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Do you have a hunger habit? How to conquer mindless eating.

Next time you reach for a sweet or a snack, ask yourself these questions: Am I really hungry or just having a craving? Am I bored or sad? How will eating that food make me feel?

Judson Brewer, a psychiatrist, neuroscientist and director of research and innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center, offers this guidance as part of a 21-day strategy to conquer habitual eating and instead learn to listen to your body's cues. These questions, Brewer says, help people focus on what they actually need, vs. what they want.

The Washington Post recently spoke with Dr. Brewer about his new book, "The Hunger Habit: Why We Eat When We're Not Hungry, and How to Stop." We spoke about how his plan can help with habits like stress and binge eating, as well as the role of willpower and curiosity in changing habits. Here's what he had to say.

What role does willpower play in the effort to improve eating habits?

"From a neuroscience standpoint, willpower is not even part of the equation when it comes to behavior change," said Brewer.

"The dominant paradigm is that people feel like they just need more willpower," said Brewer. "And so every six months, there's a new theme, whether it's a new diet or a new plan or a new this or that that requires willpower. People feel ashamed of themselves because they feel like there's something wrong with them."

Simply knowing what we "should" be doing is also often not enough to make us change behavior either. Brewer notes that we've all been inundated with messages that fresh, whole, minimally processed foods and regular exercise are the foundations of health, yet so many of us continue to struggle. "The knowing is not enough because that's not where behavior change happens,"

Brewer said. “The feeling is where behavior change happens and so we have to actually get reacquainted with — I would say, reconnected with — our bodies and then start listening to them.”

How can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness is a term that essentially means bringing awareness to the present moment without judgment.

“I would start with the why,” said Brewer. “Why am I reaching for food? Am I actually hungry or is it something else? And if it’s not hungry, it’s indicating some type of a habit that we can then delve into.”

The early science evaluating the approach is limited. A small [study](#) of 104 overweight and obese adult women showed a 40 percent decrease in craving-related eating among overweight or obese women who followed his month-long, mindfulness-based program on their smartphones.

Among those who completed the program in three months, having fewer cravings resulted in weight loss. The study was small and far from conclusive. (Brewer disclosed that he owns stock in Claritas MindSciences, the company that produced the app used in the study.)

While the evidence is still out on how effective mindfulness interventions might be, Brewer notes that some people find it enormously helpful and a better approach than restrictive diets. And while it may not result in significant weight loss, it can give people the tools they need to cope with cravings and change unhealthy habits.

“I had a patient who used to eat an entire bag of potato chips every night,” Brewer said. “And so I had her pay attention. I said, ‘just pay attention as you eat and see how many potato chips are enough.’ She stopped at two. I was blown away. I call her my two potato chip lady.”

How can we change our eating habits?

Brewer calls part of the brain’s reward system, notably, the workings of a region called the orbitofrontal cortex, “the decider.” If you feel bad, the brain can remind us that eating can feel good, and blot out bad feelings, if only

temporarily. In this system, “cake beats broccoli; cake beats boredom; cake beats bad feelings.”

But Brewer says we can change our habits by changing their position in the reward hierarchy through experience. Essentially, his plan involves three steps:

Map out your eating patterns and habit loops. Change the “reward value” of eating behavior in our brains. Finding more rewarding behaviors that make the body feel content.

As an example, Brewer offers his own addiction to gummy worms, which he downed by the bagful. After many years, he finally began thinking about their feel and taste, and realized they were sickly sweet and tasted like rubber. He replaced that long-entrenched habit with blueberries. For others, he suggests, a replacement habit might be enjoying a few squares of dark chocolate.

How do you change the reward value of food?

“Brains are prediction machines,” he said. Our brains review the past to navigate the future. Pause and ask yourself: What happened the last time I ate the pint of ice cream, the whole pizza or chocolate cake? Remembering, in detail, the stuffed gut and visceral unpleasantness will help to develop a sense of disenchantment and over time, as we catalog the uncomfortable physical sensations associated with overeating, its reward value drops.

“Nobody’s ever come back to me and said, ‘Boy, I didn’t realize how great it feels to overeat,’” Brewer said. “Nobody has ever said that.”

Brewer says this kind of focus is the beginning of disrupting a pattern. “It only takes 10 to 15 times of doing that for us to build up enough of a database to remember that for the next time,” he said. After becoming disenchanted with a certain food or pattern of behavior, the brain is ready for a change.”

How do you cope with food cravings?

Over time, as you become more aware that cravings and urges are simply sensations in the body, Brewer says, you can learn to ride them out. To do this, Brewer developed a practice known by its acronym, RAIN:

Recognize and relax into the cravings you are feeling

Accept and allow those feelings to be there

Investigate your physical sensations, emotions and thoughts with curiosity and kindness

Note what is going on in each moment

He says in his years of research, the longest craving anyone has reported was 12 minutes.

How does using curiosity help?

A typical pattern when it comes to binge or stress eating is to beat oneself up after an episode, and frame it as a screw-up, Brewer says:

Brewer suggests flipping the paradigm to embrace a “growth mind-set.” “Instead of saying, ‘Oh, no, I screwed up.’ I go, ‘Oh, well, that didn’t work.’”

That allows for curiosity to proliferate and creates space to learn from the experience, he asys. “Often we learn more from tripping up than when things go well, and so we can actually shift our mind-set to like, ‘I’m going to learn from everything, no matter what.’”

What role can mindfulness play when using a weight loss drug?

Brewer’s book doesn’t discuss the new “GLP-1” drugs like Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro and Zepbound, which can drastically suppress food cravings and drive dramatic weight loss. But, he says, his mindfulness-based approach remains a readily accessible tool that can be used in conjunction with medication if needed.

“What I would say with the GLP -1 drugs is the jury is still out in terms of long-term effects,” he said. “What the jury is not out on is how our brains learn. So regardless of whatever the GLP -1 or the next generation of drugs are going to be, we still have to know how our brains work, and we still have to learn to work with our brains.”