- Eating customs

# *How to* MASTER mindful eating

A shift in how you think about food can help you make better choices and build a happier, healthier relationship with mealtimes, explains dietitian Stefani Sassos.



Do breakfast behind the wheel, lunch at your desk and dinner in little bites while you're cooking sound familiar? Daily demands can make what's supposed to be one of the great joys of life – eating – feel routine and automatic to the point that you might not even remember having done it at all! And by the time you sit down to a meal with your family, you consume more than you'd intended but can't enjoy it because you weren't really hungry to begin with. One solution I swear by is mindful eating, a technique that tells you not what to eat but *how* – because food is so much more than just fuel.



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Mastering mindful eating starts, quite literally, with mindfulness. "That's the capacity to bring full attention and awareness to one's experience, in the moment, without judgement," says health psychologist Dr Lynn Rossy.

Being mindful involves keeping your focus on what you're doing. In the case of eating, that means tasting, feeling and smelling what is on your plate, on your fork and, ultimately, in your mouth. When your attention wanders, you do your best to bring it back to your eating experience. I try to eat mindfully and have taught this practice to my clients because I've found that it creates an opportunity to tap into the body's inner wisdom. This is about knowing not just when you're hungry, but also when you're full, the best food choices for your body and when a sudden craving is more a reaction against finger-wagging from a parent or a diet book than what your body is truly asking for. Eating mindfully can help you feel empowered and appreciate food's joys. Here are a few tips to get you started.

## STEP 1 *Check in with your hunger*

Hunger is the physiological need for food, whereas appetite is the desire for food. Try to examine how your body is feeling at the beginning of a meal: Are you not physically hungry and instead eating out of boredom or anxiety? Conversely, have you let your body go too long without food? It's best to eat something when you're slightly to moderately hungry so you can slow down and eat mindfully. Commit to incorporating balanced meals throughout the day so you have an appetite at mealtimes but aren't ravenous.

## STEP 2 *Limit distractions*

To fully immerse yourself in mindful eating, disconnect from electronics and major attention-grabbers. Silence your phone, turn off the TV and sit down at the table so that you're fully present.

## STEP 3 *Start with gratitude*

Take a minute or two to pause and appreciate the food in front of you. Think of everyone and everything that went into preparing it – including, say, the dairy farmers who worked hard to supply the milk for your yoghurt snack or the land those beautiful fresh tomatoes in your dinner-time salad came from. Are you sharing this eating experience with friends or family? Take a moment to tell them how much you appreciate their coming together for this meal.

## STEP 4 *Tune in to your senses*

Pay attention to the various flavours in your meal and the aroma of the food. What sound does it make when you chew it? Does it feel crunchy or smooth? Do you detect cinnamon? Pepper? Do any of the tastes or textures change as you continue? These are examples of questions you can ask yourself to keep yourself present while you're eating.

## STEP 5 *Go slowly*

Take time to chew your food, savour the flavour and appreciate each bite. If you find that you're still eating quickly, consciously set down your fork after every few bites. It takes about 20 minutes for your stomach to signal to your brain that it's full, so make sure that you give yourself time to get in tune with satiety, the feeling of fullness and satisfaction you get from eating.

### *TRY IT!*

**This sensory exercise is a great intro to mindful eating. You can use a strawberry (described here), a raisin or even a piece of chocolate.**

**Touch:** Hold the strawberry in your palm or move it between your fingers to explore its texture. Close your eyes and focus on its coarse leaves, seedy outer surface and dimples.
**See:** Look carefully at the strawberry. Does it have variations in colour, or ridges, folds and asymmetries? What makes this strawberry unique?
**Smell:** Take in its fragrance, noticing what's happening in your mouth, stomach and mind. Does it evoke any memories?
**Bite:** Take a bite and notice the sensations you feel in your mouth. Is it cold? Tingly? Does it make a sound when you chew it?
**Taste:** Continue chewing. Notice the sensations of taste and texture in your mouth; you may find that these change moment by moment. Pay close attention to variations in the food itself, too.
**Swallow:** See if you can feel what is left of the strawberry moving down into your stomach. How does your body feel after you finish the exercise? P



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