This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Mindful Eating:
Enhancing Your Relationship with Your Food
Clinical Tool

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way. On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. Left to itself, the mind wanders through all kinds of thoughts—including thoughts expressing anger, craving, depression, revenge, self-pity, etc. As we indulge in these kinds of thoughts, we reinforce those emotions in our hearts and cause ourselves to suffer. By purposefully directing our awareness away from such thoughts and towards some “anchor,” we decrease their effect on our lives and we create instead a space of freedom where calmness and contentment can grow.

What Is Mindful Eating?

Eating mindfully is not about what you eat, but HOW and WHY you eat. It is not about judging your choices or yourself but instead focusing on the HERE and NOW of eating. By paying close attention to taste, textures, and sensations, you can savor each bite and get more enjoyment out of your food. Here is an example of the unconscious eating that most of us do:

Think of the first bite of a food you love...maybe it is a piece of chocolate. You have been looking forward to enjoying it and the saliva builds in your mouth as you unfold the wrapper. You bite into it and are totally immersed in its sweetness, richness, and smoothness. It is so delicious, and you are happy to be eating it. Then you begin to talk with the person you are sitting with, or glance back up to the TV, and the flavor in your mouth decreases. Then you are chewing without noticing the chocolate at all, and it has disappeared before you realize it.

Mindful eating is about recreating that “first bite” delight in each bite of your food. When your mind is disengaged from eating, you are not satisfied and seek out more food, even when you are full. When you connect with your eating experience and reflect on the source of the food, those who prepared it, those eating around you, and the sensations in your body, you will feel more satisfied regardless of what or how much you are eating. Mindful eating can make anyone’s eating healthier and more nurturing, regardless of weight or nutritional status. Mindfulness-based interventions targeting eating behaviors have become increasingly more popular. In a recent literature review of 21 papers focusing on mindfulness with regard to binge eating, external eating, and emotional eating, 18 (86%) of the studies found benefit.
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Clinical Tool: Mindful Eating

Why Eat Mindfully?

There are many reasons to incorporate mindful eating into a Personal Health Plan. For example:

- It can lead to positive and lasting change, because eating mindfully is not about restrictive diet choices.
- Food becomes something to enjoy, rather than a temptation or regret.\(^\text{6}\)
- It slows down the pace of your meals, allowing your brain time to hear the “I’m full” signals from your stomach, which may help with weight loss.\(^\text{7}\)
- It optimizes digestion. Some research has shown that when our attention is not focused on eating, our digestive process is 30%-40% less effective than it should be, which leads to gas, bloating, and discomfort.\(^\text{8}\)
- Mindfulness can increase your awareness of the source of your food, which encourages buying local and/or organic if you are able.
- Mindful eating with family fosters deeper connection. It also allows you to model healthy eating behaviors for your children. (No “clean plate” club!)

Mindful Eating: An Introductory Exercise\(^\text{9}\)

It may be easier and more fun if you do this with a friend.

- Take one bite of an apple slice and then close your eyes. Do not begin chewing yet. Try not to pay attention to the ideas running through your mind, just focus on the apple. Notice anything that comes to mind about taste, texture, temperature, and sensation going on in your mouth.
- Begin chewing now. Chew slowly, just noticing what it feels like. It’s normal that your mind will want to wander off. If you notice you’re paying more attention to your thinking than to the chewing, just let go of the thought for the moment and come back to the chewing. Notice each tiny movement of your jaw.
- In these moments you may find yourself wanting to swallow the apple. See if you can stay present and notice the subtle transition from chewing to swallowing.
- As you prepare to swallow the apple, try to follow it moving toward the back of your tongue and into your throat. Swallow the apple, following it until you can no longer feel any sensation of the food remaining.
- Take a deep breath and exhale.

Reflect: What did you notice while chewing? Why did you swallow? Was the food no longer tasty? Did it dissolve? Were you bored?

Each bite does not need to be consumed as meticulously as in this exercise. Do this with the first bite of each meal, and you will lay the groundwork of mindfulness for the other bites too.
More Ways to Eat Mindfully\textsuperscript{6,10}

Here are several easy ways you can slow down your meals and be more mindful:

- Eat with chopsticks.
- Eat with your nondominant hand.
- Eat while sitting down.
- Eat without a TV, newspaper, or computer.
- Go around the table and each say something you are grateful for—a great activity for kids!
- Before you eat, sit quietly for at least 30 seconds. Smell your food, and think about where it came from. Picture it growing or roaming in its environment. Think about the steps that food took to end up on your plate...growth, harvesting, processing (hopefully not much), transportation, purchase, and preparation. Give thanks.
- Concentrate on your arm movements as you bring your food to your mouth.
- Chew your food 10-15 times per bite. Pay attention to taste and texture and how it changes. Swallow when the food is uniformly smooth.
- Set down your utensils between bites. Rest for a few seconds before gathering the next morsel.
- Take a sip of water, tea, or black coffee between bites.
- Put the proper portions of food on your plate and try to make the meal last at least 20 minutes.

**Tips for success**

- Recruit someone else to learn mindful eating, so you can share your experiences.
- Remember: there are no “do’s” and “don’ts.” Do what makes sense in your life and what brings you joy.
- Laugh with yourself when mindfulness isn’t easy. We are more successful when we have fun.
- Mindfulness is difficult to master, but you can’t fail if you keep trying.

A wealth of information exists on this subject, and each resource has a different approach to incorporating mindful eating into your life. Experiment and find something that makes sense to you.
Additional Resources

Books and online resources


Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health? Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php

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References