A Mindful Approach to Eating Through the Holidays

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With the winter holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas upon us, it is easy to become overwhelmed with all the delicious foods that surround us. From pumpkin pie to Christmas cookies, tempting treats line the aisles at the grocery store—creating challenges for those of us who are trying to lose weight or get healthier. My advice for you is to approach the holidays differently this year. Instead of going on a strict diet to prevent gaining weight from eating all your holiday favorites, try to eat more mindfully!

What is Mindful Eating?

Mindful eating is an approach towards eating that promotes a greater sense of awareness in one’s relationship with food. To eat mindfully is to pay more attention to the foods that we eat and how they make us feel. It allows us to acknowledge our likes and dislikes and choose the foods that appeal to us but also nourish our bodies. Essentially, to eat mindfully is to slow down and take the time to eat rather than multi-tasking while eating. This is a very important concept because if we can learn to listen to our hunger and fullness cues this can help us better regulate how much we eat. The most important thing to remember is that mindful eating is not about giving up the foods we enjoy. Instead, it is about paying more attention to the way food makes us feel both physically and emotionally.

Research

A pioneer in the mindful eating movement, Brain Wansink, director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab as well as author of “Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think”, has been a part of some intriguing research regarding human behavior and food. One study that he conducted involved soup bowls that “did not empty”. The bowls were rigged with tubes that continually refilled them with soup while subjects were consuming the soup. In the end, the study found that those eating from the bowls that would not empty consumed 73% more than the subjects whose bowls were not attached to the tubes. Additionally, those who were eating from the self-filling bowls did not rate themselves “fuller” relative to the subjects with the normal bowls.

What does this tell us? In many situations, we are not eating with our stomach, but with our eyes. Many of us have a “clean your plate” philosophy ingrained in us and have lost the ability to identify when we are full – likely because we are not focused on what is going on inside of our bodies.
Here are a few tips on how to eat MINDFULLY:

- Check in with yourself before you sit down for dinner and ask yourself, “How hungry am I really on a scale of 1 to 10?” You never want to be too hungry or too full. The best is to be between a 3 and 7 at all times. For example, a 10 would be uncomfortably full or “stuffed” – think “Thanksgiving full”; whereas a 1 would be staving and lightheaded. A 3 would be hungry but not uncomfortable and a 7 would be comfortably full – relief from hunger.

![The Hunger Scale](image)

- Try to avoid arriving hungry to holiday gatherings; you are much more likely to overeat. Instead of skipping meals in anticipation of the holiday feast, act like you would on any other day.

- As you are consuming your holiday meal with friends and family, check in with yourself periodically to assess your fullness. A good rule of thumb is that after you eat each fourth of the food on your plate, you should check in with your stomach. Also, try putting your utensils down between each bite of food; this will help you pace yourself while you are eating.

- Try using smaller plates. This will help with portion control. It doesn’t mean that you cannot have seconds, however, will give you more of a sense of how much you are eating.

Whether it’s during the holidays or not, we all need to slow down when we eat, think about what we are doing and stop multi-tasking while consuming meals. Mindful eating is not about deprivation and eliminating the foods that we enjoy—it’s about being more aware of what we are doing and WHY we are eating a particular food.