

Mouthfuls of Mindfulness

by Jan Chozen Bays



Photo (c) flicker.com/Debra Roby

Overeat, undereat, or just feel conflicted about how you eat? Mindfulness practice, says physician Jan Chozen Bays, can help you have a healthy and joyful relationship with food.

Mindful eating is not directed by charts, tables, pyramids, or scales. It is not dictated by an expert. It is directed by your own inner experiences, moment by moment. Your experience is unique. Therefore you are the expert. In the process of learning to eat mindfully, we replace self-criticism with self-nurturing, anxiety with curiosity, and shame with respect for your own inner wisdom.

Let's take a typical experience. On the way home from work Sally thinks with dread about the talk she needs to work on for a big conference. Before starting to work on the speech, however, she decides to relax and watch a few minutes of TV. She sits down with a bag of chips. At first she eats only a few, but as the show gets more dramatic, she eats faster and faster. When the show ends she looks down and realizes she's eaten the entire bag. She scolds herself for wasting time and for eating junk food. "Too much salt and fat! No dinner for you!" Engrossed in the drama on the screen, covering up her anxiety about procrastinating, she ignored what was happening

in her mind, heart, mouth, and stomach. She ate unconsciously. She ate to go unconscious. She goes to bed unnourished in body or heart and with her mind still anxious about the talk.

The next time this happens she decides to eat chips but to try eating them mindfully. First she checks in with her mind. She finds her mind is worried about an article she promised to write. Her mind says she needs to get started on it tonight. She checks in with her heart and finds she is feeling a little lonely because her husband is out of town. She checks in with her stomach and body and discovers she is both hungry and tired. She needs some nurturing. The only one at home to do it is herself.

Throwing a Small Party

She decides to treat herself to a small chip party. (Remember, mindful eating gives us permission to play with our food.) She takes twenty chips out of the bag and arranges them on a plate. She looks at their color and shape. She eats one chip, savoring its flavor. She pauses, then eats another. There is no judgment, no right or wrong. She is simply seeing the shades of tan and brown on each curved surface, tasting the tang of salt, hearing the crunch of each bite, feeling the crisp texture melt into softness. She ponders how these chips arrived on her plate, aware of the sun, the soil, the rain, the potato farmer, the workers at the chip factory, the delivery truck driver, the grocer who stocked the shelves and sold them to her.

With little pauses between each chip, it takes ten minutes for the chip party. When she finishes, she checks in with her body to find out if any part of it is still hungry.

She finds her mouth and cells are thirsty, so she gets a drink of orange juice. Her body is also saying it needs some protein and something green, so she makes a cheese omelet and a spinach salad. After eating she checks in again with her mind,

body, and heart. The heart and body feel nourished but the mind is still tired. She decides to go to bed and work on the talk first thing in the morning, when the mind and body will be rested. She is still feeling lonely, although less so within the awareness of all the beings whose life energy brought her the chips, eggs, cheese, and greens. She decides to call her husband to say good night. She goes to bed with body, mind, and heart at ease and sleeps soundly.

Mindful eating is a way to rediscover one of the most pleasurable things we do as human beings. It also is a path to uncovering many wonderful activities going on right under our noses and within our own bodies. Mindful eating has the unexpected benefit of helping us tap into our body's natural wisdom and our heart's natural capacity for openness and gratitude. We ask ourselves questions like:

Am I hungry?

Where do I feel hunger?

What part of me is hungry?

What do I really crave?

What am I tasting just now?

These are very simple questions, but we seldom pose them.

Mindfulness Is the Best Flavoring

As I write this I am eating a lemon tart that a friend gave to me. After writing for a few hours I'm ready to reward myself with a tart. The first bite is delicious. Creamy, sweet-sour, melting. When I take the second bite, I think about what to write next. The flavor in my mouth decreases. I take another bite and get up to sharpen a pencil. As I walk, I notice I am chewing, but there is almost no lemon flavor in this third bite. I sit down, get to work, and wait a few minutes.

Then I take a fourth bite, fully focused on the smells, tastes, and touch sensations in my mouth.

Delicious, again! I discover, all over again (I'm a slow learner) that the only way to keep that "first bite" experience, to honor the gift my friend gave me, is to eat slowly, with long pauses between bites. If I do anything else while I'm eating—if I talk, walk, write, or even think—the flavor diminishes or disappears. The life is drained from my beautiful tart. I could be eating the cardboard box.

Here's the humorous part. I stopped tasting the lemon tart because I was thinking. About what? Mindful eating! Discovering that, I grin. To be a human being is both pitiful and funny.

Why can't I think, walk, and be aware of the taste of the tart at the same time? I can't do all these at once because the mind has two distinct functions, thinking and awareness. When the thinking is turned up, the awareness is turned down. When the thinking function is going full throttle, we can eat an entire meal, an entire cake, an entire carton of ice cream, and not taste more than a bite or two. When we don't taste, we can end up stuffed to the gills but feeling completely unsatisfied. This is because the mind and mouth weren't present, weren't tasting or enjoying, as we ate. The stomach became full but the mind and mouth were unfulfilled and continued calling for us to eat.

If we don't feel satisfied, we'll begin to look around for something more or something different to eat. Everyone has had the experience of roaming the kitchen, opening cupboards and doors, looking vainly for something, anything, to satisfy. The only thing that will cure this, a fundamental kind of hunger, is to sit down and be, even for a few minutes, wholly present.

If we eat and stay connected with our experience and with the people who grew and cooked the food, who served the food, and who eat alongside us, we will feel most satisfied, even with a meager meal. This is the gift of mindful eating, to restore our sense of satisfaction no matter what we are or are not eating.

Jan Chozen Bays is a pediatrician, mother, wife, and longtime meditation teacher. She is the author of Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food.