

Weeks 8 & 9: Mindful Eating & Healthy Nutrition

Developed by The Center For Mind Body Medicine

I. Nutrition and Healthy Eating:

Eating has a profound effect on our health. Every time we put food in our mouths, we have an opportunity to either enhance or diminish our lives. Making good food choices is perhaps the single most important way we can care for our bodies.

Many people have chronic health problems related to diet such as: obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, anxiety and depression. Diets high in sugar, refined carbohydrates and high fructose corn syrup can lead to chronic high blood sugar or high insulin which increases the risk of developing diabetes. Diets high in saturated fats may increase the risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Also, processed foods, animal fats, sugar, white flour and pasta all increase inflammation in the body which leads to a variety of chronic illnesses.

Stress has an impact on eating and nutrition; it inhibits digestion and absorption and can lead to deficiencies. In order to counter the effects of stress and create a lifestyle that does not contribute to chronic disease, it is important to:

- Drink 7-8 glasses of water daily,
- Avoid processed foods (Processed foods are always deficient in essential nutrients and are also full of unwanted chemicals).
- Eat nutritious foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, unprocessed fish, chicken & other meats. .

In our group discussion and reflection writing, we can benefit by becoming aware of our patterns, feelings, and thoughts about food. Once you increase your awareness, your food choices will change. Also, each of us is biochemically unique, so we need to discover how foods effects us all differently, and experimentation is a very good way to figure this out.

II. Experiential Exercise: Mindful Eating

Mindful Meditative Eating means giving your full attention to your experience of food. No TV, reading, driving, arguing or walking down the street. Mindful eating can also provide you with information about which foods make you feel energetic and happy and which make you feel tired, anxious, depressed or uncomfortable.

People eat for many different reasons. Though most animals eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full, human beings often eat to fulfill emotional needs and don't stop when their physical hunger is satisfied.

The exercise we will do involves eating slowly and meditatively. It is to help you become more fully aware of how, why and what you are choosing to eat, as well as, what food actually smells

and tastes like. Practicing meditative eating may change what and how you eat; you may even develop a new appreciation of healthy foods, and crave a big bowl of vegetables sautéed in olive oil and garlic, rather than a plate full of french fries.

Normally, most of us eat automatically or mechanically, so we are going to experiment with eating differently, paying full attention in a non-judgmental, open way, and staying in the present moment as much as possible. Take a food object and see if you can entertain the notion that you are seeing and sensing this object for the very first time, and then...

Note: In creating a new relationship with food, it is important to not only rely on your common sense but to remember a few basic principles of good nutrition such as the following:

1. Eat real food: food that has to be refrigerated and that you have to prepare.
2. Eat more whole plant foods: fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains like brown rice, nuts and seeds.
3. Eat more fish and chicken and less red meat.
4. Eat a rainbow diet: a wide variety of fruits and vegetables of different colors.
5. Avoid processed foods which contain unhealthy additives.
6. Notice when you are full.
7. Be aware of how food makes you feel, physically and emotionally.

III.Experiential Exercise: Mindful Walking

In the mindful walking exercise, we will go outdoors and begin to walk slowly in silence for about 20 to 40 minutes, with our eyes looking down at the ground in front of us. As you walk, notice your thoughts, feelings and sensations as they arise. Acknowledge them each moment you become aware of them, for example, left foot touching the ground, sunlight on the grass, wondering what you will eat for lunch, what papers you need to write, feeling like this is silly, etc...

IV. Share the experience in your group

What was your experience like eating/walking mindfully?

Were there particular thoughts, feelings or sensations during this meditation that surprised you?

Did you have any memories come up?

Did this bring up any past experiences or teachings about food or health?

V.Homework

Practice 20-30 minutes of mindful walking a day for 3 days, or pick any of the food experiments mentioned below, or a combination, and practice them for 3 days. Notice the effects of specific foods, or mindful walking, on your energy and mood.

Try eating a variety of foods meditatively, including your favorite snacks, as well as those foods you don't often eat. Follow the same basic steps as you did with the exercise.

Eat an entire meal meditatively. Write down your observations every time you do this exercise. The more often you eat meditatively, the more you'll learn about your relationship to food.

Each time you're about to eat something, notice if you're really hungry. If not, ask yourself: "Why am I eating this food." Is it out of boredom? Loneliness? Anxiety? Just notice your answers.

Note: Because each of us is biochemically unique and no one diet is right for everyone, we need to discover which foods give us energy and which foods seem to cause problems.