

# Mindful Eating Strategies to Improve Your Relationship With Food During the Holidays

[www.everydayhealth.com](http://www.everydayhealth.com) By Elizabeth Narins, Oct 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Medically Reviewed.

## 1. Recognize Signs of Hunger

Do you feel tired, sluggish, nauseous, or faint? Is your stomach growling and your mind wandering to thoughts of food, making it difficult to focus on tasks at hand? “These can all be signs of hunger that are often ignored,” Johnson says. It sounds simple, but recognizing what actual hunger feels like can help you eat more mindfully.

To do so, think about the last time you ate. “If it’s been more than a few hours or what you last ate was a lighter meal or snack, you’re probably physically hungry,” says Hartley.

## 2. Sit to Eat

It’s easy to lose track of how much you’re eating when you’re grazing the holiday buffet while chatting with friends. Ditto when you’re eating leftovers standing in front of the open refrigerator. When you sit down to eat, however, it can help you connect with the experience so you can better gauge how much time is passing and pay attention to what and why you’re eating, Johnson says.

So what happens when things are so hectic that you physically can’t eat a proper meal? “What’s most important is that you’re feeding yourself consistently and adequately,” Hartley says. So pack a healthy snack or two to sustain you between errands when a sitting down isn’t on the table. This also helps to avoid grabbing something processed just to “tie you over”.

## 3. Breathe Deeply

Taking a deep breath before eating can help you achieve some degree of mindfulness throughout your meal, Hartley says. And it’s not rocket science.

“Deep breathing allows us to become more in tune with our bodies in the present,” Dr. Goldman says. A simple inhale and exhale gives you a chance to inventory your surroundings and check in with your body and emotions, so you can recognize hunger signals and respond with intention rather than react impulsively by refilling your plate. It’s a tip that literally everyone has time for — even during the busiest day of the craziest holiday season.

## 4. Focus on Sensory Cues

This time of year, your senses can easily get overloaded by the sheer indulgence of the season, with its fancy cocktails, dazzling desserts, and nostalgic flavors. Taking time to really focus on the scent, taste, texture, and temperature of food is one way to practice mindful eating.

Hartley says that it's smart to check in with how your food tastes a few times throughout your meal: **If you can, pause in the beginning, middle, and end of the meal for a mindful bite or two when you can savor the food** — identify a flavor you particularly like or appreciate the fluffiness of your dinner bun. The exercise will help you avoid slipping into the mindless eating mode that leaves you feeling stuffed.

"Think of it like wine tasting your food," Hartley says. "You don't have to wine taste your entire meal, but even just a few bites can improve mindfulness."

## 5. Stick to a Schedule

"It's tradition to save up for the big meal because holidays are the time when we're allowed to break food rules," Johnson says. While you might think it's smart to bank calories by skipping meals in anticipation of a holiday meal, forgoing breakfast or lunch could actually trigger mindless eating — and overeating. "We make more informed decisions about what to eat when we aren't uncomfortably hungry," she says. If you follow intermittent fasting, try to keep that in mind when you are invited to festivities. It will help you stay on track for your health.

## 6. Pack Your To-Go Plate First

There's no question that we tend to overeat foods we only get once a year. Before settling down for a holiday meal, pack up all the things you think you'll want more of later. The practice will help you remember this isn't your last opportunity to enjoy holiday foods, which can decrease the pressure to eat opportunistically and past the point of fullness, Johnson says. If hoarding food ahead of a hosted meal sounds a tad awkward, bring a to-go box to fill later on, and fill it mentally before you make up your dinner plate.

## 7. Indulge Outside of Holidays

"If you allow yourself to have certain foods all the time, then you are more likely to be mindful of how much you are having," Johnson points out. Just imagine eating latkes every Saturday morning or keeping a fresh batch of Christmas cookies on hand in the freezer as opposed to enjoying them once a year — chances are, you'll be less likely to overindulge when it's time to sit down for a holiday meal. And remember, Johnson says: "You are always allowed to eat what sounds good to you." *(DS comment: This one I would treat with caution because it could back fire with many more calories eaten ongoing and can stimulate your craving for sweets.)*

## 8. Practice Coping Mechanisms

Spending time with family members you don't typically see can stir up emotions ranging from sadness to straight-up anger. "Emotional eating is a normal human response, especially when we don't have the skills and tools to manage our emotions," Johnson says.

Don't typically inventory your emotions at the dinner table? Hear us out: Recognizing an un-enjoyable eating experience can help you understand whether you're eating for the right reasons or in response to a particular feeling — a bad idea, according to Johnson, since it's less satisfying

than you might think. “The negative emotions are typically still there after you finish your food, along with some feelings of guilt, shame, or self-judgment,” she says. And that’s no way to end a meal.

When you practice the coping mechanisms you know you’re going to need before you blow up at your mom or flip the table, you’ll be an expert when the time comes to whip them out of your toolbox, Goldman says. She recommends keeping at least three tools in your back pocket to help you calm down, including one that you can do anytime, anywhere. For instance, deep breathing or meditation can be helpful before you sit down to a holiday meal or whenever you need a break from the festivities — just slip into the restroom and do your thing.

“This way, you’ll always have something to do besides eat in social situations when a go-to steam-blower such as running isn’t realistic,” she says. It’s best to practice this tool first thing in the morning and right before you go to bed throughout holiday season and beyond to lower stress levels and prepare yourself for inevitable emotions and the mindless food fest that may otherwise follow.

## 9. Set an Alarm

Practicing mindfulness throughout the day can set the stage for mindful eating during mealtimes, says Hartley. So set a reminder or alarm on your smartphone for a few times a day, and when it goes off, pause for 30 seconds to recognize what’s going on in your body: Is there anything you need to do to make yourself more comfortable, like stretching your shoulders after hours of being hunched over your desk or putting on a pair of cozy socks to warm your feet? Taking care of these needs can help you sidestep the mindless eating we sometimes do for comfort. And hey, you just might notice that you’re hungry and actually do need a snack.

## 10. Slow Down

“It can take time for the stomach to send the message to your brain that you are full,” Goldman says. *(DS Comment: Studies show it takes about 20 minutes and by then you might have eaten to total fullness).* Eat too quickly and you could miss the memo until it’s too late — that is, after you’ve scarfed down your seconds or thirds. It’s why Goldman recommends **putting down your utensils or finger food between bites**. “Many times people who overeat and feel guilty afterward feel out of control in the moment,” Goldman explains. “But eating more slowly puts you in control and helps you enjoy every mouthful, so you feel more satisfied and give yourself the opportunity to stop before you overeat.”

The health benefits of eating slowly are well-documented: Taking your time during meals may actually prevent obesity and reduce associated risks, according to a [study](#) of more than 700 adults who’d been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

## 11. Enjoy

Part of eating mindfully is appreciating your very favorite dishes. “It’s essential to having a healthy relationship with food, even when the food you love is something you might not consider healthy,”

Hartley says. There's a reason we don't eat kale all day every day: "Eating is more than the delivery of nutrients," she says. "We have cultural and emotional connections with the food we put into our body and need to regularly eat foods we love to feel not just full but satisfied." So yes, Aunt Barbara's mashed potatoes and your cousin's famous pecan pie can remain on the menu. (*DS Comment – just be mindful of how many time you go back for more*).

## 12. Cut Yourself Some Slack

Real life dictates that we can't always eat 100 percent mindfully 100 percent of the time. But mindful eating can still be a helpful tool. Hartley says it's helpful to think of mindful eating as a spectrum rather than a thing you do or do not practice all the time. It's better off to eat more mindfully when you can than stress out over eating every meal and snack with utmost concentration, particularly during the holidays.

"For many people, just worrying about getting through the holidays is enough," Hartley says. After all, eating mindlessly every once in a while doesn't necessarily mean you have an unhealthy relationship with food; it's just that paying attention to your feelings and the food on your plate can improve that relationship.

### Have you ever heard of *Hara Hachi Bu*?

This is an eating habit practiced in Okinawa Japan, which has been proven to improve health and weight loss. It's a term that means "Eat until you are 80% full". Okinawa is one of the world's Blue Zone regions where people live extraordinarily long and healthy lives!

The average daily intake of calories for this group is 1,900 calories. This is significantly less than what is typically consumed on a daily basis in America. Heck some Americans may even eat this many calories in one meal (especially during the holidays)!

There is a significant calorie gap between when an American says 'I'm full' and an Okinawan says, 'I'm no longer hungry'. Big difference since, as mentioned above, it takes our stomach about 20 minutes to signal our brain we've had enough to eat. During that time in between, we probably have overeaten.

So how does this work? Simple changes to your daily eating habits can make a big difference. Here are some simple tips to get you started eating only until you are 80% full not much different from the mindfulness tips already mentioned:

1. **Eat more slowly**- allow time to notice how you are feeling
2. **Focus on the food** – turn off any distractions such as phones, TV or computers. Pay attention!
3. **Use small vessels** – choose to eat on smaller plates and use tall, narrow glasses.