



“Bringing awareness to our real needs is the ultimate act of self-care.”

From Food to Awareness: *A Radical Act of Self-care*



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More often than not we can find ourselves eating for reasons other than hunger. Perhaps when we are hit by stress or we are feeling lonely, we reach for something sugary, fatty or salty to trigger the reward and pleasure areas of the brain. But what are we actually looking for? It is likely that we are looking for some type of comfort. We seek comfort in so many ways, sometimes in healthier ways, like calling a friend, but often in less helpful ways, like numbing out on drugs, alcohol, food, the Internet, and so on. Easing pain and discomfort with food has become very common.

The practice below is a “three-step breathing space for self-care” that can be helpful to bring awareness to our mental processes and create space for considered and caring actions rather than going down the usual unhelpful routes. By bringing awareness to our actual needs, we will feel really nourished and loved rather than

depleted. This is a short practice that can last between 2 minutes and 10 minutes.

Meditation practice: Sit in a comfortable position with your feet flat on the floor and close your eyes if it is right for you. Begin to notice your breath, the flow of air that enters the nose and gently travels all the way down to the lungs. Breathe in this relaxed way for at least 5 breaths, sensing the fresh air coming in through your nose and a letting go of any tension.

It could be helpful to have your hands on your belly or your chest to notice the gentle movements that accompany the breath.

Now, checking in with your mind and body, ask yourself: “What is going on for me right now? What are my thoughts? Where do I feel them in my body? What are my emotions? Where do I feel them in the body?”

Then, gather your attention around your breath, following the breath as it moves in and out the body for about 1 or 2 minutes (or allow more time if you feel like it). When your mind wanders away from the breath, just bring it back to the psychical sensations of the breath in the

body, with kindness and without judging yourself.

As the next step, gently expand your awareness to the present moment, to the space of the body in this room, to the space of the body in your chair; open your eyes if they were closed.

After reconnecting with this enhanced awareness, it might feel appropriate to ask yourself, “What do I need to help me get through this time?”

Take your time to find your answers and then ask yourself, “How can I act with awareness and self-compassion?”

This practice can be followed by some considered and self-compassionate actions (i.e., actions taken in full awareness, taking advantage of the mental space that you have created by interrupting the rumination of negative self-talk and with a kind attitude toward yourself). You could try to develop your own list of “considerate and self-compassionate actions” to be used in times of difficulty.

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COMMUNITY WISDOM:

We asked our members to reflect on our theme of meditation in relation to their personal and professional practices.

In what ways has meditation or some other spiritual practice or personal reflection helped you with your mindful eating practice?

“The practice of meditation provides me with the opportunity to notice how my emotional states and thoughts affect my body, and how this affects my choice of when, where and what to eat.” ~ *Lisa Schmidt, MS, CN, CYT, Scottsdale, Ariz.*

“Regular meditation has helped me to gradually uncover the deeper reasons for overeating, like peeling off the layers of an onion.” ~ *Rita Zeelenberg, Utrecht, Netherlands*

“I have become aware of what my body is ‘humming’ for. I listen to my body in terms of does it want warm/cold food, crunchy/smooth etc. I rarely overeat when I eat from a humming perspective.” ~ *Allison Basile, LCPC, Brunswick, Maine*

When you are practicing mindful eating, what challenges or obstacles arise?

“... my surroundings, children, spouses, animals, television, cell phones etc. We all have a lot of ‘stuff’ going on...” ~ *Kim Balzan, Scottsdale, Ariz.*

“Lunch is also a harder time to eat mindfully because I eat with coworkers and try to engage in conversation, which takes me away from paying attention to the meal.” ~ *Stephanie Swavely, RD, LDN, Lancaster, Pa.*

“Restlessness leads to thinking while eating and eating quickly. This leaves little room to actually experience and enjoy time spent eating.” ~ *Nina Meledandri, ND, MSOM, LAc, Portland, Ore.*

“I need ‘strong determination’ not to give in to cravings



and to simply sit with the feelings in my body and observe them with curiosity.” ~ *Mardi Dunbar, BA, NSW, Australia*

What are some ways you help your clients practice mindful eating?

“I like to help clients remember two important ideas. First, there is no being perfect with mindful eating. This is a process that asks us to invite self-kindness, patience, and self-compassion. Secondly, start slowly – a moment of silence before a meal, or with awareness of that first bite.” ~ *Donald Altman, MA, LPC, Portland, Ore.*

“Offer the client a cracker and have a cracker yourself. Practice taking small bites together in silence and chew slowly, then discuss the experience.” ~ *Cynthia Swiss, DTR, Baltimore, Md.*

“By telling them that every small step is useful. They tend to think they have to practice ‘perfect’ and give it up too fast.” ~ *Rita Zeelenberg, Utrecht, Netherlands*

“By stopping and paying attention to breath and body – checking in with self before engaging in eating or drinking – a 30-second timeout to focus.” ~ *Meg Ramstad, MSN, ARNP, Port Orange, Fla.*



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