

Is thinking making you fat?

There are myriad reasons for dysfunctional eating, and it's not an easy problem to tackle. Using just the power of our minds, we can change our behaviour around and attitude towards the food we eat, writes **Tracy Melass**.

I am becoming impatient. For the past 10 minutes, I have slowly rolled a raisin between my fingers, put the tip of my tongue to it to feel the texture and get a hint of the taste. I wait for the instruction to eat it. I am at a mindfulness workshop, and am getting the message loud and clear – be fully aware when you eat and chances are you won't overeat. It's harder than it looks though.

The raisin test – a commonly used tool in teaching mindfulness – may be a little frustrating, but it works. In the context of eating, you will become acutely aware of how you multitask while you eat, graze mindlessly, gobble hurriedly, or feed an emotion behind the hunger, seldom stopping to establish whether you're really hungry or not.

This can lead to a cycle of overeating that is tough to break, problems with weight gain, and even addiction to food. In a word, disordered or dysfunctional eating.

It's not an exaggeration to say that a significant number of people in Western society are eating disordered. While no such local statistics exist, in the US, for example, 80% of girls have reportedly been on a diet by the time they're 10 years old (source: neuroscientist Sandra Aamodt, TED talk). No-one can claim this is normal or healthy.

Many of us vacillate between overeating – or even binge eating – and dieting, and wonder why we can never lose weight and keep it off on a permanent basis. Which begs the question: why do we overeat, binge eat, yo-yo diet, and allow stress and emotions to rule our appetites?

ABOVE: It's often all too tempting to cure a bad day at the office with a creamy chocolate éclair or two.

“Diets, detoxes and eliminating food groups are among the major causes of overeating and binge eating.”

Eating for all the wrong reasons

According to Xenia Ayiotis, a Pretoria-based Intuitive Eating counsellor and Mindful Eating coach, there are many reasons people overeat and develop eating disorders.

“Overeating is often used as a coping mechanism,” she says, “as it can be experienced as a form of soothing when difficult emotions and situations are experienced.”

We also often overeat due to diets and food restrictions. Diets, detoxes and eliminating food groups are among the major causes of overeating and binge eating.

Says Ayiotis: “When we eliminate food groups or try to control our food, it often leads to all-or-nothing thinking; so when we eat so-called ‘forbidden’ foods, we think ‘we’ve blown it’ or we’re ‘off the wagon’, so we continue to eat with the idea we will start again tomorrow or on Monday or in January.”

Other factors of overeating include social drivers, like not wanting to waste food, a lack of self-care, boundaries and tiredness, emotional reasons, or because we're bored or procrastinating.

Of course, there are more serious eating disorders, such as body dysmorphia, anorexia, orthorexia (an unhealthy obsession with healthy food) and bulimia. And they are more prevalent than we think.

BELOW: Is it just a habit to delve into the cookie jar while waiting for the kettle to boil?



TACKLE DYSFUNCTIONAL EATING

1. Give yourself unconditional permission to eat what you want. This takes away the forbidden-food aspect and neutralises food.
2. Pay attention to your hunger. When hungry eat.
3. Stop eating when comfortably full.
4. Put your knife and fork down in between bites.
5. Pause in the middle of the meal to tune in to fullness.
6. Most of the time, eat food for fuel and nourishment; some of the time eat food with zero nutritional value for the pure pleasure of the taste.
7. Get to know your triggers around overeating/binge eating and find other ways you can deal with difficult emotions.
8. There are many hungers we experience; establish which hunger is triggering you to overeat.
9. Before eating, practise the basics:
 - B** Breathe and check in with your body.
 - A** Assess your hunger and your food. Look at the colours – does it look appealing?
 - S** Slow down.
 - I** Investigate your hunger, fullness and levels of satisfaction. Investigate the pleasure of your food.
 - C** Chew your food.
 - S** Savour your food.

- www.theartofmindfuleating.com

Change bad habits through mindfulness

Ayiotis and Dr Richard-John (RJ) Chippindall, a clinical psychologist in private practice with 20 years of experience in mindfulness, run workshops (www.theartofmindfuleating.com) focusing on overeating and using mindfulness to overcome it.

People who attend these workshops generally learn to trust themselves around food more and listen to their bodies, says Ayiotis. “Using mindfulness, they gain a freedom and peace around food and learn techniques on how to deal with binge eating and overeating, and to apply this in daily life.”

Attendees also see that they are not alone in their struggle with food and eating. ▶

wellness

How does mindfulness work?

Very simply, mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while acknowledging and accepting feelings, thoughts and sensations. Mindfulness can help people develop healthier relationships with their bodies, food, eating and ultimately themselves. But how?

“A lot of weight gain boils down to you eating when you're not hungry.”

Says Julie Deane-Williams, a registered dietitian, mindfulness facilitator and director of the Institute for Mindfulness in South Africa (www.mindfulness.org.za): “By training themselves to be here, now, in this moment, people [become] present in their lives as they unfold, rather than being on automatic pilot.”

Through the mindfulness technique, people can become aware of their eating drivers, be they physiological (bodily hunger or fatigue) or emotional (anxiety or loneliness).

Instead of food being used to alleviate emotional distress, a person can learn how to self-soothe. According to Deane-Williams, this involves learning how to delay instant gratification and practise impulse control; to risk feeling difficult emotions and hold them in awareness; and to allow the 'emotional stomach' to digest and metabolise the feelings. Put simply: to befriend the difficult emotions, rather than trying to get rid of them.



ABOVE: Hunger comes in many forms; only physiological hunger can be sated by eating food.

BELOW: Forbidden food is OK – occasionally.



This may also mean learning to separate out the different types of hungers one feels and to deal with them appropriately. So, instead of a person using food to satisfy any and all internal emptiness or discomfort, physiological hunger is differentiated from spiritual hunger (which is a hunger for meaning) or intellectual hunger (which is a hunger for stimulation).

Mindfulness versus dieting

Tackling the subject of disordered eating and its link to dieting and the power of the mind, American neuroscientist Sandra Aamodt shares in a TED talk how she lost weight when she stopped dieting.

What we all know is that in order to lose weight, the energy we burn needs to outweigh the food we take in, she says. “What we don't realise is that hunger and energy use are controlled by the brain – mostly without our awareness.”

Dieting, she says, is not reliable. Five years after a diet, most people have regained the weight, while 40% of people have gained even more, she claims. Aamodt poses the question: if dieting is a problem, what do we do about it? “The answer, in a word, is mindfulness,” she says.

And she doesn't mean taking up yoga or meditating. “It means learning to understand your body's signals, so that you eat when you're hungry and stop when you're full. Because a lot of weight gain boils down to you eating when you're not hungry.”

It worked for Aamodt. She lost 4.5kg by listening to her body and mind – and hasn't looked back.

Ready to be mindful? It starts now... ■