

Mindful Eating



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Introduction

We Americans tend to eat mindlessly. We are unaware of tastes and smells and textures as we focus on conversation or television or reading material. Mindful Eating gives an opportunity to slow down and experience dining in a very conscious way. Eating can become a joyous and spiritual experience as we develop a healthy relationship to food.

Mindful Eating is based on the Buddhist tradition of focusing, of being very conscious of whatever activity one is engaged in. Jesus was no Buddhist, but he certainly paid attention to what was in front of him and to the present moment!

It is developed for you to use with a group of parishioners who are self-selected. If you have had a program on food, diet or exercise, you might want to use this as a follow-up. It is also very appropriate for use during Lent and Advent.

Special thanks goes to Allison Shore Gaines who teaches at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health for her inspiration.

Preparation

Of space

1. Have a CD player with some gentle music, maybe chamber music or music with the sounds of nature. Religious music might not be a good choice in that it might evoke memories that might interfere with the mindfulness of eating.
2. See that the tables where parishioners will eat have something attractive as a centerpiece such as a flower, autumn leaves, or pinecones.
3. See that the tables are set. Simple is better than elaborate.
4. If the dining room is large, you may need a microphone in order to be heard. If your group is small and you are in a large space, you may want to partition the space to increase the sense of intimacy.

Of parishioners

1. Don't surprise parishioners with this experience. Give people enough information before attending that they feel comfortable in their decision to attend.
2. Instruct parishioners to get their food as usual (buffet or family style). Tell them to take as much or as little as they want, and whatever they want.

Of yourself

1. Read through the script, produced here in large font for ease of reading. Read it aloud so you get a sense of timing and pausing. The times in parentheses are suggested. For some people, pauses will seem very long, but they usually adjust to it and come to appreciate the pace.
2. Become familiar with it so that the words become your own. Edit the script as you need and as may fit the occasion. There's space at the side of the text for your own comments.
3. You will not have a chance to eat while you are leading this, so it is wise to eat before the others arrive.
4. Have a glass of water nearby. Reading aloud can make your throat dry.

Script

Sit quietly for a moment. Gently close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Relax your shoulders. Relax your belly, your lower abdomen.

Scan your body, and notice any tension in your body. Breathe into your tension to relax it. *(10 seconds)*

Notice any messages in your mind, your thoughts, old tapes, concerns....

Digest all the activity of your mind in your mind. Are you feeling impatience? Anxiety? Joy? *(15 seconds)*

Notice your feelings. Don't judge them. Just notice them. And take another deep breath.

Now bring your awareness to your belly.
Bring your consciousness there. Notice what your level of hunger is, on a scale of one to five, with 1 being ravenously hungry, and 3 being just on the edge of hunger, and 5 being full, not at all hungry.

Where is your hunger? Just notice it. Don't try to change it or control it. Just notice it. Just notice your stomach hunger. *(10 seconds)*

Now notice any emotional hunger you have right now. Notice any spiritual hunger you might have just now. Maybe you are seeking comfort. Maybe pleasure. Maybe connection with friends. Maybe you are seeking nourishing conversation. There is no right or wrong. There's only what you experience. Notice any emotional hunger you have right now. *(15 seconds)*

Open your eyes.

Take a moment to bless your food. See what gratitude or thankfulness you are experiencing. Maybe you are thankful for those who grew the vegetables, or the animal that died that you could eat, or the person who flew the airplane to get it here, or those who cooked the food, or those who will clean up after you... Notice the gratitude.

As children, many of us were expected to “pray over our food.” That may have included folding our hands. Today some people choose to put their hands above the food in blessing, as a priest puts hands over the bread and wine at the Eucharist. Do what you find comfortable as a way to bless your food. *(15 seconds)*

Food is nourishing. Food can nourish many of our senses. I encourage you to use all of your senses.

First, look at your food. Notice the colors. Notice the shapes, the textures, the surfaces, the contrasts... Use your eyes to choose your first bite.

Use your fork or spoon or fingers, and pick up that first bite. Just pick it up. Feel it. Feel the weight of it.

Slowly lift it and bring it near your face, near your nose. Smell it. Really smell it. Slowly inhale, and let the smell penetrate the receptors in your mouth and nasal cavities. Notice if your saliva starts to flow when you take in the aromas.

Now put the food in your mouth. Take the food – consciously, take it. Receive it into

your mouth. Be aware that you are receiving. Accept it as the gift it is.

Now put down your fork and chew. Chew the food at least 10 times. Feel the squish and the crunch. Hear it, too. Liquefy the food. Release the flavors by mixing it with saliva. Breathe when you chew. That will let you experience even more of the flavor. Savor the textures. Savor the tastes. *(15 seconds)*

When you swallow the food, receive it into your stomach. Enjoy the feeling. Notice the residual taste in your mouth. Food tastes different after it is chewed and mixed with our juices. *(10 seconds)*

Prepare to take your second bite. Look at your food, and let your eyes choose. Notice the colors. Notice the shapes, the textures, the surfaces, the contrasts...

I'm going to guide you through this bite, too. Use your fork or spoon or fingers, and pick it up. Just pick it up. Feel it. Feel the weight of it.

Slowly lift it and bring it near your nose. Smell it. Slowly inhale, and let the smell penetrate the receptors in your mouth and nasal cavities.

Now put the food in your mouth. Take the food – consciously, take it. Receive it into your mouth. Be aware that you are receiving. This food is a gift.

Now put down your fork and chew. Chew the food many times, at least 10 times. Liquefy the food. Notice the flavors released by mixing it with saliva. Breathe when you chew. That will let you

experience even more of the flavor. Savor the textures. Savor the tastes.

When you swallow the food, receive it into your stomach. Enjoy the feeling. Notice the residual taste in your mouth. Food tastes different after it is chewed and mixed with our juices.

If we can't receive, we can never be full.

Breathe. *(10 seconds)*

Let your eyes again choose your next bite.

Gaze at it.

Reach to take the portion of food. Receive it as a gift. Lift it. Smell it. Put it in your mouth and hold it for a minute. This may be the only chance you, as an adult, get to play with your food!

Then chew it. Focus on your chewing.
Breathe. Liquefy the food.

When you are ready, swallow. Sit back.
Receive. Breathe. Relax. To often our
bodies are tense when we eat. Breathing
relaxes and “makes space” to receive the
food.

How we eat tells us much about how we
live our lives. It also says much about what
kind of relationship we have with our
bodies.

Continue eating at your own pace. But
continue to be quiet. Be conscious of what
you are doing. *(20 seconds)*

Notice your level of hunger now. Where
would you place yourself now on that scale
from one to five, with 1 being very hungry
and 5 being stuffed? *(20 seconds)*

It takes the brain 20 minutes to get the message that hunger has been assuaged. Eating more slowly gets the brain in alignment with the belly. Let your brain catch up with your body.

Notice your breathing. Breathe deeply. Expand your ribs. Create space inside yourself to receive the gift of this food.

Allow feelings of enjoyment to arise inside you. *(15 seconds)*

Are there other feelings? Are you feeling conflicted? Is your belly satisfied, but another part of you is not? That's okay. What is, is. Just notice.

Do you need comfort? Then let the next bite give you that comfort. Receive it as comforting. *(10 seconds)*

Do you seek the sensual experience of eating? Then, with the next bite, experience that sensuality, fully. *(10 seconds)*

Know what hunger you are experiencing. Then you can respond to it. Be present with the truth of your body.

Continue eating at your own pace, but without speaking. *(45 seconds)*

Says Sharon Parks: "When we eat, we must very soon eat again. If we dare to contemplate fully the act of eating, we will be led to the unavoidable awareness of our continual desire to live, and also of our utter dependence upon the generosity of the earth and its peoples and the power and grace by which our lives are sustained." *(60 seconds)*

Says St. Paul: "We suffer no loss through failing to eat, and we gain no favor by eating." *(60 seconds)*

Says Wendell Berry: "We cannot live harmlessly or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. ...In such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want." *(60 seconds)*

Says the writer of the Letter to the Romans: "The one who eats does so to honor the Lord, and gives thanks to God. The one who does not eat abstains to honor the

Lord, and he too gives thanks to God." (60 seconds)

Says Sister Mary Margaret Funk: "Food should not dominate [our] consciousness; it is only a tool for our relationship with God.... A fruit of the contemplative life is the joy of eating mindfully, with gratitude."
(60 seconds)

Says Michel Schutt: "Daily we participate in the mystery of other beings becoming part of our very tissue. And daily we have the opportunity to experience food as sacrament – where the metaphor for food is not *fuel* but rather *communion*." (60 seconds)

(Let the music continue till people have finished their meal.
Be patient.)

Amen.

