

FOOD *for* THOUGHT

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Social Dining: Mindfully Eating Together

IN THIS ISSUE:



*Eating Out,
Tuning In*

page 3



*Challenges
of Social
Dining*

page 5



*Eating for
Happiness
and Health*

page 7



About The Center for Mindful Eating:

Our Mission:

The mission of The Center for Mindful Eating, also known as TCME, is to help people achieve a balanced, respectful, healthy, and joyful relationship with food and eating. By providing an easily accessible source of information and opportunities to interact – via the web and in other ways – we seek to train and encourage professionals, who can then foster this capacity in others.

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About this issue:

Our Spring issue of *Food for Thought*, entitled *Social Dining: Mindfully Eating with Others*, offers tools and guidance on how to remain mindful in social settings, whether in a restaurant or dining at home with family and friends.

In the main article, Caroline Baerten, RD, offers insights on the importance of our evolutionary journey to our eating habits, emphasizing the role of compassionate self-care and curious awareness while eating out. She shares many interesting studies on how eating out influences our food choices and why mindfulness is a crucial tool to turn our attention to what our heart, body, and mind really need.

In her article on the challenges of social dining, Cinzia Pezzolesi, PhD,

encourages us to focus on setting reasonable expectations and to let go of the idea of having ‘the perfect mindful meal.’

Cultivating a mindful-eating practice, even in the midst of a busy day, can be a source of joy and happiness, according to Marsha Hudnall, RD. She shares four steps by which mindful eating can help us to maintain a balance between momentary pleasure and genuine nourishment of body and mind.

We close this issue with a meditation practice to help bring mindful eating alive during challenging family meals and restaurant dinners. As always, thank you to our writers, to our members, and to everyone in our online community for supporting *Food for Thought*.

Eating Out, Tuning In



Caroline Baerten
MA, RD

“My doctor told me to stop having intimate dinners for four unless there are three other people”

– Orson Welles

(quoted in P. Giriodi, *Breakfast in Paris, Lunch in Rome, Dinner in London*, 2010)

Our evolutionary journey has adapted our brains to survive in times of scarcity. As a result, we are genetically programmed to like energy-dense foods from a very young age. For example, babies are soothed more effectively with sweet foods than with other food types (Ventura and Mennella, 2011).

In today’s world, the food industry deliberately takes advantage of this reactive part of the brain. Throughout the day, our senses are attacked by food advertisements in magazines and

From Mindless Overeating to Savoring with Awareness

newspapers, on billboards and buses. This flow of distracting messages keeps our minds preoccupied with food, which influences our behavior. These messages also accompany us into restaurants, where mindful eating can be particularly difficult.

When eating out, we encounter two different food environments, which present their own challenges. One restaurant type offers a self-serve buffet, the other an environment where chefs control the menu and portion sizes. How do these two settings influence mindful eating?

“All you can eat” restaurants provide abundant food at low cost, which can be an appealing trap when money is tight. Individuals with lower socio-economic status eat more high-fat and sugary foods,

and these preferences are mainly driven by price and a lack of nutrition education (Appelhans et al., 2012). Deliberately choosing to eat less may be a confusing idea under these circumstances.

Portion choices also have a cultural component. In the United States, people consume larger portions in part because they eat more often in restaurants, including fast food restaurants that offer cheap meals in large quantity (Harnack et al., 2000). In contrast, French portion sizes are smaller in menu-driven restaurants, supermarkets, and buffet restaurants. Even French cookbooks suggest portions that are 25% smaller than in the U.S. (Rozin et al., 2003).

The size of dinnerware also influences how much guests serve and

continued on page 4

eating out, tuning in

Continued from Page 3

consume during a meal. People over-serve themselves when using larger dinnerware and under-serve themselves when using smaller plates. The Delboeuf illusion (a visual perception bias caused by contrast) may explain this effect (Van Ittersum et al., 2012).

In the second case, when the restaurant controls our portion sizes, it may also control our decisions about how much to eat. If the chef is too generous with food offerings and we can't serve ourselves, then we easily lose connection with our own physical needs.

Brunstrom (2011) makes the controversial suggestion that physical satiation plays a secondary role in the control of food intake. Instead, decisions about portion size—which are made before eating—play a predominant role. Multiple controlled studies show that larger portions leads to substantial increases in energy intake (Steenhuis and Vermeer, 2009). These data suggest that the availability of large portions can override the regulation of energy balance.

Proprioceptive awareness and listening to our physical sensations while eating out can be an effective way to help shift the balance from external cues like portion size to internal cues like hunger and satiety. Although mindfulness probably will not prevent us from ever overeating when dining out, we should not underestimate its power. If we do not practice awareness, our behavior is dictated by cravings and easily manipulated by others.

Mindful eating can be learned, even in challenging circumstances. A program aimed at women between 40 and 59 years old who frequently ate out at restaurants, Mindful Restaurant Eating, taught them to be more aware of their choices, hunger, fullness, and mindless eating. Although the aim of the six-week training was not restrictive eating or weight loss, the women ended up eating less according



Listening to our physical sensations while eating out might be an effective way to help shift the balance from external cues like portion size to internal cues like hunger and satiety.

to their physical needs (Timmerman and Brown, 2012).

True joy has a long-term effect and a heart-nourishing component. When eating out, it can include sensory awareness and being in the present moment, hearing stories about where the food comes from, or simply enjoying the good company of beloved ones. Finding a balance between pleasure and self-care is one of the keys to happiness. Focusing our awareness on these added benefits of restaurant eating may help us to achieve it.

Caroline Baerten (Belgium) is a mindfulness-based nutritionist/RD, qualified chef, and integrative psychotherapist. She specializes in work with disturbed eating behavior and nutrition ecology and serves on the Board of TCME. Since 2016, she has been a certified Mindful Eating, Conscious Living teacher (ME-CL). www.me-nu.org.

Resources:

Ventura, A. K. & Mennella, J. A. (2011). *Innate and learned preferences for sweet taste during childhood*. *Current Opinion in Clinical Nutrition & Metabolic Care*, 14(4), 379-84.

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Journal of Preventive Medicine, 42(4), 398-402.

Harnack, L. J., Jeffery R. W., & Boutelle, K.N. (2000). *Temporal trends in energy intake in the United States: An ecologic perspective*. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 71, 1478-1484.

Rozin P., Kabnick, K., Pete, E., Fischler, C. & Shields, C. (2003). *The ecology of eating: Smaller portion sizes in France than in the United States help explain the French paradox*. *Psychological Science*, 14, 450-454.

Van Ittersum, K., & Wansink, B. (2012). *Plate size and color suggestibility: the Delboeuf illusion's bias on serving and eating behavior*. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39, 215-228.

Brunstrom, J. M. (2011). *The control of meal size in human subjects: A role for expected satiety, expected satiation and premeal planning*. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 70, 155-161.

Steenhuis, I. M., & Vermeer, W. M. (2009). *Portion size: review and framework for interventions*. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 6, 1-10.

Timmerman, G. M., & Brown, A. (2012). *The effect of a mindful restaurant eating intervention on weight management in women*. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 44(1), 22-8.

The Challenges of Social Dining

How to Eat Mindfully When No One Else Does



Cinzia Pezzolesi

PhD

Many people wonder how to eat mindfully when dining with others who are not mindful eaters, as eating socially is the norm, both at home and in restaurants. There may be challenges in maintaining moment-by-moment awareness of our body and how it responds to food if we feel that we are not in the right setting. For example, there may not be enough time or a space to sit, or we might be trying to eat while winning a very important client for our company. However, a business lunch, a family gathering, a celebratory meal, or a dinner at home with young children are still excellent opportunities to practice mindful eating.

Probably the most important thing is to set the expectations right, to choose a focus for our experience and to let go of the idea of having the perfect mindful meal. When eating socially, a person does not need to use all their mindful eating tools, such as paying attention to the entire meal, eating with all the senses, connecting to sensations of hunger and fullness, and many more.

Sometimes the skillful approach could be to stick with one familiar tool that can guide our ability to make choices in such a setting. For example we may focus only on the sensation of hunger, checking in to see how it changes as we start the meal, halfway through and at the end of the meal. Or we may use our taste buds to notice when the food stops tasting good or there is a reduction in pleasure, to help decide to stop eating a certain food.



1. A business lunch, a family gathering, a celebratory meal, or a dinner at home with young children are still excellent opportunities to practice mindful eating.
2. The most important thing is to set the expectations right, to choose a focus for our experience and to let go of the idea of having the perfect mindful meal.

At times, mindful eating can be cultivated just by pausing as soon as the food arrives to feel our lower body supported by the chair.

Your fellow diners may be delighted to learn something new, so sharing your intention to eat mindfully or having a first mindful bite together could be a good way to create a sense of connection and to engage the people around you with the practice. Expressing gratitude and appreciation for the food, noticing where it came from, and acknowledging the effort that someone has made to prepare it can go a long way toward dealing with the social pressure to eat and the need to please others.

Finally, it is not always possible to eat mindfully, and this is OK. We have all our life to practice. Even if we make a few choices or have a few meals that are not as quiet as we would have liked them to be, there will be many more occasions to make things right.

Cinzia Pezzolesi is a chartered Clinical Psychologist and senior lecturer on mental health and wellbeing, who serves on the Board of TCME. She qualified as a mindfulness teacher at the University of Bangor (North Wales, UK) and as a CBT therapist at Oxford University. She is currently Clinical Director of The Mindfulness Project (UK).



Social Dining Toolbox:

A Selection of Inspirational Blogs from Around the World

Australia

- **Body Positive Australia**, Fiona Sutherland, <http://bodypositiveaustralia.com.au/category/blog/>
- **Sol Food**, Christina Turner, <https://www.solfood.com.au/blog/>

Belgium

- **MeNu**, Caroline Baerten, http://www.me-nu.org/nl/mindful_eating_blog

Brazil

- **Mindful Eating Brazil**, <http://mindfuleatingbrasil.com.br/>

Canada

- **Vincci Tsui**, <http://vinccitsui.com/blog/>

France

- **Nutrition Pleine Conscience**, Sandrine Le Mazou, <https://www.nutritionpleineconscience.com/>

- **Bien être à Table**, Géraldine Desindes, <https://bien-etre-a-table.com/blog-2/>

Germany

- **Food Coaching**, Nicole Hoenig, <https://www.foodcoaching-hamburg.de/blog>

Ireland

- **Straightforward Nutrition**, Linn Thorstensson, <http://www.straightforwardnutrition.com/lifestyle-blog/>

Mexico

- **Mindful Eating Mexico**, Lilia Graue, <http://mindfuleatingmexico.com/blog/>

South Africa

- **Xen and The Art of Mindful Eating**, Xenia Ayiotis, <http://www.theartofmindfuleating.com/blog/>

Spain

- **Bienestar Consciente**, Cuca Azinovic, <http://bienestarconsciente.es/category/articulos/>

United Kingdom

- **Cinzia Pezzolesi**, <http://cinziapezzolesi.com/blog/>
- **Peaceful Eating**, Vania Phitidis, <https://peacefuleating.co.uk/blog/>

United States

- **Am I Hungry?**, Michelle May, <https://amihungry.com/mindful-eating-resources/blog/>
- **A Weight Lifted**, Green Mountain at Fox Run, <https://www.fitwoman.com/blog/>
- **Mindful Eating Conscious Living**, Jan Bays and Char Wilkins, <http://www.me-cl.com/me-blog/>
- **Mindful Eating Made Easy**, Megrette Fletcher, <https://megrette.com/blog/>
- **Tasting Mindfulness**, Lynn Rossy, <http://lynnrossy.com/tasting-mindfulness/>

Embracing the Joy of Eating for Happiness & Health

Whether you're eating in or eating out, put joy on your menu



Marsha Hudnall
MS, RDN, CD

Busy lifestyles often make for eating experiences that do not measure up. Remember the last time you ate in front of your desk while replying to emails. Or ran from table to stove, taking care of family during a meal. Not only do these situations often lead to choices that do not deliver nutritionally, but we also shortchange the role of food in our happiness.

The truth is that happiness is a big part of health. The pleasure we get from food goes a long way toward helping us celebrate, remember, and even soothe ourselves. Emotional eating is so often maligned, but it is actually an evolution-based process that serves up a bounty of neurochemicals designed to help us feel good.

In a world where many of us have access to an abundance of food, mindful eating can help us maintain a balance between momentary pleasure and genuine nourishment of body and mind.

Consider these four steps to finding true joy in eating, by savoring both the flavor and how food makes you feel, whether at your or your friends' table, a drive-through, or a fancy restaurant.

- 1. Wait for hunger most of the time.**
Food tastes better when we're hungry. Hunger is also the signal that it is



time to eat. Just be sure not to wait too long. Getting too hungry is a set-up for unsupportive choices and overeating, none of which feel good in the long run.

- 2. Focus.** Eating is such a natural part of our lives, we can do it on autopilot. But the easiest things usually get the least attention. We often resort to choices that do not meet our overall needs. Consider all five senses—smell, touch, sight, sound, and taste—to get the most from your eating experiences.
- 3. Think before you choose.** Toss out nutrition rules and think instead about what will taste good and make you feel good, too. We have built-in guidance systems that, if we trust them, work well to ensure that we get the foods we need. This is another part of that evolutionary system designed to keep us alive. Check in before, during, and after a meal to get the full benefit of your body's wisdom.

- 4. Eat intentionally.** What is your intention? To enjoy, of course! Just remember to include feeling good now and later in your definition of enjoyment.

Start by appreciating the food's aroma and appearance while also recognizing what it took to get your food to your plate or hand. This pause before eating fires up anticipation, which, when you finally take a bite, can offer big payback in terms of pleasure.

Then eat slowly to fully experience the food and more easily notice when you are satisfied. Instead of forcing yourself to slow down, or even count bites (heavens, no!), savoring your food automatically slows you down. It is not something we have to do but something we want to do. And that makes all the difference.

Here's to joyful eating!

Marsha Hudnall, MS, RDN, CD is president & co-owner of Green Mountain at Fox Run, a women's retreat for healthy living without dieting, and the current president of The Center for Mindful Eating.

Restaurant Meditation

- As you arrive at the dining table, allow your body to find its space on the chair. Feel the contact points, the back of your legs, the pelvic area, the lower back. Notice your feet flat on the floor and experience a sense of being rooted and grounded. What thoughts are present right now? Have you fully arrived at the table or is the mind still somewhere else? If so, take a few moments to feel the body before looking at the menu and ordering the food.
- If you are meeting someone else, greet your fellow diners, noticing if your body or mind is reacting in any way to the people who are present.
- Allow your mind to notice any critical thoughts, strong emotion, or urges that may emerge, meeting your mental chatter with kindness and, if possible, without engaging with it.
- Taking a slightly deeper breath, quickly check in with your stomach and evaluate your hunger level. If you are unsure, continue to explore it during the meal every once in a while, to notice changes. Look at the menu, perhaps considering what you can choose that will nourish your body and bring great enjoyment.
- Once the food is present, take another breath and check in again, 'Am I in my body right now or am I somewhere else, in the universe of thinking?'. If you feel



that you are no longer present, come back to the contact points of your body against the chair, the feet on the ground, and take the first bite of food when you feel ready.

- As you eat, perhaps you could alternate your attention between savoring the food and talking with your fellow diners.
- Once your stomach begins to send signals of fullness, pause for a second and consider what would be the best course of action for you right now. Would more food enhance your experience at this moment or in one hour from now?

- Enjoy the rest of your time, allowing a sense of gratitude for the food that you have eaten, for everyone and everything that made the meal possible, including your fellow diners who shared the experience with you.

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