



DIRECTORATE OF PREVENTION, RESILIENCE AND READINESS

Mindful Eating: An Approach to Health and Nutrition for Our Military

By Chester Curtis, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness

Military personnel are not immune to weight gain or obesity. In 2017, the Defense Department was estimated to spend \$3.4 billion annually on obesity-related health care costs for service members. A strategy for weight management that is growing in popularity is mindful eating, and with the holidays approaching, it is worth investigating.

Mindful eating is an approach to food that focuses on individuals' sensual awareness of the food and their experience of it. It has little to do with calories, carbohydrates, fat or protein, JB Nelson says in his book *Mindful Eating: The Art of Presence While You Eat*.

According to Nelson, the purpose of mindful eating is not to lose weight, although it is highly likely that those who adopt this style of eating will lose weight. The goals are to help individuals savor the moment and the food and to encourage their full presence for the eating experience.

Nelson says diets tend to focus on rules of eating (such as what to eat, how much to eat and what not to eat), with the intended measurement of specific outcomes. These outcomes are most likely weight loss and, in the case of diabetes, improved blood glucose values and improved A1C. All diets have the potential for success or failure based on a weight loss outcome.

Mindful eating is about being present, listening and responding to our internal cues—namely, our hunger and fullness cues. Research shows that mindful eaters are less likely to eat in response to negative emotion (stress eating). They also make less restrictive eating choices and have a greater preference for healthful foods. Often choosing fruits over sweets like candy and cookies, they're less likely to snack without noticing—what we often call mindless eating or distracted eating— which could help with weight loss and digestion.

Practicing mindful eating can have significant positive effects on our health, according to Alannah Gore, a registered dietitian and a member of the Healthy Living team at Giant Food.

"There's evidence that mindful eating can lower blood pressure, improve sleep and even help people cope with pain," Gore says. "Emotionally, mindfulness treatment has been shown to reduce anxiety and depression. Being aware of one's body and needs leads to more emotional self-regulation, which then empowers people to make choices in their own best interest, which will improve your overall health."

"Healthy habits are not about perfection; it's about balance," she says. "When we eat in a balanced way, there are a lot of benefits for our body and our minds. It can prevent nutritional deficiency. It can boost the nutrient density of the food. It can also boost our immunity and can help prevent certain illnesses. And balanced eating can keep you feeling fuller longer."

She continues: "When we think of mindful eating, the focus is less on what we eat and more on how we eat. Ask yourself if you are getting an adequate amount of the foods and nutrients that you need."

Gore says a good starting place is the Agriculture Department website MyPlate. "It's a visual tool on how to balance your meal. It has a half plate of fruits and vegetables, a quarter plate of grains and a quarter plate of protein," she says. "For you to achieve balance, maybe you can start with adding more produce or boosting your fiber by

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switching to whole grain. The MyPlate website will help you balance getting the nutrients you need and watching portion sizes.”

“We are all born mindful eaters,” Gore says. “Babies and toddlers are the best at mindful eating when they’re hungry. They will stop what they’re doing and find a way to tell you. It doesn’t matter if they just ate or just had food 20 minutes ago. And once they’re full and satisfied, they will stop eating, even if there is only one bite left. They might even start to play with their food or throw their leftovers on the floor. This is a reminder that somewhere between being a toddler and being an adult, we started to lose the skill to assess when we are truly hungry or when we are truly full. We can relearn this cue. Mindful eating is a practice that can take time to develop.”

The first step, according to Gore, is to “slow down our pace. Take a sip of water between bites, or set your fork down if you need to take a pause. Give your brain time to register that you’re eating. Maybe time yourself for 20 to 30 minutes to complete your meal. You also want to be aware of your feelings, thoughts and emotions. How does this impact what you eat? Is this a physical hunger or an emotional hunger? Physical hunger usually builds gradually. You feel it in your stomach several hours after you’ve eaten your last meal, and it goes away once you’re full.”

Emotional hunger is using food to feel better, to fill an emotional need. This doesn’t fix problems, though; it only makes you feel worse.

“Emotional hunger can develop suddenly,” Gore says. “You may think you’re hungry and it persists even when you’re full, so be sure to be aware of how you are feeling. Also, you want to sit and focus. Often, we’re doing other tasks while we’re eating, and our attention is focused on something else. We barely taste our food and get little enjoyment from it. And we’re not in touch with how much we’ve eaten because we’re not in tune with our bodies, so we’re more likely to keep eating beyond the point of satisfaction.”

Emotional hunger is part of a cycle. Something happens that upsets you, you feel an urge to eat, you eat more than you should, and then you feel guilty.

“Overcome emotional hunger by sitting at the table, and put away all your distractions, even your phone,” Gore says. “Another tip is to use all of your senses. Smell the aroma. What’s the flavors that you taste, the texture? And, finally, listen to your body. Be aware of the sensation of fullness.”

Staying present in each experience reconnects us all to the enjoyment that is food. Paying attention while we are eating allows us to feel the fullness of our stomach, which makes it easier for us to eat the right amount of food that nourishes our mind and body.

For more information on mental health and well-being, go to helpguide.org; for tips on healthy eating, visit myplate.gov.

Another good source is the Consortium for Health and Military Performance at <https://champ.usuhs.edu/>.