

“Mindfulness” means paying attention in the present moment with acceptance (i.e., without judgments). Mindfulness applied to eating known as **“Mindful Eating”** means paying attention to at least three aspects:

1. The sensations in your mouth when eating
2. Signals of hunger (i.e., physical need to eat)
3. Signals of satisfaction and fullness

Emotional Eating refers to eating that is not done to satisfy physical hunger; **Binge Eating** refers to emotional eating that feels out of control and results in large food intake. Mindful eating is an important component in the treatment of binge eating and emotional eating. There are three primary ways it works. First, mindful eating helps to structure eating throughout the day around appetite, so decisions about when to start and stop eating become clear and are not hijacked by emotion-minded thinking. Second, mindful eating helps a person feel satisfied with small amounts of food, which reduces the pressure to consume large quantities. Third, mindful eating creates a habit that is antithetical to the mindless eating that occurs during a binge. The more one becomes accustomed to eating mindfully, the less comfortable it will feel to enter the trance-like state that constitutes a binge. To make this clearer, let us look at the three components of mindful eating and see how each can help a person who is trying to stop binge eating.

Mindfulness to mouth sensations: Another word for this is “savoring.” Savoring means getting the most enjoyment possible from each mouthful of food that is eaten. It is accomplished by paying close attention to the sensations in one’s mouth—especially taste, touch, sound, and smell—as food is being moved around, chewed, sucked, and ultimately swallowed. In order to be mindful to the sensations in your mouth, you need to avoid paying attention to TV, reading, computer screens, movies, conversation, and distracting thoughts (especially worries, regret, planning and judgments). If your mind is occupied with something else while food is in your mouth, you miss out on the pleasure and satisfaction that the food can offer. When your mind doesn’t have a chance to register the full food experience, you are more likely to keep on eating. This often happens in a binge—lots of food is eaten, but little satisfaction is gained. If you focus on eating mindfully every time you eat, you can feel satisfied and even soothed with a few bites, and are less likely to eat large amounts.

Additionally, because mindful eating leads to satisfaction with smaller portions, it becomes unnecessary to restrict favorite high calorie foods from one’s diet in order to manage one’s weight. Eliminating this “restriction” or “diet” approach to weight management is important

for ending binge eating. Research has shown that binge eating is often preceded by an attempt to restrict food intake for the purpose of weight control (e.g., going on a “diet” or skipping meals). The feelings that are often described as “deprivation” that come from food-restriction, along with the feelings of guilt and self-judgment that often arises when a person breaks one of her restrictive rules, are common feelings that precede and accompany a binge. However, if people learn to manage their weight and satisfy their cravings using mindful eating, they won’t feel the urge to go on weight-loss diets and restrict themselves from favorite foods. They will learn that they can indulge in one or several mindful bites of enjoyable foods when desired (for example, cake at a wedding, pizza at a party) and neither gain weight nor be triggered to overeat these foods. They will learn that they can manage their weight without deprivation, and this will reduce binges that stem from a dieting mentality and the self-judgments that accompany it.

Mindfulness to Hunger:

Mindful awareness of hunger entails paying attention to your body’s signals that it needs food for fuel (e.g., sensations of emptiness in stomach, pressure in neck and face signaling low blood sugar) and differentiating these from other urges to eat. Non-hunger urges can come from boredom, habit, environmental triggers, and emotions and may be the first step in a binge episode. To end binge eating habits, it is important to check in with your body every time you have an urge or craving to eat. This way you can determine if the urge is from hunger or not. When you notice have urges or cravings to eat that are NOT coming from hunger, it is helpful to ask yourself “what do I need right now other than food.” For example, you may need emotional soothing, connection with other people, sensory pleasure, distraction, entertainment, companionship, intimacy, a change of scene, or a few deep breaths. There are specific skills you can learn to help you manage emotional urges to binge—interestingly, many of these skills are also based in mindfulness (e.g., DBT for Binge Eating and Bulimia). For our current discussion, the key point is that learning to eat mindfully—eating when hungry, avoiding eating when not hungry—transforms our urges to binge eat into signals that we need to care for ourselves in another way.

Mindful Awareness of Fullness:

Mindfulness to fullness means recognizing when your body is no longer hungry plus noticing the feelings in your stomach as food fills it up. A very important habit to get into is stopping eating as soon as you feel yourself comfortably full. Binge eating often involves ignoring or not fully perceiving signals of fullness, and continuing to eat until a point of severe discomfort. The more you practice paying attention to your growing fullness during other meals and snacks,

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the easier it may be for you to notice fullness signals during a binge. With enough practice, you may be able to stop before your binge becomes large, painful and harmful to your body.

Mindful eating is the antithesis of binge eating, which is always mindless and not responsive to hunger and fullness. Binge eating is a hard habit to break. It can feel addictive. Mindfulness and mindful eating provides a path to end this habit. Mindful eating, including savoring and attention to hunger and fullness, requires practice. However, the practice is quite satisfying! Mindful eating, along with some work on self-soothing and managing your emotions without food, may free you from binge eating habits for good.