

Mindful Eating to Improve Health & Well Being

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Eating on Autopilot

Are you reading this article while eating? If you are, you may be eating on autopilot and consuming more calories than you think. Now that you have finished your meal, do you feel satisfied? If you don't, distractions may have caused you to miss important internal cues of satiety and pleasure. College students and professionals alike value productivity, and it's common to multi-task in order to get things done. Even leisure activities can involve doing several things at once. In an effort to promote nutrition education and healthy eating habits on campus, one college has chosen to champion mindful practices. A Registered Dietitian at Dickinson College uses the concept of mindful eating to teach students how to identify and respond to genuine hunger cues and also eating behaviors that may stem from stress or anxiety (1).

Mindful eating

Mindfulness is derived from ancient Buddhist principles that promote physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness. This approach brings non-judgmental awareness and attentiveness to physical sensations, feelings, and environmental influences. When practiced while eating, it may help to reduce caloric consumption, increase satiety and pleasure, and foster a positive relationship with food.

Clinical support for mindfulness

Researchers explored the concept of mindless eating at the movies. They found that if moviegoers were given a large size of free popcorn as opposed to a medium size, they consumed significantly more, even if the popcorn was stale. This research indicates that the combination of large dishes and lack of focus may lead to a disregard for palatability and pleasure as well as overconsumption of calories (2). Another study found that a mindfulness-based therapy resulted in binge eaters enjoying their food more than with a typical psychoeducational treatment. The mindfulness-based therapy also resulted in a reduction of negative feelings related to dietary control (3).

Suggestions for practicing mindful eating

Eating mindfully can take commitment. Begin by practicing with one or two meals every week. Designate a space in which to eat like a dining room table or outside on a quiet park bench. Make sure the area is free of distractions such as computers and cell phones. Remember to eat slowly and chew thoroughly. It may help to say a blessing prior to eating or to take a break in between bites to establish an appropriate flow. Engage all of the senses by focusing on smell, color, texture, taste, and even how the food sounds while being consumed. Slowing down may prove to be difficult, but when consistently practiced over time, mindful eating habits can be established.

References

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