

# Mindful Eating

## Jan Dean, Ph.D.\*

In our busy lives, eating is often done on autopilot. We multitask eating with other activities such as driving, watching television, reading a book, or talking on the phone. Food and body image issues produce great suffering. To manage this suffering, people look to dieting in the hope of finally ridding themselves of this unrest.

Yet, diets can add additional strife. The bludgeoning weight loss industry provides conflicting information and a confusing myriad of choices about the best way to achieve long-term success in weight loss. While diets are useful tools, they can result in feelings of dissatisfaction with ourselves and our bodies when approached as the ultimate solution to our well-being. Diets are often approached with a mindset that cultivates a mind/body split, using our mind to control our body's cravings. A primary focus on dieting can feel depriving and rigidly rule-bound. People often talk about diets as a "struggle" and struggle is defined as a violent effort to change. Approaching dieting with a sense of struggle maintains a conflicted relationship with food.

An antidote to this strife and striving is mindful eating which provides an opportunity to make different choices and cultivate harmony. It is not a quick fix technique but rather a life-long process of learning to be with what is and learning to use food as nourishment for our body and spirit.

How can we bring mindfulness to eating? It may be helpful to first explore its opposite, mindlessness, a concept many of us are more familiar with. Examples of mindless eating given by clients include impulsively going through a drive through for fast food, going to a convenience store to buy a milk carton of Whoopers and inhaling them in one brief sitting, eating the jumbo tub of popcorn at the movies. Mindlessness is a lapse in presence, zoning out, being mentally dull.

Mindfulness, then, is about conscious deliberate presence, being aware, being fully awake moment by moment. It is being able to see the inconsistency many of my clients have found. They say they enjoy food yet find that when they spend time observing their eating, an exercise I often encourage, they discover that they are not tuned in to their eating experience and not really tasting or savoring their food. Mindful eating then is tuning in to the eating experience.

The two cornerstones of mindful eating are presence and compassion.

Presence embodied with loving kindness towards our selves offers a radical opportunity to cultivate a harmonious relationship with food. To understand our relationship with food it's important to begin to pay attention to it. This means taking an active interest in tuning in to the eating experience, being curious about how we relate to food *without judgment*.

I often suggest to my clients keeping an awareness journal. The value of noting observations can be illustrated by an example. After a relatively short time keeping her journal, one client of mine came in very excited. She had been out of town and reacted with anger at a friend's insensitivity. In the moment, she dismissed her feelings of anger and consumed a large pepperoni pizza instead. Later, she realized she was mad at herself for not standing up to her friend and then doubly mad she had been "bad" and eaten food off her diet. As she was writing about this experience in her journal, she heard my voice in her head, "It's great that you are aware" and was able to reframe this awareness as progress and feel a sense of gentle kindness towards herself. Awareness is the first step towards changing habits. Perhaps at first, the awareness comes, paradoxically, after the fact. So be it. Over time, cultivating this practice will enable an ability to pause, creating the space to respond in new ways in the moment rather than react in routine knee jerk fashion.

Another client noticed as she embarked on a mindful eating exercise. She made her dinner and did not grab a book or turn on the television. She was going to experience the eating process in its totality. She was aware of how her mind was encouraging her to do other things while eating. She persisted in staying with the experience and became bored halfway through with the eating process and did not finish her meal. How interesting, she thought, as she wrote her observations in her journal.

Presence and the awareness journal can help us become aware of other lurking hungers that we feed mistakenly with food that require alternative ways of feeding if they are to be truly satisfied. Clients have found that they eat when they're bored, to get back at people, to manage stress, to avoid dealing with deep longing or loneliness. Ronna Kabatznick, the author of *Zen of Eating*, suggests that many of us use food as a form of nourishment way beyond our need for it as our body's fuel and points out that we use and even abuse it as an attempt to satisfy or nourish emotional hungers. If we're feeding ourselves to satisfy other desires the food we eat won't ever fill these wells keeping us perpetually hungry. So, in being willing to be aware of and face these unfulfilled hungers, there is an opportunity to

discover their appropriate forms of sustenance.

When we begin to cultivate an awareness of our relationship with food it reminds me of an episode of *Will and Grace*. *Grace* is pregnant and eating with great relish a leg of chicken. *Will* says "you and chicken" with an exasperated and puzzled look on his face. She says it's a Jewish thing, "me and chicken goes deep". Similarly, when we begin to use our relationship with food as a practice of observation, we and food goes deep.

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### **\* *About Jan***

Jan Dean is a life coach, licensed psychologist, and yoga instructor. She specializes in working with people with eating-related problems and teaches mindful eating practices. She also works with mind/body problems such as chronic health issues, pain disorders, and stress-related conditions from a holistic perspective.