

# Mindful Meal

## ***Goals:***

- 1. increase internal awareness***
- 2. increase self-understanding***
- 3. increase skills for supportive eating practices***

## Why mindful eating?

- Mindful eating is a skill that offers us more insight and awareness into our eating experience. It encourages a positive and non-judgmental approach to investigating our relationship with food.
- It can help us make choices that align with what helps our body to feel good.
- Mindful eating is not a diet - and shouldn't be one! If you notice that the increased awareness while eating is increasing your thoughts about how much is okay to eat or when you "should" stop - try to reorient yourself toward trust with your body and the cues it is giving you.
- Mindful eating does not have to be a formal meditation process to be helpful - letting your brain and body communicate and connect even for a couple moments during your meal can be helpful.

## How do I practice mindful eating?

- Mindful eating can be a lot of different things and doesn't have to look one specific way!
  - Checking in with yourself before, during, or after the meal
  - Eating without distractions - putting away your phone or turning off the tv
  - Using your body cues to inform your food choices - what sounds good? What feels good? When is it time to eat?
  - Experiment with food - try new things or different routines and notice how you feel.
  - Stay in touch with your body throughout the meal - when you find it difficult to notice when your hunger turns to neutrality and then to fullness it may be a sign to take a pause and see how you feel.

# Mindfulness Activity:

## **Before the meal starts -**

Notice what thoughts and feelings you're bringing to the table. What do you think about the food we are eating together?

## **Close your eyes or lower your gaze -**

Take 5 deep breaths into your belly. It may help to place a hand on your heart and one on your tummy. Do your best to breathe into your stomach without moving your chest. Write down what you notice.

## **Neutral descriptors -**

Write down the colors, textures, etc of the food you are going to eat.

Pretend you are trying to help someone guess what you are about to eat.

### **First bite -**

Write what you notice about your experience of this bite. Do you have any physical or emotional sensations present? Did the food meet your expectations?

### **Describe your hunger -**

What does hunger feel like in your body? How do you know if you are hungry or full? If 0 is starving and 5 is full, where do you fall on that scale right now?

### **Mid-meal check-in -**

What has changed as you continue to eat? Rate your hunger using the same scale as above. What are the physical cues your body is giving you?

## **Judgements -**

Have any thoughts been intruding in on your meal? Write them down to come back to in the future. How are you feeling about yourself, the food, your body, etc?

## **Takeaways -**

What did you notice about this experience? Were there things you would like to try again in the future? Where does your hunger or fullness fall on the scale now?

## **Comments & Questions**

# Learn More about Mindful Eating!

In a world of body shame and food guilt, it's not crazy to have a complex relationship with food or to search for an answer to how and what to eat. Overall, mindful eating can be a supportive tool to use when we're re-learning how to compassionately and intuitively feed ourselves. I think the most important part is that it remains a tool and not a rule.

**Self-awareness** is the first piece of this tool. Building internal awareness is a tough business and can be incredibly uncomfortable in the beginning. We start this mindfulness journey by being aware of ourselves, not aware of the food. Having awareness of our hunger cues, our emotions, our vulnerabilities, our body image informs how we are showing up to the meal. It gives us some insight into the influences impacting our hunger, our cravings, and how our body might have some opinions in the moment. Using these internal cues gives us the information to make informed choices about food and eating. This information can provide some nuance as well - having low hunger cues could be a sign of fullness or it could be a physical manifestation of anxiety or other big emotions. Self-awareness is a tool to explore how to take care of ourselves with eating without relying solely on one piece of information.

**Food awareness** is our second component. Hunger and fullness cues can be incredibly intricate, giving us different signals even among types of foods that we might desire or not desire. Have you ever heard the awful advice "if you aren't hungry for an apple, you aren't that hungry"? There are so many reasons I hate that particular adage, but most of all it promotes distrust in our own bodies. It's okay to have variety in your cravings and hunger cues. It's also okay to lean into the ways that your body is communicating you - seeing these cues as data and information to learn from. As we eat food, having awareness of what is on your plate and how you are feeling about it gives our body a chance to further communicate with us. You're allowed to feel full on your broccoli, but still be craving more pasta. It is normal to feel full from your meal, but still want a little dessert after you're done. Variety is necessary to have a well-rounded intake of nutrients, so forcing ourselves to eat specific foods and reduce others can displace the balance our body craves.

**Being present** is the piece of this framework that can be the hardest to sit with. Our 21st century minds are accustomed to distraction and stimulus throughout most of our days. If we are also feeling some type of way about eating food, sitting in the presence of those feelings and sensations is going to be pretty uncomfortable. Thankfully, being present doesn't have to be any one particular thing. I typically recommend trying to be mindful/present at three times in your meal - the beginning, the middle, and the end. As we build tolerance for being present in our mind and bodies while eating, we can add check ins into our meal in a way that feels natural. Eating alone may offer more opportunities to be truly present, while eating with others makes it more challenging. And it should be more challenging because you are being present in conversation, connection, and friendship - all things that are just as health promoting as having a good relationship with food.

Speaking of eating with others, there are appropriate times to be distracted while eating. My personal favorite is when I'm sharing a meal with someone else and I'm more engaged in our conversation than with every bite of food I put in my mouth. Distraction is also an important skill for people who are new on an eating recovery journey if hyper-awareness of the eating experience feels triggering. If mindfulness is a tool, let's use it appropriately and know when it's opposite is going to be the more helpful choice. If mindless eating (or distracted eating) is a skill you need in order to adequately feed your body try listening to a podcast, watching a tv show, playing a great playlist, or using conversation cards with those you are eating with. A reminder that eating food is always preferable to not getting enough, even if it means using skills that don't look like the "right" way to eat.