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Does Mindful Eating Help You Eat Less or Just Better?

Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

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You've probably heard about all the ways to lose weight and then some. Diets, fads, no diets, power bars, shakes—you name it. Well, research indicates that mindful eating *might* be a good place to begin.

The term “mindfulness” refers to being in the moment. And that’s not always so easy. We can get stuck in our own thoughts and self-talk as life passes us by. We can all say, at one point in time or another, that we have become mindless in our eating habits. We eat meal after meal, snack after snack, barely aware of what and how much we’re eating. Being mindful with our eating means paying attention to our food—really paying attention—and we begin to notice all sorts of wonderful aspects of the food, and how much we’re putting into our bodies.

FIRST, THE BAD NEWS

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than one billion adults worldwide are overweight, with at least 300 million of them obese. In the United States, obesity has reached epidemic proportions: one-third of adults—33.8 percent—are obese. And there really haven’t been many, if any, effective interventions to address obesity. The need to focus on innovative solutions to weight loss and management is crucial.

Numerous studies have demonstrated obesity to be positively associated with increased risk of a variety of chronic diseases, and, more than three decades and millions of dollars later, solutions to the problem of obesity for any demographic remain elusive. Even the most promising weight-loss interventions are unable to prevent high percentages of individuals from regaining any weight lost within a short period of time. While some researchers argue that only macro-level environmental changes will bring out decreases in obesity rates, to date, such changes have been no more successful than behavioral interventions.

ABOUT MINDFULNESS & EATING

The concept of mindfulness dates back many centuries, originating in Buddhist practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has been at the forefront of efforts to apply an understanding of this type of mindfulness to mainstream research. Kabat-Zinn defines the concept as “the awareness that emerges when paying attention in a particular way, that is, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” In this, we can understand the idea of purposeful and conscious attentiveness as opposed to automated reactions.

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the current research on mindfulness employs a program called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Kabat-Zinn about 25 years ago as a pain management intervention. The focus of MBSR is on the cultivation of mindfulness through meditative practice. The program consists of eight, two-and-one-half hour meetings concluding with an all-day meditation retreat. The effectiveness of MBSR in treatment of pain, depression, and anxiety disorders has since been well established with rigorous clinical trials. In addition, recent analysis concludes that MBSR may help both clinicians and others with a broad range of clinical and non-clinical problems.

Only recently has mindfulness been applied to the study of eating behaviors. The relative consistency of findings is enough to suggest that it may be worthy of attention. Much of the research concerning mindfulness and eating has focused on clinical populations, including individuals who suffer from binge eating disorder (BED) and bulimia. In the first of three studies, researchers implemented a pilot program on Mindfulness Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) among obese women with BED and although participants did not demonstrate weight loss, the six-week intervention resulted in a large and significant reduction in depression and the number of binge episodes per week.

A second study of mindfulness and binge eating recruited 25 individuals from the general public to participate in a brief set of eating exercises. This intervention resulted in significant decreases in binge eating, state anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Studies also support the notion of mindful eating as an intervention for individuals with eating disorders. One of these studies included six, college-age women with bulimia nervosa describing their experience with a mindfulness-based eating disorder (M-BED) treatment group through interviews and self-portraits. Another study used a similar approach in an analysis of personal journals of 25 obese women completing a 12-week yoga and mindfulness meditation course. There was considerable overlap in the findings from the two studies—in both, participants described how the experience of the group resulted in their greater self-awareness and acceptance. The women in one study also reported experiencing less emotional distress and improved ability to manage stress following the program, whereas the other study characterized the main shift in participants as one from disconnection to a “healthy reconnection” to food and to their bodies. Participants in the former study also reported reduced food intake, decreased eating speed, and healthier food choices throughout the program.

CAN MINDFUL EATING HELP CANCER PATIENTS?

Cancer patients are another clinical population that has been targeted with mindful eating training. Chemoradiation therapy for head and neck cancer can result in anorexia, weight loss, fatigue, and nausea. Patients often require nutrition support via gastrointestinal tubes during treatment and subsequently find it difficult to

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transition back to eating normally when treatment ends. In this case, mindful eating has been used to help individuals eat *more*.

Consistent with several of the studies discussed above, some of the preliminary research in this area lends support to the idea that mindfulness promotes changes in eating behavior through an increased ability to recognize and attend to internal rather than external cues. Patient reports also confirm the value of mindfulness in helping them deal with and manage emotional distress.

While there is still so much to learn about mindful eating and how it can help you, there is some encouraging information available stating that mindfulness plays a positive role in weight loss or gain—depending on the person.

*Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM Learn more about our award-winning research at Mather LifeWays **Institute on Aging**, our **senior living residences**, and our **community initiatives**.*

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