

The Importance of Mindful Eating



As a Registered naturopath and [nutritional therapist](#) the first place I start with improving my clients' health is with nutrition. Correct dietary intake is essential to maintain health but so is the body's ability to absorb nutrients. Anyone can opt to take a fist full of supplements daily but if your digestive system is unable to absorb the nutrients then they are of no use at all.

My personal approach to health includes working through the natural seasons. I believe that a seasonal diet encourages good health and ensures we remain close to nature but I am becoming increasingly aware how important mindful eating is.

Let me explain further. With the use of [Biofeedback](#) and functional laboratory testing I have noticed an increased connection with reduced digestive enzymes causing reduced nutrient absorption and clients presenting with hormonal and stress related imbalances. Of course complementary therapies such as [reflexology](#) are great stress support tools but so too is mindful eating. In our busy, mad life it is so easy to take a digestive enzyme supplement and presume we will be able to absorb out nutrients but let's just stop for a moment.

Let's think about our digestive system. Logically, it makes sense that every mouthful we take plays a role in how we digest and metabolise our food. A recent study (1 and 4) substantiates this - demonstrating how our digestive processes are especially sensitive to chronic stress and how it affects blood flow in the intestinal tissues, gastric secretions and gut motility. Another study demonstrates how mindful eating can aid weightloss (2 and 3) through awareness of hunger and emotional eating. So, returning once more to our digestive system, let me make this simple.

To absorb nutrients it is important that we need to be in a "rest and digest" state.

Providing we are relaxed our stomach is able to secrete hydrochloric acid, our pancreas can release pancreatic digestive juices and the all important liver release bile into the intestines. All these functions are essential to metabolise nutrients in addition to killing off pathogenic bacteria and additional toxins in food.

However, when we are distracted, overtly busy, tense, stressed or anxious, our sympathetic nervous system activates, this is our "fight or flight" mode. Now, blood travels away from the intestines to peripheral muscles, glucose is released from tissues into the bloodstream and the heart rate increases. This gets us ready to engage in adrenalin and stress filled activity, not digest food.

So What Exactly Is Mindfulness?

An ancient practice that dates back to 2500 years ago. Mindfulness and meditation can be traced to Buddhist psychology, although it is also found in other eastern traditions. Its underlying purpose is to encourage living in the present, eliminate suffering, and train the mind to find a point of stillness, thus silencing the "monkey chatter" and return to a state of "rest and digest". I have been practising meditation and teaching [meditation](#) for some years

now and although have not necessarily directed it to mindful eating am well aware of its benefits on many levels.

And Mindful Eating?

Mindfulness based practices brings our awareness to what we are doing, this can be anything but needs to be in the present tense – cooking, eating, breathing or gaining awareness of sensations in our body.

I have written this mindful eating exercise for you to try, You can begin by just concentrating on **one** aspect of it and then increase the other mindful tasks as you feel fit, making it a lengthy meditation. What is important is that you use part or any aspect of the exercise regularly and log whether it makes a difference to your food intake and your digestion – after all your gut is your second brain!

Mindful Eating:

Before starting the exercise begin by

Becoming aware of where you are eating (table/desk/sofa/car etc)

Are you hungry or eating out of habit?

Are you relaxed or tense/busy?

Once you have done this then:

a) Look at your plate of food and become aware of your mouth. Are you salivating?

b) Now smell your food? Take a moment to let your senses connect with the aroma of your food. Become aware of your heightened sense of smell. What can you smell?

c) Look at your plateful again. What is on your plate or what are you going to eat? What colour is it – shape?

d) Now take a moment to consider where your food is derived from and originated from? Is it in it's natural state, a local source, animal or vegetable?

e) Take a mouthful – be mindful of the sensation of taste and texture and temperature.

f) Begin to chew your food - we should chew each mouthful about 30 times before swallowing. Become aware of how your teeth and saliva are breaking down the food to enable swallowing.

g) Take some time to draw your awareness to an individual taste within the mouthful i.e. a herb or spice, vegetable or protein source.

h) Place your knife, spoon or fork down between mouthfuls as you let your food travel down the oesophagus and enter your stomach

i) Repeat as often as you feel appropriate.

j) When you have finished draw your attention to the portion size.

f) How do you feel?

You can also add to this exercise by including Mindful Cooking:

Chicken and Clam Cataplana 25mins and serves 4. This is my version of a Portuguese dish. I recommend serving it with a winter salad. If you do not eat chicken substitute it with more clams or white fish. It is a great mindful eating and cooking dish because you can link with the food and also the aroma's are totally wonderful.



2 tbsp oil
2 garlic cloves, chopped
1 onion, chopped
16 par-boiled sweet potatoes, leave skin on but cut into new potatoes size
450-g/1lb boneless chicken, cut into 12mm/1/2-inch cubes
90ml/3 fl.oz. Chicken stock or white wine
250g shell-on prawns (optional)
450g/1lb fresh clams in shells, scrubbed

Freshly chopped parsley to serve

1. Heat the oil in a Cataplana or wide saucepan with a close fitting lid, add the onion and garlic and sauté gently over a medium heat until soft and transparent, about 5 minutes.
2. Add the chicken turn to coat then cover with the lid and cook for about 10 minutes or until cooked through, turning once or twice during the cooking time. Add potatoes and coat.
3. Add the stock and bring to simmering point.
4. Add the clams, and prawns. Replace the lid and cook for five minutes, or until the clam shells have opened.
5. Discard any clams, which haven't opened, sprinkle with the chopped parsley and serve immediately.

Additional similar recipes can be found at

<http://www.myportugueseKitchen.com/2014/03/clams-cataplana.html>

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- 1) http://www.jpp.krakow.pl/journal/archive/12_11/pdf/591_12_11_article.pdf
 - 2) <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26867697>
 - 3) <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24854804>
 - 4) <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27021514>

For more information on mindful eating these websites may be helpful

<http://thecenterformindfuleating.org/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mindful-eating/200902/mindful-eating>

<http://www.foodforthebrain.org/>



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