

MINDFUL EATING, *Balanced Health*



The Value of Asking Deeper Questions

by Laurie Young

“**W**hat should I eat?” It’s one of the first questions people ask when seeking to improve their health. “Should I try a vegan diet? Paleo? Or maybe just smaller portions, calorie-counting, and more exercise? Am I getting the right nutrients?” These questions are typically followed by a more urgent plea to be freed from a restrictive plan as soon as possible. “How long will it take to reach my goals? How long before I can eat what I really want?”

Implicit in these questions is a fear of losing control, especially when it comes to food. “If I don’t stop myself, I’ll eat the entire box of (*insert uncontrollable craving here*)! I’ll never lose weight!” Interestingly, this lack of self-trust is further reinforced by looking to outside authorities for a solution. By assuming we need credentialed professionals for such answers, we de-value the information our own bodies provide. We ignore what we already know. And, in effect, we avoid exploring the real reasons our eating patterns and other health habits may be sub-optimal.

The key to long-term health does not reside in gathering more information from professionals or adhering to restrictive diet and exercise regimens. Following someone else’s plan for our lives never really works. At least, not for very long. Nor do positive, lasting changes result from applying more willpower, which is really just a struggle against yourself and your desires. The answers you’re looking for can only be found by asking deeper questions in a mindful way.

What, really, is mindfulness and how does it relate to improving your eating and overall health? Mindfulness is not simply a meditation technique that reduces stress, to be used in those fleeting moments you’ve been able to carve out for quiet time. It’s not just about eating slowly and in silence. These are excellent applications of the concept, but mindfulness is much more than just a set of practices. It is a way of being, a way of paying attention to the gifts of the moment—even when those moments are not exactly as you’d like them to be.

When it comes to improving your health practices, mindfulness lies at the center point between planning and letting go. It is a state of balance that allows you to notice patterns that may not be serving you without jumping to self-criticism, grabbing for a quick-fix plan or giving up entirely. As you cultivate mindfulness, you begin to hear

the internal conversations you’ve been having with yourself more clearly. This, in turn, allows you to actively choose the changes you want to make based on your own guidance. It doesn’t mean you will never choose to apply a disciplined eating plan for particular goals. Rather, it means that your choices will be driven by an awareness of true need rather than a forced struggle to control yourself. In this way, you define your own path toward improved health rather than looking to an outside authority.

So let’s take a step back and practice asking a few questions mindfully. The starting point is to observe the ways in which you may have searched for solutions in the past and consider how you might look at things differently. By re-framing your questions, you choose where to place your attention. This supports a deeper understanding of yourself, and your relationship to food and health. Let’s observe what it’s like to approach eating and health as an journey of exploration rather than a problem you need help to solve.

Instead of asking an expert “What should I eat?”, ask yourself:

How do I eat?

Eating on the go or while doing something else, grabbing food as an afterthought, skipping meals and ordering out are modern conveniences that have become the norm. But how often do you actually sit down to notice and savor the food you are eating? Do you know who grew it? How was it prepared? Are you fully appreciating the many differences between a home-cooked meal made with love versus a mass-produced, convenience option? This sort of awareness opens up when you pay mindful attention to how you eat. (See sidebar for one way to practice this.)

By slowing down, you notice the details of food and the pleasure of eating. That act of noticing matters, because it allows you to be conscious of the choices you make at a much deeper level. Our bodies crave nutrients, and healthy food satisfies that need. Without it, no matter how much we eat, we may still find ourselves hungry for a truly nourishing meal that has been lost. When we busy ourselves with other things, we know something is missing but we don’t quite know what or why.

Why do I eat?

This question allows you to focus more deeply on defining your hunger and personal needs. Busy lives, thoughtless habits and convenience are some of the reasons people adopt eating patterns that fill them up without satisfying their deeper hunger. Emotional eating is a common challenge too. Maybe you're tired at the end of a long day and just want an easy meal. Maybe you diet because you want to lose weight and look good, no matter what the cost, and have given little attention to the quality of what goes into your body. Or maybe you find solace in certain comfort foods when life gets hard.

These are common challenges, many of which have only recently emerged, for it has only been in recent years that we really had much choice. Before the advent of processed food, we had to make our meals with our own hands. Whatever form your particular challenge with food takes, it's instructive to make a practice of stopping to notice why you eat and why you choose the foods that you do. This exploration may lead to conclusions about deeper unmet needs that drive your eating patterns. Meeting those needs directly can free you from habitually substituting food in place of them.

What does it feel like?

Perhaps the single most important question you can ask yourself is, "What does it feel like when I eat this food?" Slow down and notice. As you do so, pay attention to the taste, texture, and aroma. Linger with your meal long enough to feel the effects as it assimilates in your body. Notice the connection between what you just ate and how you felt while eating it, in between meals and over the course of the day. Did it give you energy or bog you down? Did you feel light or bloated? What was the quality of energy

that you got from that meal? And, more broadly, notice if your body functions well and feels good when choosing particular foods. Notice if how you eat affects how your body responds.

It's not uncommon for clients to tell me that dairy upsets their GI tract. Yet they are often still eating it regularly. Every day, they are putting food into their bodies that makes them feel bad while ignoring clear messages. If you're doing that, ask yourself the deeper question, "Why?" Why are you continuing to eat something your body rejects? Do you really need an expert to tell you what your body is saying?

Ultimately you know, somewhere deep inside, that quick-fixes, impersonal programs and short conversations with health professionals don't serve the deeper need for something that is unique to you. That's why restrictive plans for improvement don't last. We hardly even expect them to. These are challenging questions that aren't necessarily answered quickly and efficiently. They require reflection and self-knowledge. Answering them thoughtfully is the first step toward defining a personal plan that you believe in.

The central question, then, is not "What should I eat?", but rather "What do I want?" And perhaps more precisely, "What do I really need?" In order to find meaningful answers, we need to re-frame our conversations about health and eating. We need to ask deeper questions.

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SAVORING: A MINDFUL PRACTICE

For many of us, slowing down takes practice. This exercise can take five minutes or more if you want, depending on what feels right to you. Choose something simple that you enjoy eating, something you indulge in or perhaps even crave. Find a quiet space in your home where you won't be interrupted. Get comfortable in your seat, and place the food in front of you:

- Look -

Take a deep breath and really look. Notice the colors, shapes, texture. Find details you've never noticed before. Is this food natural? Homemade? Processed? Where did it come from? Relax your mind. Look, and explore your thoughts.

- Smell -

Continue slow, deep breathing as you close your eyes and inhale. Linger, enjoying the complexity of scent, noticing your desire to eat it. Anticipate the taste. What ideas and memories come up?

- Feel -

Is your mouth watering? What textures do you notice? How does it feel as you slowly bite into it? Do the flavors burst on your tongue? Breathe.

- Taste -

Chew slowly, exploring the subtle flavors of your food, those you may not usually notice when you are eating quickly. Notice any sensations and thoughts that arrive along with them. Take a deep breath and pause. What's different?

- Listen -

Notice the sound of eating, how the food gives as you bite into it. Hear everything going on around you. Consider how your environment affects your experience too. Listen to your own thoughts. In what way is it different to eat with all senses engaged?

- Repeat -

Slowly, and with awareness. Can you experience the next bite just as fully? Even more deeply?

You can use this mindful eating exercise as a model for experiencing the world and life. When you slow down and savor food mindfully, you engage all the senses. Mindful eating leads to mindful living and mindful choices.