regularly shared education regarding the many benefits of mindfulness skills.

Despite depictions found in popular media, one can benefit from mindfulness practices in just a few moments of each day – you don't have to go off to some exotic location or an extended retreat, or buy special gear. You can practice mindfulness – and specifically, mindful eating,

sitting in your office or kitchen chair. Here is a basic experience to “dip your toes” into the practice of mindfulness – it’s simple, but deceptively so, because nearly every person who has practiced this exercise has been surprised by how much they have learned from their experience. This exercise is adapted from versions developed by both Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program) and Dr. Jan Chozen Bays, another pioneering Mindful Eating teacher. It has since been used in a variety of mindfulness-based programs.

Step one is identifying a food item that you want to use for this exercise. I would recommend that you use something small in size, such as a raisin or other piece of fruit (such as a slice of apple), but you can also use a piece of chocolate or a cracker, for example. If it is something that might melt easily, keep it in its wrapper or hold it in a napkin until placing it into your mouth. Find a location where you can practice this exercise undisturbed – it will take you about five minutes or so. It is important that you take the full time to complete this exercise. Next, follow the playful instructions (designed to evoke our “beginner’s mind”) below:

*Imagine that you are a visitor from another universe, and you have just met a friendly human who has presented you with an interesting morsel of food. Because your task on this planet is to gather information to take back to your home planet, you must carefully inspect and then consume this food to learn as much about it as you can. In the following order:*

- (1) *Hold the food item in your hand.*
- (2) *Look at the food item, noticing any interesting details about its appearance (such as color, size, texture, contours, etc.). Imagine that you have never seen this item before.*
- (3) *Bring the food item to your nose, and carefully smell it. Take at least a minute to do so. Notice your body’s reaction to this prolonged exposure to the food item although you haven’t begun to eat it.*
- (4) *Place the food item in your mouth (but don’t chew or swallow) – run your tongue over the item, noticing flavor and texture; explore the sensations of holding this item in your mouth*
- (5) *Continue holding the food in your mouth and observe your experience (but don’t chew)*
- (6) *Make the decision to chew the item, and then do so, trying to chew it as slowly as possible*
- (7) *Swallow the food item*
- (8) *Notice any lingering taste in your mouth from the food item*
- (9) *Observe any reactions (thoughts, feelings) to your experience of eating this food item*

Remember, there is no right or wrong way of completing this exercise. If you noticed that your mind was busy critiquing your experience of mindful eating, if certain strong emotions arose because you were limiting your intake of food, or if you became so easily distracted that you gobbled up this morsel of food in one bite, don’t worry. You’ve just learned some useful information about how you might get caught up in “auto-pilot” during your daily routine of eating, and how easy it can be to gobble our food even when we were attempting to eat mindfully. Simply practice this exercise again, ideally once a day, and discover how your experience varies from one mindful eating exercise to the next. Mindfulness is like a muscle that might be initially weak but with regular practice (think of it as a “mindfulness workout”), it will become strong and more readily available when you need it.