

Mindful Eating Exercises

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PURPOSE/EFFECTS

Eating food is one of the places where people exhibit the greatest degree of unconsciousness, grasping, aversion, and indifference. For most Americans, eating is just “putting food in the hole” while doing something else, like watching television, talking, or even driving! Yet eating is potentially one of the most important things in our life. It sustains our physical body, brings pleasurable sensations, can fill us with emotional joy and satisfaction, and can be a powerful source of spiritual insight. Furthermore, eating meditation, like any other “mindfulness” or Vipassana practice, while reinforce the core skills of concentration, sensory clarity, and emotional equanimity.

Eating meditation can even increase your physical health, by removing a common source of obesity. Eating too fast usually means that we are also eating too much. The feeling of being full takes a little while to come to our attention, and during this time we may still be loading our stomachs with more and more food, unaware that we are already full. By eating slowly and bringing awareness to our bodies during the activity of eating, we will probably eat quite a bit less food, and therefore not gain as much weight.

Many people report huge personal changes from the simple act of eating meditation.

HISTORY

Eating meditation is a common practice in Vipassana and Zen Buddhism. Formal Zen eating meditation is different from what is presented here. It is called oryoki. Prayer before meals could be considered a basic form of eating meditation, by formally stopping all other activities, and bringing our attention to the sacredness of the act of eating.

CAUTIONS

You may wish to do this alone, or only in the presence of other practitioners, as it can make non-practitioners uncomfortable.

Short Mindful Eating Exercise

Eating is an opportunity to nourish your body while nourishing your mindfulness practice.

You can do this practice in any position, but it is helpful to stay still while eating.

This minimizes unnecessary stimulus and helps you focus on the experience.

You can do this with any food. I recommend starting with something simple, like raisins, berries, or a few of your favorite vegetables.

Begin by taking in the food visually. Notice the colors, shapes, and sizes.

As you look at the food, notice the urge to start eating.

There is nothing wrong with hunger, but allow the cravings to come and go.

Return to the sight of the food.

Next, investigate the smell of the food.

Some foods may have stronger aromas than others, and you may have to hold the food up to your nose.

Be present for the experience of smelling.

When the mind begins craving, just return to the smell in front of you.

Before eating, take a brief moment to appreciate the energy that went into its production.

People worked to grow this food and bring it to you.

Nature provided nutrients, rainwater, and sunshine.

Maybe somebody cooked, cleaned, or packaged it for you.

Bring into your mind all of the energy from various sources that came together to create this meal.

Now, slowly pick up the food.

If you are using any utensils, tune in to the experience of touch as you feel the utensil.

Mindfully feel how the food or utensil feels in your hand. Is the food stiff, soft, cold, or warm?

As you put the food in your mouth, notice the desire to chew and swallow quickly.

Instead, start by feeling the temperature of the food.

Holding the food in your mouth, can you feel the shape?

As you begin chewing, notice the texture of the food.

Does it change as you continue to chew?

Notice the flavors.

You may have a hard time doing more than simply labeling what you're eating, such as "It's a raspberry."

Try to dig a little deeper. Are there multiple flavors present?

Pay attention to the changing of flavors as you continue to chew.

When you swallow your bite, tune in to the experience of swallowing.

What does it feel like as the food moves down the throat?

You may also notice the desire to quickly have another bite.

Pause and notice if any flavor remains in the mouth for a moment.

You can continue eating like this, reminding yourself to slow down and be present.

Continue to check in with the sights, smells, tastes, feelings, and thoughts that arise.

When you finish eating, allow yourself to feel gratitude for the food that is nourishing your body.

Let the mind relax into a state of appreciation for the energy and life.

Long Mindful Eating Exercise

Pay close attention to the physical activity of eating slowly, while contemplating the food itself.

1. At a meal, take a single piece of food (like a raisin, a piece of pizza, a spoonful of yogurt) and hold it in front of you.
2. Pay close attention to the sensual quality of the food. If it is in your fingers, how does it feel? What is its texture? Feel its weight, shape, and physicality. Notice how it looks. What color(s) is it? What aromas does it give off? In every way possible, deeply encounter the food on the level of your senses (without putting it in your mouth yet).
3. Tune in to your emotions around this bite of food. Are you attracted to it? Do you feel in a hurry to get it into your mouth? Are you annoyed at having to slow down and consider the food? Or are you perhaps unattracted to this food, and filled with a sense of disgust and not wanting to eat it? What are you hoping to get out of eating this food?
4. Now consider where this food came from. Think of the farms where it was grown, the farmers who worked to grow it. Think of the sun and the rain it required to grow, the air and the soil which supported it, and so on. Then consider what it took for this food to get to you. It may have been picked, sorted, moved many miles in trucks or trains, sorted, packaged, and so forth. It may have then been shipped to a grocery store, where people unpacked it, displayed it, sold it, and bagged it. Once in your home or in the kitchen, the food then had to be cooked or prepared in some way, even if only by washing. An enormous, complex web of interactions, elements, people, and perhaps animals and machines had to come together, all to bring you this single bite of food. It may even have come from the other side of the planet, all so that you could eat it now.
5. Now slowly and mindfully put the food in your mouth, but do not chew it yet. Simply feel the food on your tongue. Taste how it tastes before being chewed. Take in its smell, and its texture on your tongue. Notice how your whole body reacts and changes to the food in your mouth. Salivation begins. The stomach may become active. Pay close attention to this entire process. You may wish to close your eyes.
6. Next slowly and mindfully chew the food (assuming it needs it). Attempt to chew in an attentive, active manner. As much as possible, remove the robotic, mechanical, mindless aspect of chewing. Instead, make each chomp a conscious act, done with great care and consideration. Notice how chewing the food changes it in many ways. New flavors and aromas are released. The texture and size of the food undergoes a remarkable change. As much as possible, keep your attention on the food and the act of chewing it. Let go of all other thoughts. Again, closing your eyes helps.

7. Feel the food going down your throat. Feel if you can sense it entering the stomach, and the sensations of the stomach receiving the food and working to digest it.
8. Let go and relax, noticing all the sensations that arise from having eaten this bite of food.
9. Repeat this process until the meal is ended.

Guidance on Teaching Mindful Eating Exercises

Key Learning Features

1. Experiencing the difference between mindful awareness and automatic pilot.
2. Experiencing how bringing attention to experience can reveal new aspects to it and transform our experience of it.
3. The present is the only time we have to know and experience.
4. Experiencing how the mind wander.

Guidance for Teaching Mindful Eating Exercises

- ☐ Hygiene Considerations. Using proper utensils, hand washing, handling of food.
- ☐ Offering an option to interact with something else – exploring senses.
- ☐ Choosing repeated experience. For example, guide the class with one raisin, then invite the participants to call out “flavor” words; then next ask them to eat in silence with teacher guidance; then repeat a third time in complete silence with no guidance.
- ☐ Invite participants to “Let Go”. Let go of prior knowledge/experience of the food and invite them to see it with as a new encounter.
- ☐ Consider emphasizing attitudes of Curiosity, Interest, Exploration.

Inquiry and Didactic Teaching

- ☐ Direct noticing of the sensations of the experience from all the senses.
- ☐ Elicit observations about how it might have felt different from their usual experience with eating the item.
- ☐ Help the participants to gather the observations about the nature of our minds, the ways we pay attention and how this relates to well-being.

Themes

- If we are on autopilot, we cannot see our moods to begin to change.
- The mindful eating practice may lead to realization that there are other things to be seen and more to life than our preconceptions, deductions, and opinions.
- Develop awareness that slowing down even with routine activities might transform them.
- Paying attention to experience in this curious, open way may show aspects of our experience we had not seen before.
- The mind is always making associations from present moment experience to memories, deeper understanding, stories from the past, but we are not usually aware of where that takes us. Difficult mind states may take hold when we are unaware.
- The difference between eating mindfully and usual attitudes to eating, impulses around food that are unconscious, powerful, and uncontrolled.

Self-Assessment

Refer to the Mindfulness Teaching Self-Assessment Rubric, taking evidence of your execution of one of the Mindful Eating Exercises using this guidance and asking yourself the questions embedded in the tool. Identify your strengths and areas in need of learning improvement. Rate your competency in this event. Use this information to plan for and execute your next teaching of the exercise.

(Guidance adapted from <http://mbitac.bangor.ac.uk/mbitac-tool.php.en>.)