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# Eat Slowly. Appreciate Every Bite. See What Happens. (You'll Be Amazed!)

The smartest way to lose weight isn't a diet at all -- it's a brand-new mind-set that will change your food focus for life.

By Sarah Elizabeth Richards

[« Previous](#) | **1 of 2** | [Next »](#)

I felt so cheated. I'd spent an hour making a delicious healthy dinner of chicken in a balsamic glaze, Brussels sprouts, and wild rice with dried cherries and orange zest -- just for me. "Wow, you really nailed this," I congratulated myself as I breathed in the aromas and tasted the first bite. Then I got distracted checking e-mail on my phone. Ten minutes later I looked up from the screen and realized my beautiful dinner was gone. Oh, I'd eaten it, all right. But I'd been so focused on contributing my two cents to a family squabble that I'd forgotten to notice, let alone enjoy it. Even worse, I didn't feel satisfied.



+ ENLARGE IMAGE

Hey, it happens to everyone. Have you ever looked down to see that a whole bag of chips or plate of cookies has disappeared as if by magic? And you didn't even taste those fatty calories while you were texting a friend or watching *Modern Family*? Join the Mindless Eaters' Club.

You know you should slow down while you're eating. It sounds obvious and natural, even trendy, like the Mediterranean diet and Slow Food movements. But it's hard when you live in a "rush and stuff" culture where it's common to inhale fast food in the car while shuttling your kids or to plow through a sandwich at your desk between calls. "It takes about 20 minutes for food to get into your small intestine and signal the brain that you're getting enough," says Jan Chozen Bays, MD, author of *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*. "But research shows that people eat in about 13 minutes, so you override your natural fullness mechanism." Then there's that difficult "being present" part. I regard mealtimes as the perfect opportunity to check Facebook or thumb through a magazine. And I'm single. I can only imagine how much more difficult it is to savor your food when you have multiple family members needing your attention.

I didn't realize how much of a mindless eater I'd become until I tried to lose a few pounds by recording my daily food intake. My online tracker showed I was eating plenty of calories, but I never felt like I got enough. Plus I realized (to my chagrin) that I often ate on autopilot, loading up my fork with a new bite before I'd even swallowed the last one. Yikes. And I couldn't blame it all on electronic distractions. Sometimes I got so caught up in a conversation with my boyfriend I lost track of the amount I was shoveling in. I decided I needed some help.

### A TRUE DINING EXPERIENCE

Becoming a more mindful, intuitive eater goes beyond just being aware of how much you're consuming. The theory is, if you experience your food fully with all your senses, noticing its aroma, temperature, color, texture, crunch, and flavor, you'll develop a real sense of how much your body needs. Not only will you enjoy your food more, you'll probably eat less. And here comes the too-good-to-be-true part: If you can get into the habit of savoring every morsel of, say, a cookie, you might not even want another one.

I asked Dr. Bays how this works. "Every bite should be a party in your mouth," she told me. "But to have a party in your mouth, your mind has to be invited. If your mind is not present to

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mindful-eating therapy sessions. In another study, obese patients who underwent a similar program not only lost weight but showed more self-control and were less prone to binge eating.

With weight loss as a motivator, I decided to take action. I heard that a monastery in upstate New York conducted public mindful-eating lunches twice a week, so I signed up. The program included walking around the grounds for a half hour and then eating together as a group -- slowly and (here's the key) without talking. I arrived exhausted from nonstop deadlines so the fresh air in the woods was a welcome break. But by the time lunch rolled around I was starving. I noticed my anxiety surging as I stood in line waiting for the vegan lunch: I needed to eat now. The people ahead of me were taking too long. How could I get full on this kind of food? As soon as the blessing was over, I dug into tofu in tomato sauce, brown rice, squash soup, and salad at my usual frenetic pace. But then something started to kick in. Could it be awareness? The calm energy around me was soothing, and I started to slow down. I loved not having to make small talk with strangers and instead focused on savoring every succulent piece of squash. To my surprise, when the lunch hour was over, I felt perfectly, harmoniously full. I didn't even crave my usual sugary post-lunch cafe mocha.

Back in my real life, though, I didn't have the time or patience to practice what I'd learned. It felt like an incredible indulgence. Trying to be mindful and eat slowly during meals with my boyfriend made things too quiet and less fun, frankly, because I talked less and chewed more. I felt awkward as he patiently waited for me to finish my salad. And I'm not sure somber, quiet chewing sessions were what my married mom friends have in mind when they make family dinner night a priority. Sometimes, a meal just has to be a meal -- not a transcendent experience. And despite my careful cooking and tracking, I still wasn't losing weight.

### MESSAGE RECEIVED

For my next step I made an appointment with Alexis Conason, PsyD, a New York City psychologist who runs an eight-week program on mind-body eating awareness. But before she started my training, she told me to stop obsessively tracking every calorie. I needed to listen to what my body told me to eat. "You may be craving a banana because you're low on potassium, but you don't hear that message because you're so disconnected from your body," she said.

Woman eating spaghetti  
[+ ENLARGE IMAGE](#)

Then Conason took me through an eating exercise in which I would notice how my fullness and satisfaction changed after each bite and rate it on a scale of one to 10. I was excited when she cut up pieces of a brownie -- one of my favorite foods. First, she encouraged me to take several deep breaths and check in with my body. Then she asked me to admire the bite of brownie and smell it before placing it in my mouth. I had to move the piece around in my mouth and notice the flavor and texture before I bit into it, pausing again before I chewed it, all the while reflecting on how much pleasure it gave me. I was shocked at how many steps there can be to eating a bite of food and how the taste changes over time and in different corners of my mouth. At first I felt a little silly, but the exercise made an impact on me. By the fourth bite I honestly didn't want anymore. I was brownied out.

As I left Conason's office, she encouraged me to stop dieting for a week. If I just continued to eat mindfully, it didn't really matter what I chose to consume. I almost laughed as I thought, "Well, she doesn't know me and caramel corn." Within a few days I had a PMS-fueled urge to make the world go away with a box of butter toffee popcorn with nuts. Sure enough, after several long bites in which I let the sugary coating dissolve and the popcorn collapse on my tongue, I was actually content to stop.

The real challenge, however, was vacation -- always a diet minefield. I was going on a boating trip, and do you have any idea how good potato chips taste when you're out on the water? For the first few days I successfully managed my chip intake by enjoying each bite fully. But one afternoon I noticed I was grabbing more and more each time I walked through the kitchen area. By the time dinner rolled around, I had an upset stomach and was searching for sugary sodas and juices to relieve the salty taste in my mouth.

This sensation, experts say, may be one of the most useful in learning how to tune in to your body. Of course, this wasn't the first time in my life that I'd overindulged in salty snacks. But I'm not sure I was ever this aware of how bad I felt afterward. When I told this story to Dr. Bays, she said I shouldn't beat myself up over it. "You can't flip old patterns overnight," she told me. "It takes constant practice. You catch yourself mid-bite and say, 'Wait! My mind went elsewhere. I need to bring it back and pay attention to this food.'"

I've kept trying, and eating intuitively isn't such an effort anymore. My weight is slowly coming down, too. I don't do it perfectly, but I manage to take a breather now and then during animated conversation. And I try to close my computer lid or put away my phone when I realize I'm halfway through a meal and still staring at the screen. It's a shame not to, especially since I make such killer balsamic chicken.

Continued on page 2: [How to Eat More Mindfully](#)

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## How to Eat More Mindfully

We know it can be a challenge to focus on eating slowly. It's even harder to contemplate every bite. Try our experts' easy suggestions to get started.

 Empty plate of spaghetti  
[+ ENLARGE IMAGE](#)

1. Set your fork down between bites and chew your food thoroughly. Make a rule: no watching TV during meals and no electronic devices at the table.
2. Start small. At least make the first few bites count. Create a game with your kids to see who can eat quietly and slowly for the first five minutes of a meal.
3. Set aside time for at least one mindful meal a week. Let family members pick dishes they love so they can focus on the pleasure of the food.
4. Don't take it all too seriously. Encourage your family to be open to trying it and talking about the experience, even if they want to make fun of it.
5. Save emotional discussions or arguments for after dinner. You tend to eat faster during tense situations.
6. If you have to eat in the car, park and savor your breakfast burrito. If you have to eat at your desk, avoid multitasking and really focus on that tuna sandwich.
7. If you want to lose weight, step it up a notch and try to practice mindful eating full time for a few days.

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