

# THE ART OF MINDFUL EATING: from judgment to compassion

*In an age of constant media consumption, the pressure to be young, thin and beautiful can be immense. But are diets worth it? Louise Ferreira looks at a different way of treating your body*

**f**ood has become a battleground. Fad diets and ads on rubbish bins promise a new, slimmer you; magazines and lifestyle gurus lecture on the evils of certain food groups. Deciding whom you should believe can be difficult.

Amid this confusion, mindful eating promises not weight loss – although this can be an added benefit – but a healthier relationship with food and your body. Developed in the early 2000s by Jean Kristeller, an American psychologist specialising in eating disorders, the mindfulness approach is about eating with awareness and attention.

Xenia Ayiotis, an intuitive eating counsellor and mindful eating coach based in Pretoria and Johannesburg, explains: “Mindful eating means not eating and multitasking. It is not eating in front of the TV, in your car, on the go.”

It is not a diet. Quoting author Geneen Roth, Ayiotis says that for every restriction, there is an “equal and opposite binge.”

“One of the main reasons why diets don’t work is that they don’t address why you eat when you’re not hungry. You can follow the rules, but unless you learn what your triggers are to overeat, you’re not going to find a solution.

“I practise mindfulness-based intuitive eating. Intuitive eating is really just listening to your body, tuning into your body signals, paying attention to hunger and satiety cues. Are you tired? How are you feeling emotionally? What is going on in your mind?”



## DIETING AND SELF-ESTEEM

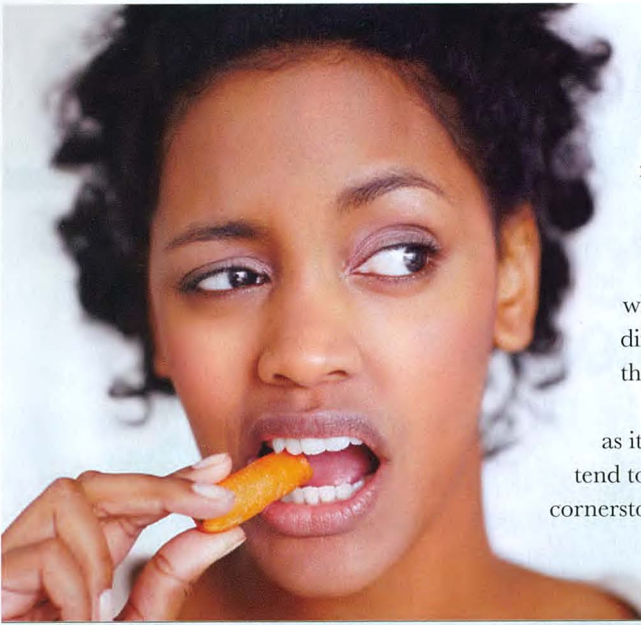
We eat for two reasons, Ayiotis says. “The one is to fuel and nourish our bodies. The second is for the pure pleasure of the experience. It doesn’t help to judge food as good or bad. The minute you eat a piece of cake, you think you’ve blown it. This is typical diet mentality.”

According to RJ Chippindall, a clinical psychologist from Johannesburg who often works with Ayiotis, diets follow a one-size-fits-all approach. “Restrictive dieting doesn’t allow for flexibility and individuality. It sets people up for failure, leading to a vicious cycle in terms of low self-esteem. They feel bad about their inability to stick to something.”

Celynn Erasmus, a registered dietician, author and professional speaker from Johannesburg, adds that people find it incredibly difficult to stick to diets. Yo-yo dieting, in particular, affects your self-esteem. “You feel like a success when the number goes down on the scale, then like a failure when it goes back up again. Eventually you give up.”

The physical consequences of repeat dieting can be severe, she warns. “Dieting can create a certain amount of stress in your life, further adding to stress hormones like cortisol. If you lose a lot of weight quickly, that can shock the body. When you go off the diet, your body goes from starvation to storage mode. Your metabolism thinks a feast is coming and it must store the food in case you fast again.”

Typically, when people gain additional weight after a diet, they gain visceral fat (fat around the middle), she says. This is particularly unhealthy. The constant stress on your metabolism can also increase insulin resistance.



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### COMPASSION FOR YOURSELF

Mindful eating is about non-judgment.

“There are going to be times when you’re eating in front of the TV or rushing through a meal, and that’s OK,” Ayiotis says. “But if you come from a history of dieting, you will beat yourself up over it: ‘I’m doing it wrong, I’m not sticking to it.’ It’s important not to turn mindful eating into another diet.”

One of the steps in the mindful eating process is accepting your body for what it is. “When clients first come to me, they hate their bodies. They find it difficult to grasp that they can’t change something they don’t accept. They think that if they accept their bodies, they won’t change them.”

Chippindall adds: “Initially, it can be very difficult for people to take on board, as it goes so strongly against what they’re used to. It can be very frightening. We tend to be punitive when we make mistakes, and non-judgmental compassion is a cornerstone of the approach.”

The first thing Ayiotis tells her clients is that they’re not going to look at losing weight. “The minute you focus primarily on weight loss, it creates dysfunction with food.”

People can develop disordered eating or a dysfunctional relationship with food for various reasons, but it is often entrenched from a young age, says Chippindall. For example, children are often told to finish their food because other people are starving, or that they won’t get dessert if they don’t clean their plates. This teaches them to ignore their body’s hunger and satiety signals.

### THE PROBLEM WITH “CLEAN EATING”

The current obsession with “clean eating” is also a concern for Ayiotis. “It’s a myth that carrying a bit of extra weight means you’re unhealthy. It’s really not dependent on your size,” she says. For many of her clients, the prime motivator is health, but obsessing about eating healthily is not healthy.

“If you’re stressing every time you eat chocolate or cake, or, God forbid, wheat or pasta, your body tenses up and digestion becomes difficult, plus the body releases cortisol. It is sometimes okay to eat food with zero nutritional value, for the pure pleasure of it. Like a Fizzer, or Doritos. Kale chips will never be a substitute for Doritos! If you feel awesome being vegan or not eating gluten, by all means go for it. But let’s not turn it into another righteous, militant approach to eating.”

Chippindall and Erasmus agree that mindfulness is an effective approach.

“As you listen to your body, you make different choices,” Erasmus says. “You listen to satiety cues. On some days we are hungrier than others, because of a range of factors, including hormones.”

Chippindall points out that a mindfulness approach can have an effect on other areas of your life too. “In workshops we do basic mindfulness practice; we don’t just focus on food.”

Ayiotis has the final word: “Mindful eating is the middle way between restriction, dieting and overeating. It is a kinder, slower, more gentle approach to changing our behaviours and patterns with food and eating.” 🍎

*“Mindful eating is eating with intention to care for ourselves and attention to our food. It is eating in the present moment, noticing preferences with no judgment. Mindful eating is being aware of physical sensations, thoughts, feelings and emotions as we eat.” – Center for Mindful Eating*

