

Food for Thought

A quarterly newsletter from The Center for Mindful Eating

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Welcome to The Center for Mindful Eating

TCME is a member-supported forum for professionals interested in understanding the value of mindful eating. TCME identifies and provides resources for individuals who wish to help their clients develop healthier relationships with food and eating, and bring eating into balance with other important aspects of life. Mindfulness practices have been shown to have a positive impact on many disease states and health concerns, and mindfulness approaches are increasingly being applied to eating and food choice. The benefits of mindful eating are not restricted to physical health improvement alone. Practitioners may find that mindfulness and mindful eating can affect one's entire life. The Center for Mindful Eating does not promote a singular approach to mindful eating but is committed to fostering dialogue and the sharing of ideas, clinical experience, and research.

About This Issue

Compassion is one of the key nutrients for the heart. Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D., explains this idea in this issue of *Food for Thought*, which explores how compassion can not only nourish the soul but can also heal the body. We hope you enjoy this journey, which includes the writing of Donald Altman, MA, who explains, "When it comes to eating, perfectionism can lead to feelings of failure, loss of self-confidence, and shame. The good news is that compassion is the salve that heals the wounds caused by self-criticism and self-blame." And from Char Wilkins, LCSW: "When we know the taste and feel of compassion for ourselves, we'll be able to work from the inside out."

We express our gratitude to the many individuals who have become members of TCME over the past year. Their tax-deductible donations allow us to continue to provide valuable services. If you are not a member, please consider joining.

Compassionate Eating

By Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D.

Compassion is one of the key nutrients for the heart. Compassion is as essential to the spirit as water and food are to the body.

There are two aspects to compassion. The first is the capacity to feel pain and suffering without fear, with an open heart; the other is a quality of wisdom that sees this pain and suffering as a natural part of life.

Both aspects of compassion help relieve pain and suffering, which otherwise can weigh us down. We all have our secrets and sorrows. Metaphorically speaking, emotional pain and suffering, without mindfully, is usually very difficult to swallow. If we could, we would choose the sweet and joyful parts of life. We



would be slim and strong, and healthy and fit – both physically and emotionally. We would likely eat natural and organic foods. But what is really natural? The nature of life, our bodies and the food we eat are actually infused with pain and suffering. Bodies get sick, injured; food rots; bugs get killed; plants are destroyed. Throughout life, we get hurt; we hurt others. Nothing we eat or purchase can satisfy us permanently. We can't claim anything – our body, our mind, food, emotions, relationships, etc. – to be "me" or "mine." Everything changes. These facts of life can't be avoided. This is what's natural.

Suffering is part of life, just as hunger is part of appetite. We cannot always be full and satisfied. When we accept suffering and hunger, we can let go. And compassion and a different level of fullness can arise. With this insight, it is much easier to develop compassion for oneself and for everyone. Even our judgments of others –including those who have been hurtful and abusive– can't disturb us.

Fighting against what is true and natural is one of the reasons people eat mindlessly. Compulsive eating temporarily dulls the emotional pain, but that feeling is destined to return. This cycle not only adds physical weight, but it also creates emotional weight. Blaming ourselves for overeating and hating our bodies are a heavy burden to carry. This cycle just creates more suffering, alienation and mindless eating.

Thoughts arise, "I have been eating this way for so long, these habits will never change." Then note, this is just a thought. These thought habits may feel as if they are deeply ingrained, but they are not like our eye color. They are impermanent. Through the steadiness of compassionate attention, they change over time. In that way, compassion acts like an enzyme. It

helps old patterns dissolve and allows new pathways of behavior to arise.

Our physical appetites also have the opportunity to change when we practice opening ourselves up to suffering. We realize how much energy is spent pushing away suffering and how much food plays a role in that futile effort. There may be so many years of tears,

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secrets and sorrows stuffed inside that it may feel as if there is no room to digest them. But when we give space for suffering, with compassion, and actually understand it, painful memories

and habits can be transformed and transcended. Our appetites tend to change. There is actually a natural tendency to eat more mindfully because there's less of a need to depend on food for comfort and instant gratification and as a misguided way to handle suffering. We wake up to the paradox that two ingredients — suffering coupled with compassion – have a potent, priceless and calorie-free capacity to satisfy.

Through the ongoing practice of compassion, we can become more honest and forgiving about ourselves. And then, we are more honest and forgiving with others. This is also very satisfying. But compassion always begins with us.

Over the nearly three decades of working in the field of mindful eating, I have worked with many people who take their suffering personally, as if they are to blame for things like getting sick. As compassion develops and deepens, that misguided belief that any one is singled out and punished dissolves into the truth that all beings suffer. Compassion, empathy and forgiveness and connection naturally arise for oneself and all beings. The classic image is a mother who remains loyal and steadfast when her child suffers. She will do everything and anything to protect and heal her child.

This practice requires learning how to stay with and soften to emotional and physical pain rather than tighten around pain and hate it. It is actually a form of emotional nourishment. The heart yearns for this type of nourishment because it strengthens the heart's natural capacity to let go, to allow the fullness of life and all of its manifestations to enter it.

Compassion meditation involves silently repeating certain phrases that express the intention to move from judgment to caring, from isolation to connection, or from indifference or dislike to wisdom. You don't have to force a particular feeling or get rid of unpleasant or undesirable responses. The power of this practice is the intention to generate the feeling of compassion – regardless of whether it arises.

- May I be happy and peaceful;
- May I be free from mental and physical suffering;
- May all beings be happy and peaceful;
- May all beings be free from mental and physical suffering.

The practice involves breathing in the feeling of compassion, feelings of warmth, tenderness and kindness. Allow the feelings to digest pain, grievances and wounds, both emotional and physical. We commit to planting the seeds of compassion and nourishing them on a daily basis. It may feel as if "nothing is happening." But continue the practice anyway. Eventually, the seeds will grow and sprout, often when you least expect it.

Compassion is the true mode of being human, and just like mindful eating, the practice needs to be part of our daily life. It takes strength to tap into pain and suffering, but it is also rewarding. Over time, our appetites change as do our relationships to ourselves and to others.

When we are able to respond to ourselves and others with kindness, we are providing natural nourishment – a way out of suffering. It is the mindful

approach to diminish compulsive eating, acknowledging life instead of pushing it away.

Helping others is another means of increasing compassion. We not only serve others, but we feel better as well. Consuming less and sharing food, clothing, blankets, medicines, etc., not only help others in need but also satisfy us in ways that no amount of food can. It is a way to spread harmony and maintain balance.

One of my meditation teachers likes to say that “compassion is the diet of the wise.” He frequently reminds his disciples that although we eat to maintain our bodily strength, eventually all humans pass away. The most radiant and well-nourished people are those who help others. They have few regrets and sleep well knowing that they have not harmed others. Compassion and generosity help decrease stress and improve one’s digestion, beauty and life span. We’re conditioned to want *things*, but the truth is that the best things are free. Compassion helps steer us in the direction of calm and brightness. We want to consume compassion and give to others. These are the kinds of ingredients that provide lasting satisfaction, balance and harmony.

Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D., is an adviser to The Center for Mindful Eating. She is a social psychologist, meditation teacher and the author of *The Zen of Eating: Ancient Answers to Modern Weight Problems*. Dr. Kabatznick has a private practice in Berkeley, Calif. She welcomes comments to this article and can be reached at ronna@mindfulmanagement.com.



The Healing Power of Compassion

By Donald Altman, M.A., LPC

We live in a culture where high achievement and perfectionism are lauded and desired traits. And yet, when it comes to eating, perfectionism can lead to feelings of failure, loss of self-confidence, and



shame. The good news is that compassion is the salve that heals the wounds caused by self-criticism and self-blame.

The early meaning of the word compassion is “to be with suffering.” Certainly, food and eating perfectionism causes suffering because it is unrealistic and not sustainable. The idea of attaining perfection with anything—especially with regard to eating, finding ‘perfect’ foods, or maintaining the perfect diet—inevitably leads to frustration and loss of self-esteem. That’s because perfectionism is unforgiving and leaves no room to be flexible and adaptable. Remember, the rigid and brittle branch snaps in two during a windstorm while a flexible branch can bend and not break.

A compassionate approach to eating helps you be flexible, letting you bend and not break emotionally when

things don’t go as planned. Author Pema Chodron asks some questions that can help you find the path to compassion, when she writes, “Right now, today, could you make an unconditional relationship with yourself? Just at the height you are, the weight you are, the amount of intelligence you have, the burden of pain that you have?”

Anytime that you feel self-blame or that you have “failed” with food, know that you have many more meals to eat in a lifetime. Each meal offers you the opportunity to practice compassion toward yourself. Invite compassion into your life, one bite, one meal at a time. Let it help you welcome flexibility and patience into your life.

Donald Altman, LPC, is a psychotherapist, former Buddhist monk, award-winning writer, and author of the new book One-Minute Mindfulness. Other books include 12-Weeks to Mindful Eating, Meal By Meal, The Mindfulness Code, and Art of the Inner Meal. Donald consults and leads mindfulness workshops around the country. He currently serves as Vice President of TCME. His website is www.mindfulpractices.com. Contact: info@mindfulpractices.com

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Compassion: Starting With You

By Char Wilkins, MSW, LCSW

There isn't anything much harder to talk about with clients who struggle with eating issues than how to be kind to themselves. For most of them, it's the furthest thing from their mind. "Be compassionate with yourself today" certainly won't show up on their "To Do" list. It doesn't even show up on their "Don't Do" list because it's not even a consideration. They must push themselves harder, faster and longer, otherwise they'll be worse than they already believe themselves to be. Yet these are some of the most caring and giving people I see.

As professionals, we can see how painful and even unproductive this relentless driving force can be. It sometimes leaves us feeling helpless, frustrated and even hopeless, which is, of course, what our clients are

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feeling as they struggle with weight and health issues, cravings, shame and blame. How do we begin to even suggest compassion for self as a possibility for them?

As with all mindfulness practices, we start with ourselves. We begin by recognizing that we, too, are caring people trying to alleviate suffering in our corner of the world. We do the best we can in any given moment, but we aren't perfect. We recognize that to be angry with ourselves, to beat up ourselves over our mistakes, doesn't leave any room for us to be curious about what caused us to be reactive or how we might do it differently next time. When we know the taste and

feel of compassion for ourselves, we'll be able to work from the inside out, and we'll be able to be with our clients' pain with palpable kindness and patience. So if experience is the best teacher, then for our clients, being in the presence of felt compassion will offer the possibility of another way to be with themselves – without the word "compassion" even being uttered.

Char Wilkins, MSW, LCSW, is a mindfulness-based psychotherapist specializing in women's issues. She is a certified MBSR instructor and trains professionals nationwide in the use of mindfulness skills with clients and patients. Contact her at www.info@amindfulpath.com.



Our Mission

TCME is a nonprofit, nonreligious organization whose purpose is to incorporate mindful eating into new and existing programs. We offer a variety of resources, including *The Principles of Mindful Eating*, which is available at our Web site and is free for reproduction for educational purposes.

TCME is a member-supported organization. JOIN TODAY!

\$40 Professional Membership: Learn more about mindful eating and ways to bring this wisdom into your daily work. Become a member today! See our Web site or application for details.

\$25 Student Membership: TCME welcomes individuals who are enrolled in a degree-granting program to learn more about mindful eating. Verification of current enrollment required. See Web site or application for details.

TCME_{.org}
The Center for Mindful Eating

P.O.Box 88

West Nottingham NH
03291

603-778-5841

info@tcme.org

