



# Mindfulness at Mealtimes

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Here are tips for more mindful eating. Not all of these tips may feel right for you — try a few and see how they work.

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## 1. Tune in to your feelings.

Before you begin eating, take a moment to reflect upon how you feel. Are you rushed? Stressed? Sad? Bored? Hungry? What are your wants? What are your needs? Differentiate between the two. After you have taken a moment to reflect, then you can choose if you want to eat, what you want to eat, and how you want to eat.

## 2. Sit down.

Don't eat on the go. Take a seat. You're less likely to appreciate food when you are multitasking. It's also difficult to keep track of how much you are eating when you snack on the go.

## 3. Turn off the TV (and everything else with a screen).

Have you ever glanced down from your phone, tablet, or computer, only to wonder where all the food went? These distractions make us less aware of what and how much we are eating.

## 4. Serve out your portions.

Resist eating straight from the bag or the box. Not only is it easier to overeat when you can't see how much you've had, but it is also harder to fully appreciate your food when it is hidden from view.

## 5. Give gratitude.

Before you start to eat, pause and take a moment to acknowledge the labor that went into providing your meal — be it thanks to the Lord, yourself, you and your husband, farmers, factory workers, animals, chefs, or even your companions at the table.

## 6. Don't give into the pressure to clean your plate.

Many of us were brought up to finish everything on our plate and were not allowed to leave the table until we did. It's okay to leave food on your plate. It's okay not to finish every single bite. Consider packing the leftovers to go, or just leaving the last few bites. Even though nobody likes to waste food, overstuffing yourself won't help those in need.

## 7. Silence.

Try eating your meals in silence once in a while. When it's quiet, it is natural for the mind to wander; acknowledge these thoughts, and then see if you can gently return to your experience of eating. Be conscious of the food's consistency, flavor, tastes, and smells, and fully appreciate the moment. Even spending the first 5-10 minutes in silence can be refreshing and set a grateful tone for the rest of the meal.

## 8. Eat slowly.

Most of the time we're eating so fast we have the next bite on the fork ready to go before we're even done chewing the first one. Try putting your fork down in between bites and not picking it up until you're finished chewing. By doing this, you are slowing the meal down and giving your stomach the time it needs to tell your brain you are no longer hungry.

## 9. Listen to your hunger cues.

Be kind to your body. If you notice your stomach growling, give your body what it needs. Do not be harsh to your body by refusing it food and sustenance. You do not have to "earn" food. You do not have to workout before eating food. Listen to your body because your body knows best.

## 10. Distinguish between true hunger and non-hunger triggers for eating.

Have you ever found yourself walking to the refrigerator without actually being hungry? Perhaps you've found yourself gravitating towards the pantry even though you just ate. It is important to differentiate between true hunger and non-hunger triggers for eating, such as boredom, negative emotions, stress, etc. Practice being intentional about what you eat, when you eat, and why you eat.

## 11. Engage your senses by noticing colors, smells, sounds, textures, and flavors.

When you are rushed or distracted, you are not able to fully experience or appreciate your food. Instead of eating straight from a bag or box, take out your food and put it on a plate so that your food is in full sight. Instead of rushing through bite after bite and ignoring the complexity of your food, practice mindfulness by thinking about how the food tastes, looks, and feels.

## 12. Learn to cope with guilt and anxiety about food.

If you are experiencing guilt, shame, or anxiety around eating, first try telling yourself that everything is going to be okay. Your harsh inner critic will most likely try to convince you of lies such as, "You're going to gain weight because of that meal" or "You have no self control." Remind yourself that you are being kind to yourself by giving your body what it needs/wants.

## 13. Eat to maintain overall health and well-being.

Diets are all about restriction, and they are not sustainable. When people go on diets, they drastically change their eating habits and limit their food to only a handful of options. You cannot eat only chicken, broccoli, and rice for the rest of your life. The problem with restriction is that it limits the body's intake of diverse nutrients which are vital for key metabolic functions. Focus on food as fuel for your body.

## 14. Notice the effects food has on your feelings.

Focus on how the food makes you feel. Do you always feel guilty or shameful after eating a particular food or food group? Do you suddenly feel more joyful after eating your favorite snack? Do you feel relieved after indulging in a particular food? Do you feel stronger and more energized after eating a nutrient-dense meal? Heighten your awareness of how food makes you feel.

## 15. Stop eating when you're full.

Hunger and satiety are complex functions regulated by numerous feedback mechanisms in your body. One of those signals comes from your stomach wall stretching to accommodate the meal you are eating. Nerve stretch receptors send signals to the brain that the stomach is expanding and you can begin to taper off and stop eating. At the same time, a hormone called ghrelin (produced when your stomach empties to trigger a hunger message) starts to decrease. The result is more impulses reaching your brain saying to stop eating.

## 16. Ask yourself whether the food you chose is healthy.

Emotional eating occurs when you turn to food to cope with problems, and most people choose “comfort foods.” Eating comfort foods like simple carbohydrates or foods high in sugar do make you feel good *temporarily* because sugar triggers the release of dopamine, the neurotransmitter of comfort and pleasure. However, it is important to choose nutrient-dense, whole foods instead of sugary, fatty foods because research shows that overtime, a sugary, fatty diet can decrease dopamine levels.

## 17. Stop labeling foods as “good” or “bad.”

Foods do not have morality. Therefore, foods cannot be “good” or “bad.” A healthier way to categorize food includes “all the time foods” and “sometimes foods”. There’s no need to restrict yourself when it comes to fruits, vegetables, eggs, nuts, lean meats, and whole grains. Foods you eat occasionally would be things like desserts and carbohydrates. With this approach, no foods are completely off limits, you’re not deprived, and you’ll develop sustainable lifestyle habits that outlast any fad diet.

