

## The Basics of Mindful Eating

Summer is here and we often feel pressure to look a certain way or get “beach body ready.” This pressure we put on ourselves can be overwhelming and lead to unhealthy eating behaviours, as well as negative emotions associated with food. I’m sure you have all heard of the yo-yo cycle of dieting: We restrict ourselves from eating enough food to lose weight, then we “go off the wagon,” put the weight back on (often even more than what we lost), and feel completely defeated, resulting in poor self-worth and low self-esteem. Why do we do this to ourselves over and over again?



We will often attach emotions to foods we eat as well. We feel guilty if we eat an ice cream cone or have a fresh baked pastry from the local bakery. Why do we place certain emotions and feelings on certain foods? Food is not morally good or bad, but the society and diet culture we live in certainly does make it seem this way. Furthermore, we often tie our self-worth to the foods we eat, which leads to a shame-spiral around food. Who decided that eating ice cream makes you a “bad person?” Food choices are not a reflection of who we are as people, so why do we have those thoughts? How can we change our thoughts about food and have a more positive relationship with the foods we eat?

The first step is to be mindful about what we eat and how we feel about those foods by keeping a food journal. Not the typical kind where we are writing down the exact measurements and calorie and macronutrient breakdown of the food, but the kind where we simply write down what we ate and how we felt before eating, during eating and after eating. By keeping food and emotions journals, we can pinpoint exactly what emotions we attach to our food and then ask ourselves, where do these emotions come from and why are they there? Am I stressed out and think this food will help me feel better? Was this food used to comfort me with when I was sad or hurt during my childhood? Does this food remind me of a certain place I hold near and dear to my heart and am trying to experience those emotions again? Or am I rewarding myself with food when I do a good job and feel I deserve it?

The next step would be to be make an observation about the feelings you may have in certain situations from your food journal instead of judgement. If you feel guilty because you ate a whole bag of chips without even realizing it, instead of feeling shame, think about why you did it in the first place. Maybe you were stressed and chips are your “go to” food when stressed, maybe you missed lunch break and were just grabbing the first food you could to help with the hunger, or maybe you just really wanted those chips and enjoyed eating them in the moment and that is completely okay. You will start to notice eating patterns, which is much more helpful than feeling shame and judgement.

Once you have identified the patterns, you will use multiple strategies to break this pattern and emotional way of eating. One strategy that I like is from a program called *Craving Change™*, which was developed by a Registered Dietitian and a Registered Psychologist to help people who struggle with their eating. The strategy is called Nurture Yourself Rather Than Nourish Yourself. The first step is to keep a food and emotions journal to help recognize when you turn to certain foods for comfort, as a treat or reward, for a little “pick me up” to get through the day, or whatever it may be. Then...

1. Get a pen and paper and quickly write down a list of ways that you currently comfort or nurture yourself.
2. Review the list and cross off anything that involves food.
3. Use the remaining non-food ways to nurture yourself in the next week. The more you turn to non-food ways of nurturing yourself, the more they will become your automatic “go to” when you feel you need comfort or a reward. And the more you used the non-food strategies, the less guilt and negative emotions you will have when in these situations.

It is important to remember that healthy eating is not defined by weight. A weight neutral approach to healthy eating, paired with positive health behaviours like eating regular meals, eating when you are actually hungry and practicing mindfulness when eating, have been shown to have better psychological outcomes than approaching healthy eating with the intent to lose weight. The most important thing to remember when trying to make changes in your behaviour or habits is to be kind to yourself! Things take practice, lots of practice. Try not to be too hard on yourself – we tend to be our own worst enemy. And that can create a whole bunch of negative emotions and throw us back into that negative way of thinking.

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