IN THIS ISSUE:

Emotional Eating: How Mindfulness Can Help  page 3

Mindfulness of Emotions  page 5

Get Stressed. Eat. Repeat. Breaking Eating Habits  page 7
This spring, our quarterly Food for Thought newsletter brings into focus the role emotions play in regard to food and eating. This focus will help us better understand the concept of emotional eating as a dysfunctional behavior and thus how mindful eating can help.

In the first article, “Emotional Eating: How Can Mindful Eating Help? Reflections from Research Findings,” Cecilia Clementi, PhD, Psych.D, explores the construct of emotional eating in relationship to other psychological disorders. According to research findings, mindful eating can play an important role in the regulation of emotions when learning to distinguish hunger from distressing emotional states, such as anxiety.

In our practice-related article, “Mindfulness of Emotions,” Alice Rosen, LMHC, shares a case study of a client struggling with food and body image. Rosen describes how a mindful eating approach can help promote the development of acceptance, compassion and nonjudgment towards discomfort, a supportive tool when overcoming obstacles during the process of change.

In the educational handout “Get Stressed, Eat, Repeat: How We Can Break Emotional Eating Simply by Paying Attention,” Judson Brewer, MD, Ph.D, explains the mechanism by which the brain learns patterns related to eating based on the reward system. Brewer describes how mindfulness can help recognize cravings and eating urges in response to emotional states, based on evidence collected from the “Eat right now” app his UMass Medical School research team created.

To round out this issue, Lynn Rossy, PhD, offers a meditation practice on our theme “Mindfulness of Emotions.” She provides guidance on how to stay in touch with whatever emotions arise during meditation, especially the disturbing ones, simply by observing them with curiosity, acceptance, compassion and nonjudgment. In doing so, she explains that the nature of the emotions and their relationship with thoughts and body sensations can be entered into more deeply as a felt experience that is fluid and ever changing.

“Mindfulness and mindful eating interventions can play an important role in teaching how to attend, accept and let go of negative emotions, instead of impulsively reacting to them or suppressing them by eating.”

-Cecilia Clementi, PhD., Psych.D.
A growing area of interest for research is focused on the relationship between emotions and eating behaviors. Eating behaviors have been classified according to psychosomatic, externality and restraint theories in specific eating styles: emotional, external and restraint eating (1) which have important implications in the etiology models of obesity. (2)

Emotional Eating (EE) refers to the tendency to overeat in response to a range of negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression or anger. (3)

According to the psychosomatic theory, it is a consequence of the inability to distinguish hunger from other aversive internal states such as anger, fear or anxiety, or of using food to reduce emotional distress, probably because of early learning experiences. In cases of emotional arousal or stress, emotional eaters respond with excessive eating instead of loss of appetite. (4)

Moreover, affect regulation models state that eating may be an attempt to escape, to distract oneself, or avoid aversive affective states. (5) Emotional eating is associated with psychological distress, such as anxiety and mood disorders, suicidal ideation, and sexually-related problems (6, 7) and particularly with body image, weight and eating-related disorders. (5) Specifically, combined factors, such as negative mood states, negative emotions and stress, dysfunctional eating patterns and body dissatisfaction are implicated in the onset of binge-eating disorders. (5, 6)

Furthermore, emotional eating is associated with an increased consumption of sweet and high-fat foods (especially in response to negative emotions (7, 11) and also with weight gain. (12, 13)

On the other hand, emotional eating is negatively associated with mindfulness and body image flexibility. (14)

Emotional eaters have a low level of interoceptive awareness (i.e., the ability to discriminate between sensations and feelings, and between the sensations of hunger and satiety), (15) which is strongly related to alexithymia, (the inability to express feelings with words, and usually involves a deficiency in understanding, processing, or describing emotions). (16)

Alexithymia has been found to be positively related to emotional eating (17) and it predicts the severity of binge eating, body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms. (18)

Neuroscience research explains the continued on page 4
emotional eating
Continued from Page 3

complex mechanism of the human brain in controlling eating, in which several cortical and subcortical systems and a multitude of cognitive and affective processes are involved. (19)

Emotional eating has been assessed by various self-report measures, such as the Emotional Eating Scale (EES), (20) the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ); (21) and Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire, (22) which represent valid tools with strong psychometric properties.

There is a growing interest in research on the efficacy of mindfulness and mindful eating-based treatments for disordered eating, such as emotional eating or binge eating behaviors.

In a recent review, (22) mindfulness was found to have a strong negative relationship with weight gain and anxiety, and a positive relationship with greater emotional stability. Therefore, mindfulness could play a moderating role between negative emotions and eating behaviors.

Another review (23) specifically states that mindfulness meditation reduces emotional eating. Furthermore, in the review of O’Reilly and colleagues, (24) the majority of the studies using mindful-eating-based interventions reported a large-medium effect size in reducing emotional eating behaviors. In line with this, in a study on obese populations, (25) dispositional mindfulness was negatively associated with emotional and external eating, and positively associated with restraint eating.

Overall, mindfulness and mindful eating interventions (MBEIs) can play an important role in teaching how to attend, accept and let go of negative emotions, instead of impulsively reacting to them or suppressing them by eating. MBEIs also can help in recognizing the differences between urges/craving to eating and physical hunger. Therefore, they support aware choices related to when, how and what to eat, based on inner and outer wisdom.

In conclusion, understanding the connections between emotions and eating choices is a part of the process in becoming a mindful eater, and it represents an important target in terms of prevention and treatment of disordered eating behaviors. Further research using validated assessment tools is needed to better understand the impact of mindfulness-based eating interventions for disordered eating behaviors in the long term.

Cecilia Clementi, Ph.D., Psych.D, is a board member of The Center for Mindful Eating. She is a clinical and health psychologist, psychotherapist and instructor of mindfulness-based protocols (MBSR, MBCT, MBRP MB-EAT). She is an expert on eating disorders and obesity both in research and the clinical field. She collaborates with the University of Bologna, Italy.


Page 7, “Get Stressed, Eat. Repeat.”


As clinicians, we are dedicated to the practice of mindful eating as a way to have a healthy and satisfying relationship with food.

But how can a therapist help a client who, still driven by a strong impulse to eat in an un-attuned way, is resistant to the practice?

"Susan’s" story is a good example of ‘how’:

Susan has been engaged in a long struggle with food and her body. She is beginning to pay more attention to her feelings and thoughts and recently reported noting the sequence a few days before:

- In zipping up her trousers she felt the discomfort of constraint.
- Then came thoughts of shame and self-blame,
- an anxious imperative to “fix” her body (lose weight quickly),
- fear that her husband would leave her, and
- thoughts about how she could manipulate a situation to get reassurance from her husband.

Her question to me was, “So what should I do?”

Susan knew well enough that by going on a diet, or even thinking of it, she would rebel. But the thought of engaging her body and senses in mindful eating also felt like deprivation and triggered a stubborn, “don’t tell me what to do” stance.

In exploring that question with her, it was clear that she was asking from an urgent place of “how can I fix this?”

Susan acknowledged that this aversion-driven thinking, a reaction to her discomfort, eventually led to eating mindlessly in an attempt to comfort her distress and shut down her incessant critical voices.

“What if you stayed in touch with the initial discomfort?” I asked. “There is nothing that you must ‘do.’”

In going back to her bodily discomfort, Susan connected to early feelings of worthlessness and female objectification. In that simple contact and acceptance of her discomfort, compassion for herself as a young child naturally emerged.

Susan then had insight into her constant striving for external reassurance and considered that acceptance and kindness could only come from her.

She saw that by inserting gentle, warm-hearted awareness, she could create space between unavoidable discomfort, and impulsive reactive thoughts and behaviors.

Now that mindful eating was uncoupled from the idea that something was wrong with her, she lowered her defenses and was open and willing to practice it during the week.

Susan is beginning to understand that she can be more at peace with food if she becomes attentive to her discomforts, towards which she has previously felt great aversion. Her journey is to connect to such vulnerable states with kind interest.

With this understanding comes the opportunity to repair the relationship with food by the practice of mindful eating.

As mindfulness-based therapists, we have the skill to patiently guide our clients back to non-judgmental witnessing of what they fear will be too much.

Look for those opportunities during a session in which you can help a client come back to her senses through mindful inquiry.

Alice J. Rosen, MSEd, LMHC, is the founder of “The No-Diet and Self-Led Eating Workshops” and “The Conscious Cafe’. She is a faculty member of the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy, a Certified Internal Family Systems Therapist, and former Director of Education for “Feeding Ourselves (SM)”.

www.TheConsciousCafe.org
Introducing Our New CE/CPE Provider - International Seminars Group

We are delighted to announce that we have a new CE/CPE provider, International Seminars Group, also known as ISG, (http://www.internationalseminarsgroup.com). ISG is approved by the American Psychological Association to sponsor continuing education for psychologists. ISG is also a Continuing Professional Education (CPE) Accredited Provider with the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR).

Participants who attend our live CE webinars are eligible for the continuing education credits. Additionally, we will now have the ability to sell our pre-approved recorded programs for CE self-study! This has been a dream of ours for many, many years. The ISG staff are committed to working with us to help improve our programs for content at different skill levels including introductory, intermediate and advanced learning. Each approved program will have an evaluation and, for those doing the self-study by listening to the recording at home, successful completion of the post-test will meet the continuing education requirement. Visit our TCME Store to browse our CE self-study programs. (http://thecenterformindfuleating.org/Continuing-Education-Store).

The Center for Mindful Eating hosts a variety of teleconferences and webinars, many of which are free and open to the public. Our programs are intended to support professionals and anyone interested in exploring and understanding the principles of mindfulness and mindful eating.

See our Upcoming Events for scheduled webinars and teleconferences, including our new Foundations of Mindful Eating webinar series that offers up to 12 continuing education credits. Each year we plan to offer at least 10 continuing education programs, half of which will be free to members. We will also offer at least five teleconferences per year that will be free and suitable for those just starting out on their mindful eating journey. The Center for Mindful Eating is a volunteer-run organization. Our presenters offer their time and expertise without monetary compensation. Please join us in thanking them for their contributions! Our operations are funded by our membership dues, fundraisers, and program fees. Consider taking an active role in supporting our mission to help people achieve a balanced, respectful, healthy and joyful relationship with food and eating by becoming a TCME member. Student discounts and country of origin discounts are available!

Thank you for helping us celebrate our 10th anniversary!
I gained insight today relating to the correlation between my exercise routine and my eating patterns,” she posted on our online community.

What correlations is she talking about?

Our brains are set up to learn. From an evolutionary perspective, when we come upon a good source of food or water, it is helpful to remember where they are. When we see something dangerous, remembering that is helpful too. And this learning system, in its most basic form, has three elements: trigger, behavior, reward. This is a reward-based learning system. We see berries, we eat them; and if they taste good, we lay down a memory to come back for more.

Fast forward to the modern day, where food is seemingly everywhere. Our brains still have this same reward-based learning system. Called positive and negative reinforcement in psychology, a lot more is now known about how this system works. This is the good news. The bad news is that over time, when we learn to pair triggers that aren’t hunger-based with the same reward we get from eating sugar, we are in for trouble. For example, if we like chocolate, yet are feeling lonely or stressed, our brain might say to us, “Hey, why don’t you eat some chocolate? You’ll feel better.”

Interestingly, mindfulness training seems to be emerging as a possible way to specifically target this emotional eating habit loop. Each time we notice that we’re about to indulge, but step out of the loop, it gets weaker. For example, someone in our program wrote, “I am really seeing how the habit loop has driven my life with food.”

How can mindfulness help us step out of this habit loop? When we pay careful attention to our cravings, we can start to see really clearly what they are made up of: simply, thoughts and body sensations. Importantly, with this awareness, we can notice cravings as they arise and how they change from moment to moment. As a result, we can stay with them and ride them out instead of getting sucked into them and feeding our habit loops.

As an example, one of our participants commented, “[I] was again able to ride out my mid-morning craving for soda.”

Is there science behind this? We have designed and now studied our app-based program called Eat Right Now (www.goeatrightnow.com) to specifically give daily bite-sized mindfulness training that can help us get out of our unhealthy habits of stress and emotional eating. Through videos, animations, and in the moment exercises, people learn the difference between stress and hunger, and also learn how to not feed the habit loop of emotional eating. We also pair this with an online community and a live weekly online check in. We can support people as they go through their journey of changing their relationship to eating. We can ensure they really are understanding the mindfulness practices, instead of trying to “think” their way to changing their eating habits.

And the results are promising: in our first study, led by Ashley Mason, PhD at UCSF, we’ve found that mindfulness training delivered via Eat Right Now shows significant reductions in craving-related eating.

So with a bit of mindfulness training, we can first recognize and then learn to step out of our old habit loops of eating. One bite at a time.

Judson Brewer MD Ph.D. is a TCME board member and the Director of Research at the Center for Mindfulness and associate professor in medicine and psychiatry at University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMass Medical School).
Try this meditation when you are experiencing difficult emotions to help you learn that they are natural and manageable.

Instructions:

Start by sitting for a few moments as you settle into an erect, yet relaxed posture. Let your eyes close, or simply lower your gaze to the ground as you take your attention to your body and your breath. Take a couple of deep breaths to help you relax and settle into this moment—into your body and your breath.

First, acknowledge the emotion that is currently present, as best you can. Is it sadness, anger, frustration, or impatience? Naming your feeling may be harder than it sounds. Give yourself time to explore what’s happening. Use “sadness” as an example. Instead of saying “I’m sad,” try something like “I’m aware of sadness,” or simply “sadness is present.” Taking the “I” out of the statement begins to help you understand that you and “sadness” are not synonymous.

Notice where you feel the emotion in your body. There might be tightness in your chest, a pain in your stomach, or a clenched jaw. Whatever it is, notice with curiosity and kindness. Notice how and if it changes under your examination. Difficult emotions are triggered by a bodily reaction to something in your internal or external environment that is determined to be a threat. Take your time to discover what the emotion feels like in your body.

Notice what thoughts are present. Thoughts and feelings go hand in hand. Once your body registers something as threatening and sends a signal to the emotional center of your brain, a half second later you have a thought. Your thinking will be shaded by the emotion and may be a distorted view of your world that make things look bleaker than they are. Simply see the thought as a thought and let it go. Come back to the body and what you are experiencing there.

Now the important work becomes staying with your current experience. This is often a time when you will want to run away, fight, and resist — or eat — or do anything except stay present. Instead of these old strategies, do nothing. When a difficult feeling arises, tell yourself with kindness, “Sadness (or whatever else you are feeling) is present. This is just what wants to be here right now.” You might discover another related emotion arising. Acknowledge and sit beside any emotion that arises with great kindness and compassion.

You might find yourself going back to the thoughts that feed the feeling. This could be a thought about another person, about yourself, about your life. The subject doesn’t matter. Move your attention from the subject to the direct experience of where the emotion is felt in the body. Without a subject, the emotion becomes fluid and it cannot sustain itself for very long. If you don’t keep feeding an emotion with your thoughts, then the emotion soon runs out of flame.

Lynn Rossy is a health psychologist and author of “The Mindfulness-Based Eating Solution.” She developed and teaches the empirically-validated, 10-week mindful eating program called “Eat for Life.” She is a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction teacher and serves on the TCME board. She welcomes comments on this article. She can be reached at www.LynnRossy.com and MindfulRossy@gmail.com.