



The Athena Wellness Podcast

Episode 013 – What is Mindful Eating and Why Should We Practice It?

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Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast. The show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that prides itself on sharing practical wellness and life solutions for busy people.

Hello and welcome to Episode 13. Thanks so much for joining me. Before I tell you about today's show, I invite you to think about an incredible meal. One where all your senses are engaged. Envision yourself fully enjoying the enticing aromas, the tastes, the textures. You're in a beautiful setting, maybe even dining al fresco with people whose company you enjoy. No food is off limits. The conversation flows and everyone is sharing gratitude for all who made your meal possible. You and your guests are fully present and enjoying the company. And when you finished, you've noticed you've eaten until you were satisfied, but not stuffed. You feel nourished by the food, the conversation and the overall experience.

Maybe it's my Italian upbringing, but I love food. And what I just described, delights me to no end. That combination of good food and good company is magic. And a side note, since we're still in quarantine mode, good company also applies if you find yourself dining solo in being mindful of what you're bringing to your own experience.



Back to my food scenario. As much pleasure as what I described brings me, I spent years doing the exact opposite. I wonder how many times you have, too. Ever spent your lunch hour scrolling through email or the news or preparing for the next meeting? Perhaps you've chosen what you "should" eat and not enjoyed it. Or eaten to numb or disconnect. You look up and it's time to get back to work and you barely remember what you ate. And an hour later you find yourself at the coffee bar for a caffeine boost and maybe a bite of chocolate. There's a simple way to address this and it's called mindful eating.

And today we'll talk about: what mindful eating is and why we should do it; what triggers hunger; and then the unlearning process - how do we actually practice mindful eating?

So sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence and let's get started.

What is mindful eating and why should we do it? There are many ways to define mindful eating. Some might call it a technique or others a form of meditation. But here's my favorite: Mindful eating is about exploring your *relationship* with food.

I love this definition because for so many years, many of my meals were transactional. I often put strict protocols around what I was eating in the name of wellness. And the timing of many of my meals was dictated by my work day or social calendar. When I discovered mindful eating a few years back, this began to slowly shift. But like any relationship, it takes work, and relationships are fluid, they can get off track.



I found that when I practiced mindful eating, there was an amazing by-product. I enjoyed my food again. And today my relationship with food has been transformed.

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Here with some of the changes I've noticed:

- There's an increased joy in preparing, sharing and eating meals. Almost like infusing the food with love, just like my Italian grandmother used to do.
- I can adjust the level of mindfulness I choose to bring to my meals depending on my day, from taking a few moments before I eat, to having a complete mindful meal.
- I no longer try to control my eating habits. It's more like an ongoing conversation with myself, which allows me to eat until I'm satisfied instead of until I'm full.
- I can now distinguish between an emotional reaction and a physical cue for food which has reduced my cravings. And we'll talk more about cravings in Episode 14.
- And lastly, I can sense and honor the shifts in my eating patterns. Like I prefer to have my main meal midday and also my last meal by 6pm.

Here's another thing I love. There's no external authority on mindful eating. There's no weighing, tracking or food recommendations. You become your own authority, based on your own holistic experience of how the food you eat impacts your mind, body and spirit. You begin to trust your inner wisdom and enjoy in the simple pleasure of eating. The more curious you become, the deeper the journey and in my experience, the healthier the choices.



Here's another bonus, the inner critic need not come along for the ride. Mindful eating is one that thrives in the absence of judgment and criticism. This allows us to explore our hunger and when we feel satiated, to experiment and to see what works for us. And there will be times when we go off course. When we're mindful, we accept this as part of the learning experience and move forward without guilt and with the intent to honor and respect our health and wellness.

Why do we even need to be concerned about eating mindfully? We've become a society where eating has become automatic due to a variety of distractions. In addition, the process of eating has been sped up by scheduling and by fitting in food in between appointments and activities. It takes the brain 20 minutes to register fullness by releasing appetite suppressing hormones. Many of our meals are eaten quickly and on the go. Which is why we can eat too much food before our brain has a chance to signal that we've had enough.

Also, mindful eating helps us understand our hunger triggers. So we can determine if we're truly hungry for food, or feel an impulse that we want to eat because of emotional or environmental discomfort. Mindful eating turns our automatic eating into an intentional activity.

So how will mindful eating benefit you? Researchers have seen strong evidence that mindfulness encourages healthier eating. And studies have shown mindful eating can boost overall wellness and can have a positive impact on eating disorders, impulse control and weight loss, and implementing positive wellness behavior change. And I'll put a link in the show notes to some of the more notable studies. In addition, by simply slowing down and chewing our food, our digestion improves, as does our nutrient absorption.



And I can tell you from personal experience, there's great power in getting in touch with how I feel when I eat. Increased awareness improves my feelings of self-control and of choice. I feel I have a wider range of food to choose from because I'm being mindful of how much I eat and when I eat it. And this impacts my positive emotions and my outlook, which as we know, lowers stress levels and by design, when our stress levels go down, so do our cortisol levels. And then the cycle just feeds on itself in a good way. The better I feel, the more I want to continue to make healthy choices.

So let's move to the next topic, which is what triggers hunger. When I think back to when I was a kid growing up in the 1970s, I rarely thought about food when we weren't sitting at the kitchen table. We had three homemade meals a day and I rarely snacked or had processed food. I was engaged in school and play. I didn't have a big appetite in those days. And thankfully, I was never forced to clean my plate. But I was expected to eat what was prepared. And that gave me exposure to all different types of food.

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My awareness shifted when I got to high school and began training with the track team. This was way before the internet and before things like natural protein supplements. Even back then I loved experimenting with what little was known about fueling athletes. Remember Rocky drinking raw eggs? Yep, did it and no, it's not recommended. It could very well be why later I became a vegetarian. But the point is, I had a balanced relationship with food.



That is until I headed off to college, left to my own devices where I could eat and drink anything I wanted at any time. And that began the unbalanced unhealthy leg of my wellness journey.

So what pulled me out of balance and away from my own normal eating patterns. Many years later, I would learn that there are different aspects to the sensation of hunger. First, there's actual hunger based in the physical body. This is actual cellular hunger, the body's need for nourishment, hydration, and replenishment.

But other things can cause the sensation of hunger. And those things include conditioning, such as "It's noon, it's time for lunch," whether we're hungry or not. Or sensory... If you think about the five senses, any one of those can trigger some desire for food. For example, aroma - I can remember going into my grandmother's apartment, she lived four stories up, but I could smell her cooking as soon as that door was opened to the stairway. Then there's taste and the way one bite can turn into eating the whole thing, even though you didn't mean to do that. There's the sensation of touch or with food, its texture - that sensation of a crunch of a chip or the creaminess of ice cream. There is sound, such as the sizzle when something's cooking on the stove. Or sight - how many times have you been completely stuffed by a meal and then the waitress brings over a dessert tray. Change in plans.

Thoughts and emotions can also cause the sensation of hunger - eating to ease things like feeling tired, or stressed or lonely. And those things look like comfort food or sometimes dishes from our childhood or holidays.



External factors can also trigger us into wanting to eat - advertising, seeing commercials on televisions, or the convenience of a drive thru. Maybe it's ease or opportunity, such as being at a buffet and eating more than we normally would. Or having office perks like spreads that are just left out all day. Things like the latest diet trend or the conflicting research of what we should or shouldn't eat can sometimes take us off track.

These false sensations of hunger can result in us not respecting what our body really needs. And also eating past the point of where our true hunger is satisfied.

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I'm going to go into detail on what my process is in a bit, but to recap where we are so far and how I think about this: It's my goal, just like when I was a kid, to eat when I'm hungry. And before I do, I pause and see if what feels like hunger is actually the need for food or if I'm looking for relief from some unpleasant feelings, whatever the source might be, whether it's conditioning, or sensory, or thoughts, emotions, or external factors.

And then I ask what my body wants or needs. I focus on the food quality, which for me is mostly fruit and veg. And I focus on the portions as well as the timing. And like I said, I'll go into more detail in a bit. But that's how I think about it at a high level.

I also think it's important that we identify our challenges or what can get in the way of this. And this can shift. So for example, in my corporate days, my challenge was eating at scheduled times and also stress eating and drinking. Now my challenge is that I can eat too much good food. So the food choices are



the right ones, but I can overdo it on the portions. And I also still can reach for food or drink at the end of a long work week.

So these are all opportunities to practice and to find what might work to address the situation if I feel an adjustment is needed. And the more we practice, the more we can sense what our body needs versus what our minds desire when hunger arises. And so we can always ask the question, "What am I hungry for?" and be curious and creative in the response.

I find it's also helpful to know what can make hunger diminish. It may be just accepting the feeling and being with that feeling of hunger. It could be being in flow. I know the days when I'm writing I rarely think about food. And also at the end of cardio activity, the last thing I feel like doing is eating versus when I have a weight training day when I usually come out of those sessions being hungry. And walks in nature, too, are a big help for me. So if I'm feeling that little bit of a crave and I have the time and the day, I try to get outside, even if it's for a brief period, that usually helps to shift the energy.

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And what all of those things have in common is the sense of presence, of coming back to the present moment. And being with whatever it is that's happening, being mindful. I also think it's good to try new things and remain attentive throughout that experience. So for example, if you're eating something, like a packaged food, to really try to get in touch with what kind of impact that has on your body. And also, if you're trying something new, in what ways does that thing make you feel good?



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I like to try things like, fasting in particular, really helped me see how my hunger pains can dissipate, even if I don't eat something. And it also reminded me of the sacredness of food. And how meditation can help center me when cravings take hold on.

Finding new things and letting go of well worn habits can be really joyful as well. I have historically prepared food with recipes. And this year, shopping at a local farmers market - it taught me to buy whatever looked most vibrant that week and then figure out how to cook it once I got it home. And that was a lot of fun this summer.

I'd like to close this topic with the story of how wise our bodies are and how important it is to listen. About seven years ago, I was away on business in South America, flying between New York, Peru and Chile. And toward the end of the trip, my right ankle began to swell. I drink a lot of water trying to flush it out. I walked on the hotel treadmill to circulate the blood. And I was sleeping with my foot elevated but it kept getting worse. I wasn't in pain. But the swelling was significant and very uncharacteristic for me.

I got it checked out the day I returned home and went to the hospital for a scan, which was negative. So I made an appointment with a homeopathic practitioner, which was about a week away. And in the interim, all I wanted to eat were white baked potatoes. And in those days I rarely ate anything that was white rice, white flour or white potatoes. So this was a highly unusual feeling that I was having. But it wouldn't dissipate. So I went and bought some Idaho potatoes and baked them up.



And I found them unbelievably delicious. I was eating at least one a day. The swelling subsided quite a bit by the time I finally met with the homeopath and he suggested a pure vegan diet for a while to help bring down the inflammation and gave me a number of natural teas and supplements and tinctures to take. But he ended with a “By the way, make sure you eat white potatoes.” And I was stunned. “Why?” I asked him and he said, “Well, you know, they’re high in potassium and potassium regulates fluid balance and reduces water retention.” How about that?

Now let's talk about how to practice mindful eating. It turns out that my experience with sensing what my body needed is backed up by studies, some dating back more than 80 years.

In particular, a study was published by a doctor in 1939, who studied infants about to transition to solid foods. In place of a structured feeding protocol, the babies were offered an array of whole foods and were allowed to feed themselves, eating when they wanted and how much they wanted.

The results of the study were incredible, showing the innate wisdom of six to nine month old babies who ate the way the adults would have fed them. The children experimented with all the foods and then developed preferences for foods that suited their tastes, but naturally ate a balance of nutrients and calories that suited their physical needs. In addition, they ate attentively and leisurely for about 15 to 20 minutes, and then slowed down and ate a bit here or there for another five minutes, matching the curve of hunger suppressing hormones that are released on a normal 20 minute interval. Fascinating stuff. And I'll put a link to that study in the show notes as well.



So my takeaway is that it's not just the selection of whole food, but it's the manner in which we enjoy it, and trusting our inner knowledge of what we need to nourish ourselves in that moment.

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To make all of this more practical, I'd like to share some common suggestions on how you might incorporate mindful eating. The first way is to **slow down**. And there are ways of doing that. There are suggestions on trying to make your meals at least 20 minutes long so you have a sense of when you're full. To be able to hydrate either before or during your meal. To chew thoroughly. And there are suggestions that I know I don't have the patience to do, but there are a number you know, counting the chews and things like that. And sometimes it's easier to just put your utensil down in between bites to be able to enjoy your meal over a longer period of time.

The second is to find ways to eat the **right amount**. And so being mindful of your portions, I think it's helpful to measure out at least at the beginning to get a sense. I know it was very eye opening for me. The first time I started to measure out portions as they are on a label, it was quite illuminating on how much I was actually eating thinking that it was a portion. And I also find, if I use smaller plates, that gives me a sense of more food on the plate. As well as buying, I don't buy a lot of processed food, but if you buy individual packages, that seems to help with portion control as well. I also like to add volume to my plate with vegetables, which for me mostly, it's either steamed or roasted. Also, if I'm doing a smoothie, to put ice in there to add some volume as well.



And the last way is to find ways **to be present** while you eat. And that means no distractions of television or phone or any electronics. To find ways to engage all of your senses. To make sure you're actually sitting down at a table using tableware, which may sound funny but if you're eating on the go, there's a tendency to eat standing up in the kitchen. All also noticing what it's like to try to eat in silence for maybe a meal here or there. To do some breathing before you eat or to pay attention to your inner clock. And see if you can gauge when you're kind of at that 20 minute mark.

So with all of those possibilities as a backdrop, here's how I approach mindful eating. And it's really quite simple. When I have some sort of a hunger cue, I pause for a few moments and explore what's behind it in an accepting and compassionate manner. So I usually ask myself, am I really hungry? Or is it something that's sensory? Am I looking for a taste or smell or a texture? Is it emotion? Is it something that I'm doing at the moment? Or am I feeling stressed? Or am I procrastinating and maybe I'm thirsty. So I might get up and take a drink of water.

If it's truly hunger, then I ask my body what it needs. Am I looking for something sweet, like fruit, or something savory, like a meal? So all of that takes a few seconds.

When I choose to eat, depending on how much time I have and where I am and what I'm doing, I'll decide how much mindfulness I'll bring to my meal. Most meals it's just a few mindful moments at the start. I just think about what I'm grateful for and I take a few moments to savor those first few bites, which are always the best, just for the pure enjoyment of it. And then I have my meal.



When I have the time, I may choose to stay in mindfulness throughout the entire meal, which is awesome. It's an interesting exercise. When I do this, I focus on my two biggest mindful eating challenges, which is slowing down and eating until I'm satisfied but not full.

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With all the experimentation I've done, there are two things that seemed to help me. One is if I want to slow down, eating with chopsticks, usually does the trick. And secondly, if I'm looking to focus on when I feel satisfied and not full, I find that if I divide my portion in half, I eat the first portion, and then wait to see if I need more food at that time. Or if I want to put it away to enjoy later on in the day.

If I had to sum up what experimenting with mindful eating has taught me, it's these three things. One, the volume of food I need to stay healthy has decreased as I've gotten older. Two, there's a feeling of freedom that comes with allowing myself to eat whatever I feel I need. And three, when I connect with my body in this way, I understand what I truly need to stay well and fit. And this includes occasional times when I choose to eat some sort of comfort food, or even a drink that may not be the healthiest choice, but it's something that I want to enjoy as a treat.

As we wind down today's show, I'd like to offer this. Research has shown that we can make more than 200 food decisions a day and almost all of them are made unconsciously. This can lead to unhealthy food choices and overeating. This can shift by increasing our food awareness. And I'd suggest starting small with something that brings you joy.



I like to start my day with some water to rehydrate from the night. And then take a few mindful sips of coffee, which I just love. It sets the tone for my day.

What can be your mindful practice? A cup of tea? A square of dark chocolate? Taking a walk instead of reaching for a snack? Maybe just set the intention to invite ease around your food choices and mindfully check in with yourself to sense any inner cues.

It's my hope that this practice will help you enjoy a wide range of food in the right amount for you.

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

And I'd like to thank listeners who have subscribed and left a rating or review. Not only does that ensure you'll never miss an episode, but it helps others find their way to our circle. And if you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast.

Until next time, be well!