

The art of eating

Mindful eating, a practice that involves being completely present in the eating process, may not just prevent you from overeating but can also improve many of your health parameters

BY SUREKHA S.



Imagine a scenario where you can eat whatever you want, whenever you want, how much ever you want but you will still be healthy; the only caveat—you have to be completely aware of the process of eating and how your body reacts to each food. And proponents of mindful eating believe this is all you need to do to be healthy.

So, what really is mindful eating? This is a practice that stems from the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, which means staying and being completely involved in the present moment. “Remember how your grandparents would eat. They would

sit down with their food, say a prayer before eating and then just eat—no distractions, no television, they would just focus on the food and eat. That’s what mindful eating is really about. It’s the art of eating right. And it has been advocated by most ancient philosophies,” says Munmun Ganeriwal, nutritionist, fitness consultant and founder, Yuktahaar.

According to Dr Shyam Bhat, psychiatrist, and mental wellness expert at CureFit, what we eat and how we eat determines our state of health. “The body has a sophisticated sensing mechanism that detects everything

from blood sugar to the nutrients coming into the system and so on. Unfortunately, since our mind is elsewhere while we are eating, we are neither aware of the full taste, texture, flavours, and experience of the food, nor are we aware of our own body’s response to the food,” he says. “To eat mindfully means to pay full attention to the food and to experience eating—bringing the mind to the present, letting go of the past and the future, and being fully connected with the tastes, the textures, the smell, the sound, the sight of the food, as well as our own internal response to the food as we eat.”

“Mindfulness is about living in complete awareness,” adds Kapila Ramakrishnan, life coach and coordinator of programming at Pragya Living Wisdom Centre, who has been a practitioner and student of mindfulness for over 10 years. “It is a way of consciously living your life. And mindfulness can be applied to every aspect of your life.”

Process of mindful eating

Madhuri Ruia, nutritionist, fitness expert and founder, Integym, Mumbai, feels that most of us eat in a distracted manner, today, and we tend to eat fast, and hence overeat. “Mindfulness is

being aware of what we do and why we do it,” she says. So, the first question one should ask oneself is are you hungry. “Listening to hunger and satiety signals are very important and can be achieved when eating mindfully,” adds Ganeriwal. “Look at babies, they feed when hungry and when they are full they let go of the mother’s breast. They eat based on what their body tells them.”

Once you recognise your hunger signal, you need to sit down in a comfortable place and savour the different aspects of the food, its sight, smell, texture and taste. “Sitting quietly in a comfortable place and closing your eyes for a few minutes saying gratitude for the food also helps calm your mind and prepare your body for the food it is about to receive,” says Ganeriwal.

According to Ramakrishnan, we need to understand what it is that our body is asking for. She says, “Mindful eating is to tune in to your body and make choices from that space.” She adds that one must answer the why, what, when and how of eating; why are you eating, is it because you are hungry or is it just a force of habit. What you eat and when you eat should also be based on your body’s signals. “How you eat is extremely important. Am I completely present with the food, feeling the sensation, flavour, slowly chewing and enjoying the food,” she says. “Even if you are not consuming media, but are arguing with someone when eating, it impacts you,” adds Ruia.

As you are involved in the eating process, tune in to your body and listen to how it reacts to different food. “Note how the food feels when it is going down. Also, note your sense of energy and mood after you eat,” recommends Bhat. “Note how you feel after eating. If you keep practising mindfulness it will improve your health and how you feel and you will see a difference.” Mindful eating is about being in connect with the food and your body. “Our bodies are constantly communicating with us,” adds Ramakrishnan.

Chewing the food really well and eating slowly is important. “When you

chew well, the salivary glands start acting on the food, starting the digestion process. This reduces the burden on the stomach and the intestine and absorption and assimilation of nutrients is better. The nutritional status of the body improves,” points out Ganeriwal. “Also, it takes 20 minutes for the brain to send the signal of satiety. So, if you eat quickly you are bound to overeat. Your brain and body will not be satisfied and you will be hungry shortly again,” adds Ruia. She states that the amount you eat will reduce dramatically once you start eating slowly and mindfully. An important thing to remember is mindful eating allows you to enjoy food, something many of us have forgotten to do.

“When you give your undivided attention to food, enjoying its every aspect, the process of eating will be thoroughly enjoyable,” says Ganeriwal.

Proponents of mindful eating believe that once you learn to eat mindfully, you will never feel like reaching out for unhealthy food. Also, once you see how your body reacts to different food, you will actually find unhealthy food unappealing. “You will clearly see the negative impact bad food has on your body and mind. If you eat mindfully, you will respond to the freshness of food and also recognise your body’s energy levels after eating certain food,” says Bhat. Ramakrishnan recalls a person in one of her mindful eating workshops, who used to love eating chips and could easily go through an entire bag. “But once he practised mindful eating, he could not believe he liked something this salty. He said it tastes terrible.”

No restrictions

Mindful eating is an act of compassion and love for your body. So, the best part of this practice is that there are no restrictions, unlike other diets. The truth is, there is no need for restrictions. Sometimes, your body may ask for sugar or fried stuff and it is okay to give it that, without any guilt. “But when you eat even that mindfully, you will not over-



indulge. If you need to emotionally eat some comfort food and you do it mindfully, you will stop the moment that need is met. So, there are no strict rules, you only have to tune in and listen to your body,” emphasises Ramakrishnan. One does not need a specific diet to be healthy, adds Bhat. “You will choose healthy food and your cravings for bad food will go down,” he says.

But this takes practice. Some say it could take a week, some a month or more. “You have to try it one meal at a time. It has to slowly become a ritual, a habit. Mindfulness is a way of being kind to yourself. If you eat mindfully every day, the quality of your thoughts and your life will improve dramatically. Your energy levels are higher, you sleep better and you feel good,” says Ruia. Ganeriwal says that she has seen an improvement in many of her clients of weight loss, diabetes and other conditions, through mindful eating. “It has also led to reduction of symptoms in certain conditions like polycystic ovary disorder (PCOD),” she says.

Backed by science

It has been proven by studies and many personal experiences that

practising mindfulness when it comes to eating helps you eat less and also make healthier choices in food. But a recent study says it can do a lot more than that. In a study published in the journal *Obesity* in March 2016, researchers found that including mindfulness enhancements to a diet-exercise regime may promote long-term improvement in some aspects of metabolic health in obesity. Lead study researcher, Jennifer Daubenmier, assistant professor at the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, said that mindful eating could improve glucose levels and heart health to a greater extent than behavioural weight-loss programmes that do not teach mindful eating. The study which was aimed at evaluating the effects of a mindfulness-based weight-loss intervention on adults with obesity did not show much statistical improvements in terms of weight loss, but it showed greater improvements in certain cardiometabolic outcomes tied to type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease up to one year after the intervention ended.

Tips to follow

- › First find out if you are hungry.
- › Switch off all gadgets and keep them away. Give your undivided attention to food and sit in a comfortable place to eat.
- › Say a small prayer, expressing gratitude for the food, recognising the journey it has made from the farm to your plate.
- › Savour every element of the food, its smell, texture, colour, look and taste. Clear your mind of everything else.
- › Eat slowly, chewing well.
- › Eat with your hands; it is an intimate experience.
- › Observe how your body feels, listen to satiety signals.

Another pilot study conducted by researchers at the Oregon Research Institute found that eating focused mindfulness-based intervention can result in significant changes in weight, eating behaviour, and psychological distress in obese individuals.

So, be mindful, stay healthy! □