

## Mind-Food-Ness by Micki Fine, M.Ed., L.P.C.

Practicing mindfulness can help us fully enjoy what we eat, change our relationship to food, and make more conscious decisions about what we consume.

*Perhaps each of us has a starved place, and each of us knows deep down what we need to fill that place. To find the courage to trust and honor the search, to follow the voice that tells us what we need to do, even when it doesn't seem to make sense, is a worthy pursuit.*  
*Sue Bender*

Everyone has concerns about food. What are yours? Do you eat to handle stress? Are you in a constant struggle over what or how much to eat? Are you trying to prevent/fight disease and live longer by eating healthily? Any of these concerns can produce stress around what we consume.

No matter what your concern is with food, it is important to find a practical, healthy way of eating. In the April/May issue I wrote about general concepts of mindfulness and how it can help us reduce stress. (To review the basics, please see the sidebar in this article.) Practicing mindfulness with what we consume can help us fully enjoy what we eat, change our relationship to food, and make more conscious decisions about what we consume. This is a powerful way to enhance our health and well-being.

Obviously, what we eat affects our bodies. There is an abundance of information about what we should consume to feel better and live healthily. Evidence that eating low-fat, low-sugar, and minimally processed foods will help us feel better and fight heart disease, cancer, and some immune system diseases continues to grow. There is substantial information that quick weight-loss or fad diets do not work. And so, it is important to find a way to eat healthily and not become so alarmed that we go on stringent diets. Mindfulness is a practical, non-alarmist way of considering information and making decisions that are appropriate for you.

Even with an abundance of information about what to eat, it is still difficult to incorporate healthy eating into our lives. Our relationship to food is complex, to say the least. What we eat and how much we eat is emotionally charged. Our automatic reactions to eating are conditioned by our families. What was it like in yours? What did you learn about food? Was food a substitute for comfort when you were feeling low? Did you have to hurry up or you wouldn't get your share? Was dinner time with your family calm or chaotic? Did you share a meal with family members at all? The answers

to these questions can help you identify what emotional charges affect your eating habits.

Society affects our thoughts and feelings about food as well. We are exposed to unrealistically thin models staring out at us from magazines. Numerous weight-loss programs guarantee you'll feel better and your self-esteem will soar if you join their program. But it often doesn't work. If you lose weight, it just comes back; and besides, there are just as many thin people who feel bad about themselves as overweight people.

We develop attitudes about ourselves and food from our families and society that often last a lifetime if left unquestioned. These beliefs and attitudes create behaviors such as overeating for comfort instead of eating to fuel our bodies. Bringing mindful attention to the whole domain of food can help us change our attitudes about food, and thus, our behaviors.

*As you eat, know that you are feeding more than just a body. You are feeding the soul's longing for life . . .*                      *Marc David*

In mindfulness classes, we practice eating raisins mindfully. (I suggest getting something to eat now and following along with the description of this exercise.) First, we slow our actions considerably so we can pay keen attention to what we are doing. We observe the raisin, its color and texture, and recognize that it comes from nature. We can see the sun, rain, and earth in this food. We notice what human effort went into getting the food into our hands. We let go of judgmental thoughts.

We then notice our reaction as we bring the food slowly to our mouths. Perhaps we salivate. Perhaps we want to hurry up and eat it. With the food in our mouths, we chew slowly and observe the sensations of chewing: the taste of the raisin, and how our mouths, teeth, and tongue know automatically what to do with this raisin. We observe how we know it is time to swallow. We become aware that maybe we are putting more into our mouths before we have finished tasting the first bite.

You may be wondering how being mindful of your eating can help you establish healthier behaviors. It is through nonjudgmental awareness that we begin to awaken from the automatic reactions to food that either do or don't support healthy eating. Imagine that you have a craving for chocolate. Yet, you also know that chocolate contains fat, sugar, and caffeine, substances you may be trying to avoid. Bringing mindfulness to the decision may help you sort out all the factors that contribute to your wanting to eat the chocolate. With this awareness, it is less likely that you react automatically to the urge to eat. (See sidebar on urges.)

If you decide to eat the chocolate, for whatever reason, many of you would be judging yourselves in some way. Perhaps, all the while you are eating, you tell yourself, "You shouldn't eat that" or "You'll get fat" or "You're out of control." Imagine letting go of the judgment and slowing down your actions so you can focus on the taste, texture, and richness of the chocolate. After all, if you decide to eat it, you might as well enjoy it.

If you eat the chocolate mindfully and make a point of enjoying it, you will probably be satisfied with less. By letting go of judgmental thoughts about yourself, you may also feel less disgusted with yourself. If you pay attention to your bodily sensations a few hours after you have eaten the chocolate, you may notice feeling lethargic. These factors may help you make a different choice the next time.

*If you listen with respect, instead of mistrust, to pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue, your body will tell you how to nurture it. Rita Freedman*

Mindfulness meditation is the practice of intentionally focusing nonjudgmental attention on a single object: the breath. The focus of attention is then broadened to include observation of other aspects of one's present moment: ongoing experience such as sounds, thoughts, or feelings. This practice helps you develop the art of paying nonjudgmental attention in the moment.

It also teaches that you do not have to react to every urge that you have. For example, in mindfulness meditation, it is recommended that if you have the urge to scratch an itch, you first notice the urge and do not react to it. Some people think this is harsh, but it teaches you that the itch can change or go away by itself. It teaches you that the inclination to react automatically may not be the only way to handle an urge.

All of us have the urge to eat. Sometimes the urge comes when we are hungry, other times it comes when we are not. Many of us eat when we are bored, anxious, lonely, or depressed. Eating when we are not hungry is a result of the attitudes we have developed toward food throughout our lives. In meditation, we learn the ability to handle our experience non-reactively, and can apply this ability to our emotions and the urge to eat. By focusing nonjudgmental awareness on our emotions and impulses, we can awaken from automatic reactions, learn from this experience, and find a new way to respond.

For example, one of the class participants, Susan, began making significant changes in the way she ate. By bringing mindfulness to her daily experience, she naturally paid attention to the whole domain of food. Susan began to eat more slowly, to enjoy her food more, and was satisfied with less food. She also became more aware of the emotions and impulses that caused her to use food as a way to meet psychological needs. Susan lost weight without making it a priority.

It is often a challenge to become mindful about eating habits. We use food automatically to help us repress emotions that we believe are too difficult to handle. Growing up we are taught that certain emotions are unacceptable, so we repress them. Mindfulness reminds us that we are ultimately responsible for our thoughts, feelings, urges, and making healthy changes in our lives. Sometimes it seems easier to focus on anything else rather than our emotions and responsibility because we judge ourselves so harshly.

Because of our strong socialization patterns, it is important to be gentle and patient with ourselves as we learn to be mindful. Through mindfulness we can gently let go of

judging ourselves, and open ourselves to true acceptance and the power to change. The calm awareness of mindfulness can help us fully enjoy our food, learn about ourselves, and understand how we relate to food. We can begin to make more informed and conscious decisions about the food with which we fuel our bodies.

#### SITTING WITH AN URGE TO EAT

Notice that you have an urge to eat or drink:

Are you hungry? Do you have physical sensations of hunger or thirst?

If the answer is **YES**:

- \_ What are you hungry for?
- \_ Then ask yourself: Do I want to put this in my body? Notice the thoughts and judgments.
- \_ Eat mindfully. (See discussion of eating raisins.)

If the answer is **NO**:

- \_ Stop and pay attention to your present moment experience: What is going on? For example, are you anxious? Did you just have an argument with a loved one? Are you bored and lonely?
- \_ Take some slow mindful breaths and notice the desire to eat.
- \_ Try to accept this as part of your experience without judging it.
- \_ Bring to yourself some compassion as you observe your feelings. Perhaps tell yourself something comforting like, "It's okay to feel anxious." Instead of tensing up, try to soften around the area of your body in which you feel the emotion. Imagine cradling the emotion as you would a small baby.
- \_ Notice what happens to the urge.
- \_ Practice the steps above until the urge subsides.
- \_ Now, maybe you can think of another way to satisfy yourself. Perhaps there are other ways you can nourish yourself besides eating.

#### TIPS ON EATING MINDFULLY

- \_ Pay attention in the moment, without judgment, to the whole domain of consumption, from buying to preparing to eat your food.
- \_ Ask yourself if you want to put in your body that which you are about to eat. Notice thoughts and feelings as you respond to the question. Is there a struggle going on?
- \_ Slow down your motions so that you can observe the entire process of preparing and eating the food.
- \_ Eat without the distraction of television or reading so you can experience the meal. Eat in silence sometimes.

- \_ Observe the process of eating as described in the raisin-eating exercise.
- \_ Notice how you are feeling when you are eating the food. What thoughts and feelings come as you eat?
- \_ Be mindful of how your body feels an hour or two after you eat. Did the food give you energy or make you feel sluggish?

#### MINDFULNESS BASICS -

- \_ Mindfulness can be defined as paying attention, in the present moment, without judgment.
- \_ Developing the ability to pay attention to our moment-to-moment experience without judgment can help us:
  - \_ awaken from living life on automatic pilot and live more consciously;
  - \_ live more fully and joyfully;
  - \_ learn from our difficult experiences to develop more resourceful coping strategies;
  - \_ build concentration by training the mind to pay attention;
  - \_ begin to question assumptions and automatic reactions;
  - \_ let go of judgment of ourselves and others.
- \_ Mindfulness meditation is the way we train ourselves to pay attention in the present moment.

If you want more information on the basics, you can refer to the *Health&Spirit* April/May, 1998 issue or the author at the Women's Wellness Center at 713/522-7032.

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