

National Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2005

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Eating Mindfully 101

Contributed by Susan Albers, PsyD

Adapted from *Eating Mindfully* (New Harbinger Publications, 2003)

Purpose:

This is a fun and easy outreach program for college dorms, hall meetings and presentations to support and draw attention to your eating disorders awareness week. The workshop utilizes the art of mindfulness to help students learn that HOW and WHY you eat is sometimes more important than WHAT you eat. This outreach is also intended to challenge negative stereotypes about college eating habits and provide a non-diet alternative.

Resources:

- Suggested Handouts: “7 Mindful Eating Tips,” “Mindful Eating Contract” and “Listen to Your Body”
- For Group Exercise: Bring either chocolate or another food item (See Section IV)
- Promotion and Advertisement: For ideas, refer to Section IV

I. Introduction

Listen to your body: eat what you want, when you are truly hungry, and stop when you are full.

Mindfulness is like a microphone. It helps pump up the volume of your body’s cues so you can hear loud and clear when you are hungry and full. Many social and environmental factors can stand in the way of being able to accurately decode your body’s feedback. Mindfulness helps people break free from routine eating habits. Also, it shows you how to closely examine the thoughts, feelings and internal pressures that affect how and why you eat (or don’t eat). For example, few terms have shaped the behaviors and thoughts of students quite like the notion of the “Freshman Fifteen.”

II. The Freshman Fifteen: Group Discussion

The idea of the “Freshman Fifteen” is so ingrained in our language and culture that people are often unaware of how it influences their behavior and thoughts. Discuss the ways in which the participants may have been affected by this term.

Ask the group to consider ways in which the concept of the Freshman Fifteen has impacted their eating or the attitudes of them and their friends. The phrase targets the cultural taboo of gaining weight, which may be intended to subtly scare students into watching their weight. Discuss the societal “ideal of thinness” and how it shapes expectations and behaviors.

The phrase, Freshman Fifteen, raises a student’s anxiety about weight gain. Graham & Jones (2002) found that “freshman who were concerned about gaining 15 pounds were more likely to think about their weight, have a poorer body image than others and categorize themselves as being overweight.”

In reality, few studies have actually found evidence of an average weight gain of 15 pounds. Overall, studies indicate that the Freshman Fifteen is a bit of a misnomer and they suggest that the term “Freshman Five” is a closer description (Cooley & Toray, 2001; Graham & Jones 2002; Hodges et al., 1993).

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- According to a study by Dr. Melody Graham and Amy Jones, of the 110 college freshman subjects in their study, 36% actually lost weight and 59% gained. Students who did gain weight only increased by an average of 4.2 pounds.
- Participants in the Hodges et al. (1993) study who did experience weight gain their freshman year increased on average 7 pounds, a far cry from 15 pounds. The majority of the women in the sample did not gain weight during the first six months of the study.
- Weight gain and loss varies by *individual*. Some students lose weight because they are hiking up stairs with heavy backpacks and walking across campus. Others gain weight due to a more sedentary lifestyle, differences in food choices, high levels of stress, or transitional issues.

So, what's the problem? The belief in the Freshman Fifteen can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. It may subconsciously encourage mindless eating because it perpetuates the idea that it is "normal" to have unhealthy eating habits in college.

Worrying about the Freshman Fifteen can promote a culture of dieting. Studies have indicated that *35% of "normal dieters" progress to pathological dieting. Of those, 20-25% progress to partial or full-syndrome eating disorders (Shisslak & Crago, 1995).*

III. Mindfulness can help you take a closer look at your eating patterns.

A. What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a way of thinking and being in the world. It was adopted from ancient Eastern practices of meditation and relaxation. Although it is a simple concept, it can be difficult to describe. The best way to understand it is to experience it. As you are reading this or listening to the sound of my voice, you are cultivating a mindful state of focused and conscious awareness. When you are mindful, you are fully present, in-the-moment without judgment. Much of our time is spent dwelling on the past or planning for the future that we miss the here and now. It's a pretty simple concept; it's about shifting your attention to the present. (An example of mindlessness is driving on autopilot.)

B. How does Mindfulness Work?

Mindfulness Meditation was pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Kabat-Zinn has demonstrated through research the effectiveness of Mindfulness Meditation in helping people cope with problems such as anxiety, stress, AIDS, chronic pain, cancer and hypertension (see Baer, 2003, for a review). Recent research has also shown that mindfulness helps people gain a better sense of control over-eating habits (Kristeller, & Hallett, 1999).

Some studies show that when people are mindful, they experience an increase in EEG alpha brain waves associated with relaxation, as well as a decrease in heart rate and stress hormones. These physiological changes make a person better able to focus and come up with alternative, non-food related coping strategies. However, mindfulness also changes the way you think. It brings to the surface any ingrained fears, thoughts or actions that operate automatically, below your awareness.

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C. Mindless Eating: Living on Autopilot

Everyday tasks like taking a shower, brushing your teeth, driving and particularly eating can become routine tasks. Much of our lives are lived on autopilot. In this mode, we have little awareness of our emotions, thoughts or actions, which gets us further stuck in unproductive routines. There are many ways we eat on autopilot.

Types of Mindless Eating

- Eating an entire plate of food and not tasting one bite
- Munching on popcorn in front of the TV
- Following “food rules” automatically
- Ignoring when you are hungry or skipping meals even though you’re hungry
- Stress eating in situations such as exams, going home for holidays, roommate problems, etc.
- Multitasking while you eat (e.g. studying, driving, talking on the phone, etc.)
- Eating when you are bored and not really hungry
- Eating lunch at Noon whether you are hungry or not

Are **YOU** a *mindful* eater or a *mindless* eater? Does it depend on the circumstance? Discuss how college can be a mindless eating environment (e.g. pizza parties, social eating, buffets, little sleep, cheap fast food).

MINDFUL EATERS – are nonjudgmental, compassionate and above all aware of the taste, texture and process of eating. They check in with their bodies, thoughts and feelings to gauge whether they are hungry or full. Their diet is one of moderation and balance.

MINDLESS EATERS – are stuck in a repetitive cycle of what, where, and how much they eat. They are inflexible and rigid in their habits and cut off from hunger and fullness cues. Their habits include any kind of extremes, inflexible routines, or eating while zoned out.

IV. Eating Mindful Activity: The Chocolate Meditation or Eating Mindfully 101

A. ADVERTISE: Hang a sign or place an ad in the college newspaper advertising your program.

The Chocolate Meditation – Cut out pictures of chocolate from ads for signs. Ask a local candy maker, store or food services to sponsor your activity.

Eating Mindfully 101 – Alternate program title if you do the exercise with a different food instead of chocolate.

B. MINDFULNESS GROUP EXERCISE

Bring food to distribute. Small bite-size candy bars work well, particularly those with crunch or M&M’s to add texture. (**Tip:** You can also use cherry cordials, raisins, orange slices, sandwich cookies, box of assorted chocolates, etc.) Play a little free association game to the word *chocolate* and related words (e.g. white chocolate, king-sized bars).

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“THE CHOCOLATE MEDITATION”

Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get.

–Forest Gump

For a brief “taste” of eating mindfully, try the following exercise. The purpose is to tune in on all the sensations of eating. Slowing down the process will make you aware of any tendencies to eat in an automatic, unthinking way. Chocolate produces a lot of conflicting emotions. We love and crave chocolate yet many people feel guilty when they eat it. Walk the group through this mindfulness exercise slowly. It should take about five or ten minutes. Begin by having the group get into a comfortable position by relaxing and closing their eyes.

Say to the group: Begin by observing the shape and the color of the chocolate. Touch it and feel the texture as you pick it up. Bring the chocolate up to your nose and inhale deeply. Take a few deep breathes. Follow the scent as it travels in your nose and to the back of your nostrils. Inhale and exhale deeply for a few moments. Place the chocolate on your tongue. Roll it around on your tongue and against the roof of your mouth. Notice any thoughts that come to mind. Perhaps descriptors of the chocolate: smooth, rich, sensual. Also be aware of any feelings, sensations or memories that arise. Label any feelings that arise as just a feeling. Some emotions might be positive and others might be negative. Sometimes we feel guilty when we eat chocolate or have a lot of “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts” about what we are eating. Don’t try to push them away. Just be present with the feelings and sensations. Focus all of your attention onto the taste and texture. Listen to the sound of your jaw chewing the chocolate or the noise of salivating. Notice the sensation as the chocolate slides down the back of your throat. Imagine it in your stomach. You experienced the bite from start to finish by being fully aware of each movement, swallow, aroma and feeling.

Process with the Group Their Reaction: Typically, students are surprised that they can obtain pleasure from a focused concentration on just a little bit of chocolate, counteracting or replacing the sense of guilt.

Closing:

If you are not sure if you are a mindful or mindless eater, contact the counseling center, health services or a nutritionist. Only a professional can diagnosis whether you have eating issues or a disorder.

“Your Body is a Vehicle for Awakening. Treat it with Care.”

–Buddha

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