

FOOD FOR || MINDFULNESS

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Mindful eating was not on my radar until I had my first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh. My studies and training as a nutritionist primarily focused on what to eat, but not how to eat or understanding how our eating affects the wellbeing of others and our planet. As I attended more mindfulness retreats with Thich Nhat Hanh, I realised that mindful eating was a missing link in the prevailing scientific framework for maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle.

Expressing gratitude is a key tenet of mindfulness, and as we eat mindfully, thinking about all of the elements and individuals that played a role in developing our meal, we reach a deep awareness of how supported we are by nature, our community and numerous people we know and do not know. Look deeply into the food that you eat and you will realise that it represents the cosmos and nature, reflect upon the chain of individuals and events that made your meal possible - including chefs who hand selected each ingredient to create a cohesive dish, market clerks and employees, truck drivers and the farmers who carefully tended to the growth - as well as the essential balance of natural elements, including sunshine, wind, rain and fertile soil. Eating this way, we may also realise that many people around the world do not have the blessing like us to eat on demand. According to United Nations estimates, there are about 870 million people (1/3 of the world's population) suffering from persistent, chronic hunger every day. Having food to eat is a gift.

Meal time provides an ideal daily opportunity to slow down. Instead of treating it as just another 'to-do', you can feel renewed, refreshed and appreciative as you move on with your day. Setting aside time in your schedule and removing yourself from distraction is key. If you can't commit to an entire half hour to eat, enjoy your meal in sips of five to 10 minutes at a time. Turn off your screens and devices, and avoid other distractions that will pull you away from only eating. Take a moment to look at the food in front of you, noticing the colour, shape, texture and smell - this will help get you into the mindset that it is time to eat. Try putting your fork down between each bite, chewing slowly and stopping to breathe. As other thoughts arise, gently set them aside - find comfort in the fact that there is nothing to do but eat and enjoy your food. Mindful eating enables us to enjoy food more while eating less. As we eat, our body sends signals to our brain about how full we are. If we don't pay attention to our food while eating, we miss the signal for 'stop, I'm full'. This missed satiety signal causes us to over-eat and consume too many calories, which can eventually lead to weight gain. Studies show that when we eat slower we eat less and feel more satisfied.



Aside from benefits to our physical health, mindful eating also has many benefits for our emotional and mental health. Our days are busy - packed with work, errands, socialising and other responsibilities. The fast pace and amount of stimulus in our environment often stresses us, weighs heavily on our body (and takes a toll) on our whole wellbeing. By slowing down and becoming aware of the present moment as it is, we are practicing mindfulness, which has scientifically been shown to help manage our stress and help our brain make new neuro-connections, bringing about a range of positive effects on our bodies and minds.

As we take the time to eat and focus on savouring our food, we put ourselves in the present moment, rather than thinking about what has happened or what's to come. The conscious decision to eat mindfully reaffirms the fact that we can take the time out of our day for the important and nourishing practice of eating. Once this reflection is experienced, you will most likely find yourself naturally incorporating mindfulness into other areas of your daily life, granting time and space to breathe, to rest, to enjoy and to savour.

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