

mindful MEAL CHALLENGE

Day 3: Mindful Eating Mechanics

Welcome to Day 3 of the Mindful Meal Challenge.

Today I want to dig a little deeper into the experience of eating by focusing on the eating process itself.

The cycle of eating involves 4 steps:

1. Preparing a bite
2. Taking a bite
3. Chewing
4. Swallowing

We've been eating for so long that most of us do ALL of these steps on autopilot.

The fact that you can eat without thinking about it AT ALL is one of the remarkable features of your brain. Putting simple mechanical processes like eating and walking on autopilot saves your mental energy for doing other things, and we should all feel grateful that we have this ability.

The downside of this is that we can subconsciously develop habits that do not serve us well long-term.

So maybe you grew up with a lot of siblings and learned to eat fast, because otherwise you'd lose out on the extra mashed potatoes.

Maybe you eat impulsively to avoid uncomfortable thoughts or emotions.

Maybe you prepare your next bite instead of focusing on what is already in your mouth in some subconscious nod to efficiency.

Maybe (like me) you've found yourself doing *all of these things* at some time or another.

Fast, mindless eating can cause all sorts of problems you may not even be aware of.

When you eat quickly it is much easier to overeat, since it takes 20 minutes for your brain to recognize that you are full. The faster you eat during that time, the more likely you are to overeat.

Not chewing your food thoroughly can cause terrible digestive pains, especially when you're eating high-fiber foods like vegetables, fruits and intact grains.

This is actually something that is very common when people first starting eating healthier. Fiber-rich foods need a lot more chewing than processed foods, which have already been broken down by machines before reaching your plate. So if you've noticed healthy foods giving you stomach aches, chewing may be the solution you've been looking for.

You also lose out on some of the nutrition in your food by not chewing it completely before swallowing.

For many reasons, you want to break up your food as much as possible before it hits your stomach.

One of the benefits of mindful eating is that bringing your attention to the different stages of eating enables you to be more conscious of your habits and, once you get that far, alter them to suit your higher goals.

Today during your mindful meal pay attention to each step in the eating process and notice what impulses you have at each stage.

For example, how do you decide what part of your plate to start eating at? How do you decide what size bite you should take?

Once you put your food into your mouth, do you have an impulse to immediately start choosing your next bite? Put your fork (or food) down between bites so that you are able to focus on the next stages of eating: chewing and swallowing.

Pay attention to how you chew your food. Do you tend to chew quickly or slowly? Do you find that it is easier to pay attention to the food's flavors and textures when you chew slower? I know I do.

Do you prefer to chew on one side of your mouth over the other? What does it feel like to use the other side?

These are all the mechanics of eating that we usually ignore in our daily meals.

It is also valuable to notice the thoughts and feelings you have around these actions. While your goal is to stay focused on the eating experience, thoughts and feelings will often come up.

You may find yourself judging or rejecting certain flavors or textures as you chew. There are many people who dislike "mushy" or soft food textures in their mouths.

If this is you, try to simply notice that your brain tends to judge your eating experience and bring your attention back to the flavors and the process of eating. It may also help to focus on the act of chewing rather than the softening texture of the food.

Part of mindful practice is welcoming, accepting and staying with your experience in the present moment. Judging, rejecting and fighting with your experience immediately takes you out of the moment and into your head.

You don't have to love the entire experience of your meal, your goal is just to stay present and accept it during your practice today.

Another thing you might notice is that as you chew it is difficult to prevent food from slipping toward the back of your mouth and being swallowed before it is completely chewed. Notice how the size of bite you choose impacts this tendency. Smaller bites are easier to chew completely, because it leaves enough room in your mouth to chew your entire bite.

I'd also like you to pay attention to what it feels like to swallow food that has been chewed more versus food that has been chewed less and is more chunky. Does one way make you more or less comfortable?

Note this, and how the choices you make at the beginning of your eating experience (like bite size) impacts later parts of the experience, like swallowing.

Again, try to simply focus on the mechanics and the experience of the eating process. If you find yourself judging it, smile and recognize that your brain has many well-intentioned opinions, let them go, then refocus your attention on the experience itself.

Focusing on the process of eating is different from focusing on flavors, but both are part of your overall eating experience. It is difficult (maybe impossible) to pay attention to all of it at once, but be aware that it is in fact all there and all part of your experience.

It's a lot to track! When you think about it, it's crazy that you ever believed you would be able to eat mindfully while doing other things when there is so much going on in your mouth. LOL

Give it a try today during your mindful meal and let us know what you learned over at the FB group.

And I'll see back here you tomorrow!