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Mindful eating to improve your mental health

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Experiences in life can lead us to emotional eating. Using food as an emotional coping mechanism can bring on negative physical and mental consequences over time. Understanding and practicing mindful eating is a valuable tool for gaining deeper insight into your emotional state. When we're attuned to ourselves mentally and physically, we can begin to introduce strategies for honoring our bodies.

So, if you're working on making healthier habits stick, there are practical solutions for emotional eating. Nope, we're not talking diets or deprivation. Keep in mind that you don't have to try all of these or do them perfectly— just see what works best for you.

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Dig into the why. How do certain foods make you feel in the moment? The next time you reach for a snack, just begin to notice what's going on inside. Does a bowl of ice cream make you feel comforted when you're scared or reassured after a bad day? You can use a pad of paper or the Sanvello in-app 'Journal Tool' (more information at *Sanvello.com*) to jot down how you feel before, during and after eating. Remember to leave the judgement behind and instead bring awareness and curiosity to the pattern of why you turn to food, if it's not for nutrients or satiation. The key here is to draw awareness so that you have enough information to understand what's going on within your emotional climate and how your eating behaviors either sustain emotions or are a result of them.

Notice your body's hunger and fullness cues. What happens when you get hungry? Do you get irritable or does your stomach start to growl? What about when you're full? Do you feel satisfied? Guilty? Or sleepy? Does the taste of your meal become less appealing the fuller you get? Learning to notice when you're

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hungry before you lash out at a loved one or when you're full before you feel overstuffed are two wonderful ways to bring mindfulness to the dinner table. We've worked with people who, once they start being more intentional with recognizing their hunger cues and signs of fullness, are better able to respond to their needs. Over time, they've been able to make more informed decisions about when they're actually hungry versus when they're eating for other reasons, like boredom or stress.

Slow.it.down. We know this one can seem impossible on those days where you're rushing around, taking care of everyone and everything around you and trying to squeeze in a quick lunch break. When you slow down while eating a meal, you are better able to take in the aroma, the textures, how the food tastes as you're chewing and how you're feeling as you're nourishing your body. But yeah, that's not always reality. What's one small thing you can do during your next meal to slow it down a little? Maybe instead of eating over the sink, try taking an extra five minutes to sit and actually savor your food.

Practice oh so much self-compassion. As you begin to be more aware of why you're reaching for certain foods and how they make you feel, remember that you're a human being going through something that might be stressful, painful or overwhelming and you're dealing with it in a way that is completely understandable. We work with our clients to create a positive affirmation or mantra that can be repeated when you notice yourself getting down on your choices or "shoulding" yourself. There is also an 'Eating Mindfully Meditation' in the Sanvello app for Premium* users that is a great starting point—it helps to shape the language needed to be curious about your choices rather than critical.

Drop those labels. Removing labels as they pertain to yourself, your choices and specific foods is a huge step in becoming a more mindful eater. When you look at foods, like pizza or chocolate as "bad," you're placing a stigma on your food choices. And what happens when you eat those "bad foods"? You feel pretty crummy about yourself. Like us, have you ever used the lines, "I'm going to be bad and eat fried food" or "I know this is bad, but I'm going to eat it anyway"? Classifying food as bad or calling yourself bad for eating those foods just isn't helpful. Try introducing non-judgmental language by saying things like, "I'm in the mood for a treat" or "I'm going to enjoy this beautiful meal that my family has made."

Get to know your relationship with food. Our diet culture tells us to not eat these foods, buy this weight-loss book, drink this juice and to deprive ourselves to obtain an unattainable body type. Try your best to tune out the hype and listen to what your body both wants and needs. There are oftentimes historical reasons why we turn to food for comfort, safety, acceptance or familiarity. Know that a trusted mental health professional can support you in better understanding these patterns.

Plan ahead. We all forget our packed lunch or just weren't able to get around to planning for the week and, in those moments, having a backup plan is important. Some find it helpful to meal-prep for the week, separating food into containers so that portions are visible. Realistically, there might be days you may opt for a fast food lunch or skip it entirely because you're swamped. Don't get hung up on the fact it happened—learn from the experience and decide how you can be better prepared the next day.

Mindful eating is about awareness and intention. It's also about listening without judgment to your body's communications when you're feeling hungry and what you want to eat to nourish your body. So, pick a strategy or two that work best for you and, when in doubt, reach out to a trusted loved one, your coach or therapist for additional support and guidance.

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