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Food for Thought: An Exploration of Mindful Eating

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The prevalence of global obesity is increasing at an unprecedented rate. Conventional weight loss programs, though logical in theory, usually prove to be ineffective in practice. There is an increased need and urgency for healthcare professionals to develop innovative methods to combat this pernicious health condition. Embracing the concept of mindful eating is one way that individuals can improve the quality of their health and well-being. This article highlights the definition of mindful eating, describes the consequences of mindless eating, discusses the Japanese concept of *hara hachi bu*, and offers realistic practices that individuals can adopt in order to improve their connections with food and with others.



Although Western civilization has realized remarkable achievements in science and medicine, the United States (US) and other Western countries are experiencing unprecedented rates of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Epidemiological studies have shown that certain traditional societies from Asia and elsewhere practice patterns of behavior that significantly decrease the risks for such diseases. One of these societies is Okinawa, Japan, where individuals embrace the concept of *hara hachi bu*—a mindful approach to eating with Confucian roots wherein one eats to only eighty-percent capacity. This mindset not only keeps one from eating excess calories but also emphasizes remaining mindful of one’s connection to others, gratitude toward ancestors and the divine, and appreciation of the flavors, sights, and aromas of the meal. As a dietitian, my goal is to help individuals who struggle with food-related health issues recognize the beauty, simplicity, and power of mindful eating and the debauchery of the “mindless mouthful.” Adopting the practice of mindful eating into our daily habits is a behavior that we can embrace to improve the quality of our mental, physical, and spiritual lives—and thus to flourish.

Before discussing mindful approaches to eating, it is helpful to address *why* we should improve the way we eat. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the US, accounting for approximately one in every three deaths. Cancer, stroke, and diabetes are also among the top ten leading causes of death (National Center for Health Statistics 2018–2023). All these diseases lead to similar outcomes, such as decreased quality of life, increased healthcare costs, and a shortened lifespan. The more disquieting fact, however, is that they also all share a common cause—diet (Center for Science in the Public Interest 2016). Each of these diseases are strongly correlated with obesity, which, according to the World Health Organization, is defined as a “chronic complex disease defined by excessive fat deposits that can impair health” (WHO 2024).

To truly understand the state of health and disease in the US, let us place our domestic obesity rates in the context of global rates. Although other countries experience obesity, the US is in the worst condition: the data from 2019 shows that less than 5% of the Japanese population is obese. Canada reports an obesity rate of 24%, the United Kingdom, 28%, and Mexico 36%. Although these figures are certainly not optimal, the US takes the cake. More than 42% of adults in the US are obese (OECD 2024). Even more concerning is that this rate is expected to rise to approximately 66% of US adults by 2050 (Ng et al. 2024). This article primarily addresses mindful eating through the lens of weight loss for individuals experiencing overweight or obesity. However, most of these principles can be applied to all people, regardless of weight status. Mindful and intuitive eating practices have also been used as a successful treatment tool for individuals recovering from eating disorders, though this is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics acknowledges that the obesity epidemic is a “national public health priority” and is actively training registered dietitians to address this pressing issue (Schaefer and Zullo 2017, 1419). The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is pursuing solutions to decrease the negative consequences that accompany this issue. Currently, fewer than 12.5% of US adults consume adequate amounts of fruits, and fewer than 10% of US adults consume adequate amounts of vegetables (Lee et al. 2022). Most American adults exceed recommendations for added sugar, saturated fat, sodium, and total caloric intake (USDA and HHS 2020, 97-100). Thus, despite the well-intentioned efforts of the USDA, publishing and promoting dietary guidelines is not sufficient to induce individual or population-level behavior change.

I could go on about the deplorable state of Americans’ poor health, but I will cut to the chase—a key fact about obesity is that it is in many ways preventable and treatable (WHO 2024). If obesity is preventable, then it follows logically that so are all the adverse health consequences associated with it. Traditional methods for weight loss include limiting total calorie intake; increasing fruit, vegetable, and whole grain consumption; and increasing physical activity. Medical interventions such as weight loss surgery and medications may also help address obesity. This is not news to anyone. The answers for *what to do* to lose weight are generally agreed upon, but many people fail their diets, or, more accurately, their diets fail *them*. This article is not written to prescribe the world’s best diet to anyone. Instead, what follows is an alternative approach to eating that does not include calorie counting, restrictive meal plans, or strenuous exercise programs. That is, I will discuss how integrating mindfulness into the rituals of daily eating can not only minimize one’s midsection but also—and importantly—augment the dining experience and improve one’s connection to those with whom the experience is shared.

Although there are many definitions of mindful eating, it can simply be summarized as “the practice of enjoying food with understanding and compassion” (Fung et al. 2016, 1083). This definition can broadly apply to all people regardless of age, gender, weight, culture, or health status. This approach to eating helps individuals increase their understanding, awareness, and compassion for their own body and mind, and their connection with others. Mindful eating begins with the practice of recognition, with the individual identifying when the body is hungry and when it is full. Further, mindful eating includes cultivating a “nonreactive attitude to one’s feelings toward food and eating” (Fung et al. 2016, 1082). This attitude of neutrality allows the individual to appreciate the dining experience for what it is without harboring feelings of guilt or shame (Mathieu 2009). The eater may acknowledge the inputs and outcomes of the event and then prepare for future interactions with food that will continue to increase their appreciation of the experience.

We can identify good examples of mindful eaters in the so-called “Blue Zones.” The Blue Zones are the five areas in the world with the highest reported concentrations of centenarians, or people living over the age of one hundred. These places include Loma Linda, California; Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; and Okinawa, Japan. Not only are people living longer in these Blue Zones, but their quality of life even after one hundred is remarkable. Reportedly, men herd sheep through the countryside of Sardinia, Italy, while women leisurely work in their gardens. And men and women find ways to give back to their communities. Dan Buettner (2009), author of *The Blue Zones*, discovered that these regions shared nine common principles that contributed to their long, fulfilled lives, which he dubbed “The Power Nine” (264). Three of these principles address one’s relationship with food—the 80% rule, “plant slant,” and “wine at five.” “Plant slant” emphasizes that most of one’s diet comes from plant sources. Repeated studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between diets high in fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains and lower body fat percentages and decreased inflammation (Jakše et al. 2017). Plant-based diets also support animal welfare and sustainable food systems, and there is certainly a relationship between mindfulness and ecological equity, though this article focuses on the nutritional, rather than environmental, aspect.

What is fascinating about these cultures and their dietary habits, is that what appears as *mindful eating* to most Americans, is simply *eating* to them. Expressing gratitude, eliminating distractions, and evaluating levels of hunger and fullness are simply habits that people in these cultures have practiced for centuries, thereby effortlessly enhancing their eating experience. One of the most compelling rituals that individuals in Okinawa, Japan, engage in is the practice of *hara hachi bu*, the concept of eating until one is only eighty-percent full.

Dan Buettner (2017) describes *hara hachi bu* as the “cultural practice of calorie restriction.” Okinawans demonstrate this behavior by utilizing smaller serving vessels and by serving themselves, putting the food away, and then sitting down to enjoy the meal. This ritual deemphasizes the habit of “going back for seconds” (or thirds or fourths), and instead allows the individual to slow down, listen to their body, and engage with others at the meal. We can embrace the concept of *hara hachi bu* by implementing habits such as eating more slowly and intentionally, and by deliberately taking the time to listen to our bodies. We can eliminate distractions, such as television, the internet, or our cellphones, all of which can hinder our ability to engage mindfully with the food and with others. It has been said that “there is a significant calorie gap between when an Okinawan says ‘I’m no longer hungry’ and when an American says, ‘I’m full’” (Wansink 2011, 34). “We gain weight insidiously, not stuffing ourselves, but eating

a little bit too much each day—mindlessly” (Buettner 2009, 271). When we increase our awareness of our environment, express gratitude, and increase our perception of satisfaction, we can simultaneously enjoy consumption, conversation, and connection.

There are many ways that one can adopt mindful eating principles and practices in everyday life, one of which is restructuring the eating environment. Doing so allows individuals to eliminate mindless habits which can then help them eat more mindfully. This can further enable one to have more energy to focus on the more meaningful aspects of the meal, such as connectivity and gratitude.

Consider the following example. You notice that every day throughout each of your four planned breaks, you grab four miniature chocolate bars from the candy dish, even if you don't feel hungry—at this point, it's simply a mindless habit. Without harboring any feelings of guilt, you acknowledge this behavior, decide that you wish to change this habit, and then reengineer your morning routine so that the chocolate is no longer a temptation. This may be accomplished by chewing gum during the break, utilizing reverse psychology by stating aloud “I *am* going to eat this candy even though I'm *not* hungry,” keeping a good distance between yourself and the candy dish during your break, or getting rid of the dish entirely. By conscientiously reengineering the routine, you can “mindlessly” eat better (or in this case, not eat better). Adopting this new “mindless” habit could decrease calorie consumption by about 150 calories each day, which—all else being equal—could prevent a potential ten-pound weight gain each year. Thus, we can see that restructuring the environment and small habits can have a great impact on overall well-being. “The best diet is the one that you don't know you're on” (Wansink 2011, 1). We need not eliminate entire food groups or join intense weight loss programs to see positive changes. Rather, simple changes to the environment can bring gradual and sustainable benefits. But just as weight gain doesn't happen overnight, neither does weight loss. Time is required for effective weight loss, and patience and perseverance can indeed enhance the practice of mindfulness. Increased awareness of even the smallest positive changes in the body or mind will contribute to an elevated appreciation for mindful living and can cultivate a sense of well-being and flourishing.

Just as we can restructure our habits so that we mindlessly eat more mindfully, we can, of course, mindfully transform them as well. There are four practices we can adopt in order to do so: The first addresses *what* we eat. Making choices that are beneficial to the body, environment, and animals are key considerations in this first approach. Following a diet that emphasizes plant-based, minimally processed foods decreases the risk for heart disease and reduces environmental stress. The second component of mindful eating concerns the rationale behind our food choices (i.e., *why* we eat the

things we do). We are influenced to make decisions about what to eat based on many factors such as cost, knowledge, culture, advertising, availability, and—importantly—taste. Understanding the reasons behind our food choices can prompt us to evaluate if our dietary habits are best for ourselves and for others. Next comes the examination of *how much* we eat. This practice relates to the tradition of *hara hachi bu*. When we eat in a state of mindfulness, we are able to be more observant of the quantity of food consumed, which can decrease overconsumption. Finally, mindful eating allows us to examine *how* we eat. “Am I distracted? Am I in a rush? What flavors am I experiencing? With whom am I sharing the experience? Do I feel stressed, sad, angry, or happy?” When we make these observations, we connect back with ourselves, with those we may be with, and with those who helped bring the meal to the table (Fung et al. 2016).

Obesity. Observation. Okinawans—oh, my! There are myriad ways that we approach food every day. These avenues are unique to each of us, so there cannot be one prescriptive approach that we all can take to improve our relationships with food. However, by reflecting, observing, and assessing where we are individually, we can come to realize basic principles and approaches that may help improve our complex relationship with the food that we consume. My hope is that you can find the motivation and the resolution to take a moment of mindfulness before your next meal. Whether that be by offering gratitude, engaging with the environment, or heeding hunger and stopping at satisfaction, I am confident that you will discover an increased sense of well-being as you adopt these practices. Incorporating these rituals into your daily life can motivate others to do the same. Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn (1976) has said, “If in one class, *one student* lives in mindfulness, the whole class is influenced” (64).

If nothing else, I will leave you with these seven words by best-selling author Michael Pollan (2009): “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants” (1). This simple maxim concisely summarizes how we can avoid the mindless mouthful and live more centered, healthful, and flourishing lives. That’s just some food for thought.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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