

HINDRANCES TO MINDFUL EATING

Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D.

TCME Board Member

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WHAT ARE HINDRANCES?

Hindrances are the thoughts, feelings, sensations and experiences that obstruct our innate capacity for mindfulness—the ability to pay attention, without judgment, to what’s happening right now. Hindrances are often referred to as “weakeners of wisdom” because they seduce, sidetrack and hijack our awareness away from the present. They distract us from noticing everything from the crunch of a carrot to how hungry we are, the reasons why we’re eating or wanting to eat, and the feelings we may be trying to avoid or enhance.

It is when we return to the moment that we notice there is no more corn on the cob or food on our plate. What happened? It was all mindlessly consumed when we were under the influence of one or more of the hindrances.

When one hindrance pulls us away, this is known as a hindrance attack. When two or more hindrances pull us away, this event is known as a multiple hindrance attack. Let’s turn to a brief description of each of the hindrances.

HINDRANCES TO MINDFUL EATING (AND TO MINDFULNESS IN GENERAL)

1 SENSUAL DESIRE

This is the experience of being absorbed in satisfaction through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and physical feeling. We go after things that promise satisfaction, like the rush of good feelings that come from the first lick of an ice cream cone or the soothing taste of warm pudding. And because we like the sensations, we keep going for more, believing that we can maintain those good feelings, while at the same time, losing sight of the fact that no sensation, good or bad, lasts.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with sensual pleasure, the craving for it becomes a hindrance when it interferes with our natural ability to stay present. We’re looking forward to eating a peach, but we don’t realize that we’re lost in fantasy about how happy we are that fresh peaches are available, instead of attending to the peach itself.

2 ILL WILL/AVERSION

This is the habit, both conscious and unconscious, to punish, hurt or destroy. It includes ill will towards oneself, otherwise known as self-aversion or guilt—the feeling of turning against oneself or the perception of having done wrong or failed. Often these hindrances are unacknowledged manifestations of other experiences such as demanding desires, frustration, fear, embarrassment, hurt, feeling powerless, and inner or outer conflict. These feelings often culminate in hating or wanting to punish ourselves for failing, not being good enough, not being the mindful eater or the body weight we think we should be. So we reject the difficult feelings by pushing them away, and our attention then wanders to something more pleasant, usually mindless eating. Ill will and self-aversion can easily corrupt our ability to view ourselves kindly and fairly.

3 INERTIA

This is a heaviness of body and dullness of mind that drag one down into lethargy. It's comparable to the image of a couch potato, mindlessly eating snacks while watching television or being absorbed in a book. Munching on chip after chip, without awareness, often deepens the lethargy and the numbness that comes from being spaced out and disconnected. When the mind is smothered by dullness, it is very difficult to be mindful.

4 RESTLESSNESS

This hindrance, also called "monkey mind," is often compared to a monkey constantly swinging from branch to branch. We find it difficult to be satisfied with things as they are. Restlessness feels like a compelling need to keep moving onto something better, just beyond what's happening in the present moment. But no matter where we (or the monkey) land, it's not quite right so we keep going. First it's a cookie, then cake, then an apple, then a bowl of leftovers. It's the hindrance of restlessness that keeps us seeking satisfaction everywhere, but finding it nowhere.

5 DOUBT

Doubt is the hindrance that questions the value of mindful eating and our ability to engage in mindful eating practices. Doubt keeps us feeling indecisive or feeling that we want to hold back from committing to the practice. When the hindrance of doubt takes over the mind, we get lost in asking questions such as "Is this mindful eating practice really valid?" or "Should I choose a different method to deal with food and eating challenges?" We may obsess about whether mindful eating is or is not good for our health, or question whether it is just the current fad. These issues and questions may be valid, but it is more appropriate to ask them before or after mindful eating.

PRACTICES TO OVERCOME SENSUAL DESIRE:

- Look carefully at the object of desire (e.g. a brownie, a new flavor of coffee.) Are you really seeing it accurately? What unrealistic expectations are you projecting onto this object? Does satisfying the desire fulfill your expectations? Are you content and if so, for how long? Do other desires arise to replace the ones you've just satisfied?
- Become aware of the subjective experience of desiring. How strong is the wanting or the impulse to act? How long does it last? What are the physical sensations of desire? Where in the body do you feel them? What is the quality of the mind caught up in desire? Is it calm, frantic, painful?

PRACTICES TO OVERCOME ILL WILL/AVERSION:

- Forgive yourself for things you've done that you regret or for which you feel remorse. Repeat to yourself, "To the extent that I am able, I forgive myself for mindless eating, overeating, turning against myself."
- Make patience a partner with kindness. It takes time for most habits to change. There's no need to make the pace of change a problem. Just commit, kindly and patiently, to returning to the practice of mindful eating, bite by bite.
- Find the roots of ill-will and aversion. Ask yourself, "What lies behind feelings of ill will and aversion that fuels feelings of guilt?" What happens when you focus on what fuels ill will/aversion?

PRACTICES TO OVERCOME **INERTIA**:

- First, energize! Shake your hands rapidly, stomp your feet, wash your face with cold water, smile several times an hour. If energizers cause irritation or you find it really difficult, take 10 or 20 deep in-and-out breaths (or more if needed). Also blink your eyes repeatedly, opening them as wide as you can and when blinking, scrunching your face with your eyes closed, squeezing gently.
- Then, set a reasonable mindful eating goal. For example, mindfully drink one or two sips of a beverage or mindfully eat one or two bites of vegetables. Once this goal is accomplished, move on to three then four mindful sips or bites. Do the same with exercise. Begin with a reasonable goal, then increase the amount of time or pace of your steps day-by-day. You can disrupt the inertia with slow but steady skill building.
- Approach each snack or meal as if it was the first time you've ever seen what's in front of you. This is called "beginner's mind." Make the effort to see new subtleties in what you're eating or drinking. This will help you wake you and discover fresh possibilities in the present moment. For example, note the different colors of green in broccoli or watch the bubbles pop when you're boiling water. Generate interest in opening and closing doors, brushing your teeth or observing the night sky. Experience the beauty in the ordinary!
- Take a television and media fast. If these activities contribute to mindless eating, avoid them for as long as you can. Removing these distractions for even a few hours at a time will help weaken the habit of eating mindlessly while engaging in these activities.

PRACTICES TO OVERCOME **RESTLESSNESS**:

- Develop contentment, the opposite of fault-finding. Notice the moments when you're in the grips of restlessness. There is impatience to taste more, do more, get more. See if you can notice the desire, but not grab onto it. Stop for a minute or two and focus on the simple joy of being satisfied with what you have in this moment.
- One of the fastest ways to note progress in mindful eating is attained by being content with things as they are, including the ability to endure hunger. So be mindful of "wanting to get on with it" and instead learn how to rest in appreciative contentment. That way, the feeling of nourishment, born from acceptance, blossoms.
- Look for the causes of restlessness. What is fueling the restless feeling? Frustration, pent up anger, ill will or guilt, aversion to the mindful eating practice? Restlessness is often a manifestation of these causes. This means you need to attend to them. Then notice if the hindrance of restlessness changes.
- Let go of beliefs that tend to sustain restlessness and worry. Often, strong opinions about how you should be doing something or thoughts such as "This is not supposed to be happening when I practice mindful eating" fuel restlessness and worry, keep them going. These opinions, unless we become aware of them, rarely leads to peace and calm. Clinging to a self-image (e.g. I am no good) also tends to be agitating. It can be liberating to realize that we don't have to believe every thought we have.

PRACTICES TO OVERCOME DOUBT:

- Talk with your mindful eating teacher. A mindful eating teacher is like a coach, cheering you on to do the best you can. This support and reassurance can help nurture your self-confidence.
- Nurture your own self-confidence by reflecting on ways you've overcome doubt and discouragement in the past. Remember a time you successfully completed a challenging task you thought you never could. List the qualities (e.g. persistence, determination) that supported you before, and then apply them to mindfully eating your next snack or meal.
- Recognize doubt as doubt. Thoughts such as "This is probably a waste of time" or "Mindful eating is just a trend" are expressions of doubt. Remember, you don't need to believe your thoughts, just become aware of them. Again, check in with your teacher if you need questions answered or additional support.

Ronna Kabatznick is a TCME Board Member based in Berkeley, California. She is a former psychologist to Weight Watchers International and is the author of *The Zen of Eating: Ancient Answers to Modern Weight Problems*. She is creating a program called METTA (Mindful Eating Training Through Awareness). Metta is the Pali term for loving-kindness, friendliness, and goodwill. When mindful eating practices are imbued with metta, misguided and destructive eating habits can be overcome, leading to enduring feelings of well-being and contentment that no food can ever offer. The METTA Program is based on a variety of meditative traditions which teach mindful eating as part of the path to healing and wholeness.

For more information about METTA workshops and lectures, please contact Dr. Kabatznick at ronna@mindfulmanagement.com