

THE NASM GUIDE TO MINDFUL EATING



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Disclaimer

The content in this guide is intended to be used for informational purposes only. It is not to be used to diagnose or treat any medical condition or disease, and not to replace guidance from a licensed healthcare provider.

Welcome!

We are excited to be fully engaged with you and to go alongside this journey to greater awareness of our eating habits together! This guide is going to explore Mindful Eating and how it might impact your nutrition habits and overall life. This guide is going to focus on what Mindful Eating is, how to operationalize Mindful Eating, the benefits of Mindful Eating, and leave you with some tips and tricks for how you can begin utilizing these concepts immediately. We hope that after reading this guide you walk away with at least one or two more tools you can use to develop better habits and intentions around your nutrition.

About NASM

The National Academy of Sports Medicine is the leader in educating and credentialing fitness, wellness, and performance professionals across the globe. We provide valid, up-to-date content on topics that improve the health and well-being of those they serve. We pride ourselves on creating content you can apply right away. Learn more about us at www.nasm.org, [your favorite social media platform](#), or [wherever you listen to podcasts](#).

Getting the Most from This Guide

This Guide to Mindful Eating will walk you through information explaining a little bit of the “why” behind the “how”. We’ll make sense of the information out there, so you won’t have to. Then we’ll give you some key takeaways and actionable steps to apply whenever you like.

Come back and use the information as a reference any time. Be sure to use the key takeaways and application strategies in whatever way makes sense for you. Don’t feel obligated to put *everything* into action right away. *When you’re ready for a deeper dive on the topic, check out our recommended resources.*



Introduction

The way we understand our own nutrition has evolved over the last century. In many respects we have gotten smarter and more sophisticated with our understanding of nutrition science as well as developing great tools to quantify our nutrition. We have calorie trackers, nutrition facts, nutrition databases, and laws that require food providers and restaurants to supply quantitative information regarding the energy and nutrient content of food. Furthermore, we have fully integrated technology into our daily lives and our food habits.

These tools have revolutionized our understanding of food and have given us a lot of incredibly powerful tools for better understanding and controlling our personal nutrition in the modern world. However, these tools have also caused a lot of distraction and distanced us from the experience of eating. In fact, many of us sit down to eat a meal and have our fork in one hand and our phone in the other, logging the food we are eating and then scrolling social media until we realize our meal is done. All without us realizing we were really even eating.

The cumulative result of improvements in technology, how convenient most of our lives have become, and the endless availability and abundance around food have caused many of us to develop passive behaviors around our food consumption. This has led to mindless eating becoming a default behavior pattern for many of us. This mindless approach to eating has the potential to disconnect us from our food and establish habits that lead us to overconsume calories and adopt unhealthy eating habits. This highlights the need for nutritional approaches, tools, and skills that can help us prevent or rewire our habits around food and make us more mindful of how we eat. This concept, improving our mindfulness around our nutrition, has become a focal point of nutrition research over the last several decades and has been termed “Mindful Eating”. Mindful Eating is a dietary framework that helps us as individuals break many of the habits that the modern world has helped us build. In this guide, we are going to explore this framework and understand how we can use it to help us reconnect ourselves to our nutrition habits and our experience of eating.



What Is Mindful Eating

Mindful Eating is a behavioral approach to your nutrition and eating habits that utilizes many of the core concepts of the broader practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a mental framework or tool that utilizes paying purposeful attention to the present moment and extracting all the details and experience of that moment. Perhaps the most well-known example of mindfulness is in the context of meditation and yoga when you attempt to clear your mind and focus on your breath and the feelings associated with breathing. This concept of mindfulness extends into eating, wherein Mindful Eating has been defined as an approach to nutrition and eating that focuses a person's attention to their food, on purpose, moment by moment, without judgment, while focusing on the sensory and environmental awareness of the food they are consuming and the experience of that food (Nelson, 2017).

Mindful Eating differs from other approaches to eating in several key ways. First, Mindful Eating does not have strict rules around foods; it does not provide guidance or instruction on what foods to eat or not eat or how many calories to consume. Second, it is a behavior-first approach to eating instead of a food/nutrient-first approach to eating. Lastly, within most contexts, Mindful Eating does not set a specific outcome. For example, weight




loss is not considered the primary goal or intended outcome of adopting Mindful Eating because it is a process-oriented, not results-oriented framework.

Mindful Eating

An approach to nutrition and eating that focuses a person's attention to their food, on purpose, moment by moment, without judgment while focused on the sensory and environmental awareness of the food they are consuming and the experience of that food.

(Nelson, 2017)

Mindful Eating Characteristics

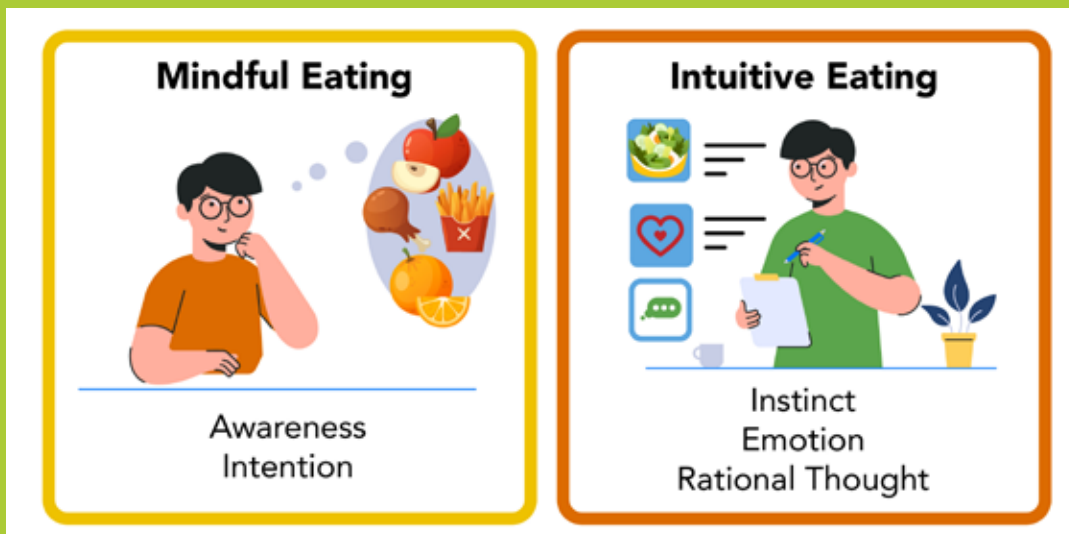
-  No strict rules around foods
-  Behavior first approach to eating
-  Does not set a specific outcome



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Mindful Eating vs. Intuitive Eating

The terms Mindful Eating and Intuitive Eating are often used interchangeably. However, they are actually very different frameworks. Mindful Eating focuses on practicing awareness and intention around eating. Intuitive Eating is considered a self-care framework that does incorporate mindfulness but focuses on instinct, emotion, rational thought, and includes concepts around body respect.



The Core Principles of Mindful Eating

On the surface, Mindful Eating might seem a bit vague and ambiguous. Without the structure or rules of traditional diets, how can anyone possibly operationalize the concept of Mindful Eating? That is a great question. The answer lies in focusing on the process-oriented principles that are taught within the Mindful Eating framework. While there are dozens of these principles, let's key in on the most important and action-oriented principles: awareness, sensory engagement, conscious decision-making, and judgment.

Core Principles of Mindful Eating



Awareness

Awareness is a process-oriented principle that underlies essentially every principle within Mindful Eating. Put simply, practicing awareness is the intentional act of paying attention to your experiences, behaviors, and emotions while you are eating. This often looks like increased attentiveness and being fully present without distractions while eating. While it might be impossible to pay attention and be aware of every single aspect of eating, there are some key areas that you can practice being attentive to and focusing your awareness on. Specifically, Mindful Eating suggests focusing on hunger and satiety as you eat; being open and experiencing the emotions before, during, and after eating; and continuing to refocus on meals when you notice you are going on “autopilot”.

Sensory Engagement

Sensory engagement is a specific form of awareness that focuses on how you experience your senses while you are eating. Doing this allows you to find several focal points for your attention while you are eating. This can begin with noticing your senses of the environment you are in when eating and then to the senses experienced with the food itself.

Here are some examples of the types of sensory engagement you can practice with Mindful Eating:

- ➔ **Sight/Appearance:** The idea of sensory engagement begins before you even take your first bite. Sight and appearance are often the first way we engage with a meal. The colors, the shapes, and the dinnerware it is served on all are aspects of food that our eyes capture. Mindful Eating teaches focusing and being attentive to the visual stimuli of food.

- **Smell:** The scent and aroma of food is often more powerful and important for our total sensory experience than any other sensory experience. Aromas can trigger emotions and memories, are often one of the “reward” experiences from food, and are often one of the triggers for food anticipation. Mindful Eating promotes keying in on smells and paying attention to how your mind and body respond to them.
- **Temperature:** After sight and smell, the next sense that is commonly experienced when eating food is the temperature of the food. Temperature is often a critical part of why we enjoy specific foods such as hot coffee or cold ice cream. Focusing on temperature adds another dimension for you to experience with your food.
- **Taste:** Taste is the most common sensory experience that we associate with the food we eat. However, we often let taste happen to us instead of seeking out and truly experiencing taste. Instead of letting it happen, focus on the taste and identify the individual components. Is it sweet, is it salty, is it savory, or is it bitter? Are their multiple flavors occurring at once, and can your brain dissect and experience them all? This not only allows you to engage in a deep sensory experience with your food, but it also helps you to stay engaged throughout each bite of your meal and avoid the autopilot nature of eating.
- **Texture:** Texture is not only another layer of the sensory experiences tied to food, but it is also one of the inherent properties of food that is directly tied to our enjoyment of food. The human brain has been wired to find greater satisfaction from foods with multiple textures. When practicing Mindful Eating, focus on the different textures within each bite, from bite to bite, and notice the different sensations, enjoyment, and even sounds that occur while you are eating.
- **Swallowing:** Swallowing is not something most people actively pay attention to when they are eating. In fact, it is almost an unconscious behavior for people. However, this is the final process when eating so it is important within the context of Mindful Eating that you give this process your attention as well.

Palatability Influence Factors



Sweetness



Energy density



Saltiness



Texture



Mouthfeel



Flavor (umami)

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How Taste and Texture Affect Food Intake

One aspect of food that increases calorie consumption is the palatability of a food. Palatability is defined by how much we enjoy and how much reward we get from food. There are several factors that influence palatability, and they are almost all centered around our senses. They include sweetness, saltiness, mouthfeel, energy density, texture, and a flavor known as umami. Mindful Eating can help you, as an individual, better understand how these aspects of food drive your eating behavior.



Conscious Decision-Making

Mindful Eating is not relegated only to the act of eating, but also the process of making decisions about what food you eat, when you eat it, where you eat it, and why you eat it. This aspect of Mindful Eating asks you to make deliberate choices each time you eat and to eat based on specific criteria. There is not a set of criteria you have to follow *per se*, but rather that you are aware of the reasons why you are choosing a given food and making a conscious choice to eat that food at a given time and in a given setting. Instead of eating just for the sake of eating and eating out of habit, you make deliberate and conscious decisions around your food habits. For example, choosing to eat a sweet treat to celebrate a special occasion would be a form of conscious decision-making. Conversely, grabbing the same sweet treat as you walk by it in the office without giving it much thought would be a form of mindless decision-making. Both behaviors result with a sweet treat consumed, but the context around how that decision was made is substantially different.

Judgment

An important aspect of Mindful Eating that extends beyond simply paying attention and “being mindful” is developing a non-judgmental mindset toward foods and eating habits. One example of this is to eliminate black-and-white thinking around food and avoid labeling foods or meals as “good” or “bad” or labeling meals as “cheat meals”. Focus instead on the process and experience of eating rather than judging yourself as you eat.

Mindful Eating and Weight Loss

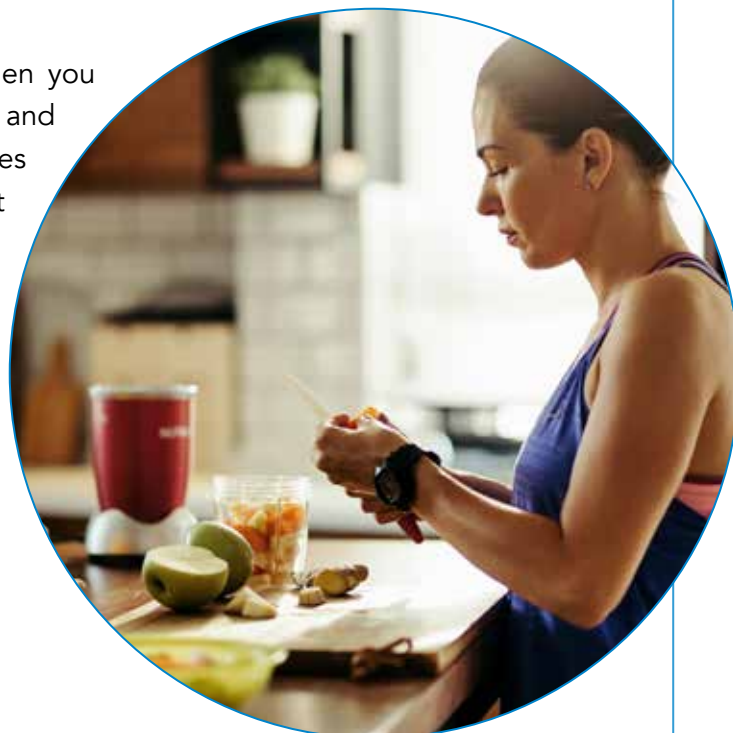
Mindful Eating is not a weight-centric approach to nutrition. In fact, neither weight loss nor weight management are the focus on Mindful Eating. Instead, it is a process-focused approach to eating. However, weight loss and weight management are often outcomes that occur as a result of people practicing Mindful Eating.

Weight Loss

Research over the last decade has helped us understand whether or not Mindful Eating can be an effective tool for weight loss, regardless of whether or not that is the primary goal. A study published in 2023 examined the effect of Mindful Eating on weight loss when it was utilized as a standalone intervention or in combination with intentional caloric restriction (Pepe et al., 2023). This study also compared this approach to caloric restriction without Mindful Eating. Those who engaged in Mindful Eating alone lost ~3.3% of their body weight, which was similar to those who were only on a calorie-restrictive diet (~3.9%). Interestingly, stacking Mindful Eating with an intentional calorie-restrictive diet did not result in more weight loss.

However, the results for Mindful Eating as a stand-alone intervention are not entirely consistent across the scientific literature. For example, one systematic review and meta-analysis found that Mindful Eating did not significantly impact calorie intake or improve food quality in ~70% of studies (Grider et al., 2021). Conversely, another systematic review and meta-analysis found a small, but significant effect wherein Mindful Eating led to ~0.75 pounds of weight loss, which was comparable to conventional diet programs in the studies examined (Fuentes et al., 2019).

These discrepancies in the research make sense when you consider that Mindful Eating can take various forms, and in some situations can lead to consuming more calories not less, making it a less than optimal tool for weight loss per se. Instead, it is a framework to help peoples' awareness around food that might result in better eating habits, behaviors, and relationships with food in the long run. When the concepts of Mindful Eating are stacked with other nutritional tools such as portion control, understanding energy density, and calorie balance, Mindful Eating is likely to help with longer term weight management.



Psychological Benefits of Mindful Eating

Weight management might be an ancillary benefit of Mindful Eating, but the most common benefits seen from Mindful Eating are psychological benefits. The psychological benefits of Mindful Eating are wide ranging and often depend on the individual and their specific circumstances. However, many of the psychological benefits can be categorized as lower stress, a reduction in emotional eating, and an improved relationship with food.

Potential Psychological Mindful Eating Benefits



Stress Reduction



Decrease in Emotional Eating



Improved Relationship with Food

Stress Reduction

Mindful Eating is essentially the application of the broader concept of mindfulness but placed on one's eating behaviors. Given the rich literature on mindfulness and stress reduction, it stands to reason that Mindful Eating is likely to help individuals lower stress, especially around food and their dietary habits. Currently there is very little research that directly examines Mindful Eating and stress reduction. However, the small amount of data to date is positive. A study examining Mindful Eating in adults with overweight and obesity found that Mindful Eating did lead to decreases in self-reported global stress levels (not just food-related stress) (Daubenmier et al., 2011).

Emotional Eating

Emotional eating often occurs as a reaction to emotions and manifests as eating without intention and/or awareness. Mindful Eating puts an additional layer of cognitive control between stimulus (emotional trigger) and response, which might help individuals reduce behaviors of emotional eating. Research does support this hypothesis. For example, a randomized controlled trial of adults who were overweight or had obesity found that a Mindful Eating intervention meaningfully lowered emotional eating behaviors (Daubenmier et al., 2011). It also helped reduce those same individuals from eating in response to external cues such as the sight or smell of food. This is not the only study to show this as other studies done in different populations around the world have found similar effects, wherein Mindful Eating reduces both emotional eating and eating as a result of external cues (Morillo-Sarto et al., 2023; Salvo et al., 2022).

Relationship With Food

There is very little in the peer-reviewed literature that directly measures and assesses “relationship with food” and how Mindful Eating impacts that in a quantifiable way. However, many people who utilize Mindful Eating report that they experience a much better relationship with food. They often indicate less shame and self-judgment around food choices, that they understand their eating behaviors better, and they are able to uncouple emotions from food choices more effectively.

Conclusion

Mindful Eating is a framework that takes the concepts of mindfulness and incorporates it directly in the behaviors, habits, and experiences of eating. It focuses on increasing an individual’s awareness and attentiveness to the experience of eating, asks the individual to fully embrace the totality of the sensory experiences that occur during eating, making conscious decisions regarding the food they consume, and removing judgment from food and how it relates to them as a person.

Mindful Eating is a process-oriented approach to nutrition and does not necessarily place weight loss, weight management, or any specific outcome as the desired end result of practicing Mindful Eating. However, Mindful Eating can be a useful tool for people to be more intentional about their diets, which can lead to weight loss and more effective weight management in the right circumstances. The most common outcomes that arise from people following a Mindful Eating-based approach are psychological. Mindful Eating has been shown to reduce stress, decrease emotional eating, and can help some people improve their relationship with food.



What You Can Do Now

Mindful Eating might be an approach that can help you improve your overall nutrition habits and develop a better understanding of what you eat, how you eat, and why you engage in many of the nutrition habits that you do. Practicing Mindful Eating can be accomplished without making any major changes to your current food choices because Mindful Eating is mostly a set of mental tools and psychological frameworks. Here are some ways that you can immediately begin implementing the core concepts of Mindful Eating into your everyday life:

- ➔ Instead of eating at random places (like standing in the pantry or sitting in the car) where you might eat from habit and not intent, be intentional about the environment in which you eat. For the next week pick one or two places (maybe one at home and one at work) where you will eat all of your meals.
- ➔ Limit distractions while eating. Put down your phone, turn off the TV, or close your book you are reading. Be fully engaged with the current meal you are consuming.
- ➔ Note every sensory experience you have when eating. Make a mental note of the visual, olfactory, taste, auditory, and texture sensations you get when eating.
- ➔ Identify the emotions you feel before, during, and after you eat. Make a mental note of them and explore what that means to you.
- ➔ Slow down. Intentionally set a long time window for your meal. For example, make yourself take a full 30 minutes to eat your lunch at least once this week.
- ➔ Journal your thoughts, feelings, emotions, and experiences every time you eat for a week and review it at the end of the week. Take the learnings from that journal and apply it to your next week.

Online Resources

Want to learn more about nutrition? Here are a few places to find reliable information and insight about nutrition and healthy eating behaviors.

- ➔ [NASM's Certified Nutrition Coach Certification \(NASM-CNC\)](#)
- ➔ [NASM Blog](#)
- ➔ [NASM's YouTube Channel](#)

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**THANKS FOR
READING!**

