



Gut INSTINCT

Also known as mindful eating—eating mindfully rather than mindlessly—intuitive eating could be the key to improving health and happiness.

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It is a foreign concept to many of us. ‘Intuitive eating’—a non-diet philosophy established in the 1980s—seeks to make us more aware of what we are consuming and less concerned about preconceived food rules.

For Louise Adams, a clinical psychologist and co-founder of health and wellness program Treat Yourself Well, the definition of intuitive eating is simple. “It means paying clear attention to what you’re eating, your hunger signs and levels and your enjoyment of a meal,” she says. According to Australian researchers cited in *Public Health Nutrition*, there are three

fundamental principles of intuitive eating: eating when you are hungry; stopping eating when you are full; and letting go of food restrictions (unless for medical reasons, such as intolerances or allergies).

Why should we eat intuitively?

Intuitive eating, Louise believes, is the best way to eat for your health and satisfaction. “People who eat intuitively have better health indicators, tend to have lower BMIs and have a much more relaxed relationship with food,” she says.

Extensive research not only confirms these traits, but has also found that people who eat intuitively have better psychological health. And since mindful eating is great for your mental health, says Accredited Practising Dietitian Lisa Renn of Body Warfare Nutrition, it puts you in a good headspace. “This means you’re generally able to cope with stress better,” she says. “People who can cope with life better also tend to maintain a healthy weight, rather than people who don’t deal with stress well, as they often eat mindlessly, binge and diet, all of which contribute to weight gain and weight cycling [constant fluctuations].”

Louise agrees that mindful eating is an excellent skill to learn—particularly if you have problems with binge eating or with cycles of being ‘good’ with food followed by cycles of being ‘bad’ and overeating (a common phenomenon seen

in dieters). “By paying attention to body signals and less attention to ‘food rules’, eating patterns return to normal,” she says. “Intuitive eating is the key to developing a good relationship with yourself, your food and your body. It helps you become psychologically and physically healthy.”

How to be an intuitive eater

The first step is to ask yourself whether you are hungry. “Pay attention to [work out] if you are actually hungry,” says Louise, “rather than just eating because it is ‘time’ to eat, because the food is there, because you feel like you should eat to appease other people or because you are on a diet and following food rules.”

The next step, she continues, is to ask: ‘What do I really feel like eating?’ “It’s not about just eating what is available, convenient or what you deem to be ‘allowed,’” says Louise. “It is about giving yourself permission to eat exactly what you feel like, without labelling the food as good, bad, naughty, healthy or unhealthy.”

She also recommends considering the sensory elements of what you want to eat, rather than a specific food. For instance, do you want hot or cold food; a small or large portion; something salty, crunchy, sweet, crisp or fresh?

Once the decision is made, it is time to eat. And this means only eat, says Louise—not also watch television, work at your desk, read or play with your phone or computer. In other words, get rid of those items or habits that distract you from the pleasures of simply eating a good meal.

Louise adds that engaging the senses—contemplating the sight, smell, touch and taste of your food as you eat it—can help you connect with the process.

Given that all these extra steps might make mealtimes longer than you are accustomed to, Lisa recommends adapting your schedule. “You need to plan for eating, such as potentially getting up earlier to allow time for breakfast at the table instead of on the run, or blocking out periods of time in your work calendar when you know you tend to get hungry.”

Removing food restrictions

As natural as intuitive eating should be to our psyche, Louise believes society has developed a tortured relationship with food. “We don’t trust our intuition,” she says. “People are often afraid that if they don’t enforce food rules and

restrictions on themselves, they will go overboard.” However, Lisa says this is not something we need to fear. “If you remove the restriction on foods and the notion of perfection, you enjoy food more. No restrictions actually leads to less overindulgence and a reduction in overeating,” she says.

Like any new habit, intuitive eating can take a while to get used to. “It is a learning curve and you have to unlearn old habits and learn new ones,” says Louise. “If you just tune in to your body and stick to what it is saying rather than your mind, the intuition will come.” +

Real hunger or false hunger?

Clinical psychologist Louise Adams says the following symptoms often signal genuine hunger:

- + stomach grumbling
- + headaches
- + moodiness
- + trouble concentrating.

However, there are also ‘false’ signs of hunger. According to *Mind Your Diet: The Psychology Behind Sticking to Any Diet*, these include:

- + stomach rumbles that could just be the result of a lying or sitting position that has created pressure on your stomach
- + feeling disorientated after sitting for long periods, especially at the computer—this is a sign you need to get up and move, not that your body needs food
- + having a bad or stressful day, which can trigger a desire for a treat like chocolate or wine—this is actually emotional hunger, not true hunger, and means you are eating to soothe your emotions, rather than to nourish your body.

Source: • *Public Health Nutrition*, ‘Relationships between intuitive eating and health indicators: literature review’, August 2013
ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23962472