

Changing Your Relationship with Food

By Barbara L. Holtzman, MSW, LICSW

How do you decide what and when to eat? Because it's lunchtime? Because someone brought donuts to the staff meeting? Because you're tired or bored? Most of us eat based on external stimuli rather than our own physical needs and food preferences. Many of us don't even know when we're hungry or comfortably satisfied. If our urge to eat is usually triggered by external situations such as the time of day or the availability of food, we may lose the awareness of our body's message of hunger. If eating is our primary coping mechanism for dealing with uncomfortable feelings, we may never experience physical hunger since we are medicating ourselves with food before we even experience the sensations of hunger.

For those of us whose physical needs for food have been overshadowed by our desire for a smaller body size, we have probably ignored our body's signals, counting on a diet, rather than our body's wisdom or our personal preferences, to tell us what to eat. When we eat from the "outside" instead of the "inside," it is normal to rebel by eating formerly "forbidden foods." To change our relationship with food, we need to develop an conscious relationship with food. Conscious eaters make food choices without feeling guilt; they honor their hunger, respect their fullness and enjoy the pleasures of eating.

If you'd like to change your relationship with food, you might want to experiment with the following:

When you think about eating, take a pause. Sit down and take a few slow, deep breaths as fatigue and stress often trigger the desire for food. Ask yourself whether you're physically hungry or if something else is prompting your desire for food. You might want to ask yourself some questions. Do I want a break? Am I trying to procrastinate? Anxious, angry or sad? If you're not sure, try lying down as you may actually be tired or drink some water, as you may be dehydrated. If you realize that you're not physically hungry but still want food, try to become curious about it. "What is prompting my desire for food right now?" Is it a habit? Do you always want food as soon as you walk through the door? Perhaps an uncomfortable thought or feeling prompted the automatic reaction of wanting food to distract you or sooth you. Are you willing to use the desire for non-hunger eating as a message from your inner self and become curious?

Try going inside and allowing the awareness to surface. Journaling may help. Is there anything else that will help soothe these feelings besides food? - taking a walk, calling a friend, taking a shower or bath, going into nature... If not and the urgency hasn't dissipated, allow yourself a small portion of what you crave, experience the taste and allow yourself to be soothed by it. Don't beat yourself up! You deserve soothing for uncomfortable feelings and emotional eating is your most practiced tool. When you give yourself permission and allow the food to soothe you, the emotional eating experience will not turn into a binge.

Whenever you eat, try to eat with awareness and enjoyment. If you're eating while doing another activity, you miss the "cephalic phase of ingestion." As Marc David, nutrition consultant and author of *Nourishing Wisdom* says, "You have to be there when you eat. (Otherwise) the belly is full but the mouth is hungry." The brain experiences hunger if it hasn't experienced the taste, pleasure, aroma and satisfaction from the food. If you're eating until the TV show breaks for a commercial or you've finished the chapter, you will miss the body's message that you've had enough food and you are likely to overeat. To feel the satisfaction from the food, it is important to be relaxed and aware. The French, who eat foods with a relatively high fat content, tend to be thin, partly due to genetics and partly because they dine rather than eat on the run. Careful attention is paid to the quality of the food, its preparation and appearance, and the ambiance in which it is eaten. Since food is eaten slowly, with great awareness and pleasure, they are satisfied with smaller portions.

Eating with awareness is the simplest way to lose and maintain weight loss – without deprivation.

Experiment with eating for energy. After all, in addition to tasting good and satisfying us on many levels, food is fuel for the body. Try eating to the point where you feel more energy than before you ate. If you eat past this point, you are likely to feel sluggish and actually lose energy. It is important to make sure that you're breathing and chewing fully as you eat, allowing oxygen and saliva to help your body digest the food, so you get maximum nourishment and energy.

Conscious eating requires commitment and awareness. Cultivate a sense of gratitude for the food. Each time we eat with awareness, we come home to that place of inner peace. As we learn to nourish our bodies, we find that we are spiritually nourished as well.

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