

Creating a Healthy Relationship with ITP's Fifth Commitment: "I am conscious of everything I eat."

Adapted from an ITP presentation given by ITP member Barbara Brown



Food and our relationship to eating are complicated topics. More than simply nutritional sustenance, food is at the centerpiece of family and religious traditions, provides an occasion for bonding with friends, and family and acts as a marker of status, class and national and ethnic heritage. Food is both fuel and medicine for body, mind, heart and soul.

Within our ITP practice, our commitment to be "conscious of everything we eat" is purposely open-ended to account for its many roles. It is simply recommended to eat a balanced and healthy diet. Being conscious while eating means to *"pay attention, to be mindful, as you choose or prepare food and as you eat, and that you stay mindful of the aftereffects of the food eaten."*

In this context, it is important to stay conscious of *what* we ingest, while also being aware of *why* we consume what we do.

Triggers for Unconscious Eating

For many of us, we approach the act of eating and drinking through the lens of losing, gaining or maintaining a certain weight or to remedy a physical ailment. No matter what our dietary goals are, however, it is important to examine our current relationship with food and what might trigger unconscious eating habits. Some of these emotional triggers include:

- Seeing food
- Smelling food
- Hearing food
- Participating in social situations where food and drink are offered
- Engaging in habitual activities while eating (pairing eating with reading, watching TV, movies, driving, computer use, working or mindless snacking throughout the day)
- Stress
- Emotional distress (using food to soothe away, numb, avoid difficult feelings like anger, boredom, anxiety, sadness, depression)
- Emotional happiness/comfort (using food to celebrate or reward yourself)
- Procrastinating (eating to avoid tasks)

Creating a Healthy Relationship with Food

When we understand our current relationship with food and what triggers unconscious or unempowered eating, we can begin to make positive changes. Just as healthy, personal relationships require respect, trust, gratitude, boundaries and honesty, our relationship with food and eating are enhanced when integrating these same qualities.

Here are a few ways we can build a healthy relationship with food inspired by John M. Gottmans' Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.

Nurture your fondness and admiration for food.

Eat slowly and chew thoroughly, savoring every bite. Consider all the miracles that came together to create the meal you are eating. Use all your senses while eating and engaging with your food.

Turn toward food instead of away.

When eating meals, take time to create joyful connections with your food. Arrange your plate with care and beauty, pay attention to the moment, light candles and use your finest settings. Make your mealtimes special by paying attention to the details.

Let food and its benefits influence your eating

Understand which foods and food combinations make you feel nourished and which ingredients have a negative impact on your integral being. Be drawn to using food that benefits your body and heart, rather than feeling pressured to follow a certain dietary approach. Be your own authority in what makes you feel balanced, vital and healthy.

Solve your solvable problems.

Seek out help and support when necessary. Hire a nutritionist, plan your meals or remove tempting unhealthy foods in your home. Understand your triggers and challenges and feel empowered to find solutions to set yourself up for success.

Overcome Gridlock

Sometimes our vision for our ideal weight, body composition or food tolerances just isn't possible. Understand the "dream within the conflict" and reflect on how you can accept the circumstances and adapt as needed. Are there healthy compromises you can make within your food choices? Are you surrounded with people who are not supportive of your food choices? Consider how you can find a way to respect each other's dietary needs with compassion and understanding.

When we are aware of our goals and practices surrounding food, we can be intentional in how food serves our transformative journey in body, mind, heart and soul. As ITP co-founder Michael Murphy and George Leonard write in *The Life We Are Given*: "To eat with full awareness turns us toward a diet that is both good and good for us. It rejoins us with the matrix of our existence and can inspire us with thanksgiving for the everyday wonder of food, the everlasting miracle of the life we are given."