Turn Mindless Eating Into Mindful Eating

How many food-related decisions would you guess that you make throughout the average day? Fifteen? Fifty? A hundred? Dr. Brian Wansink estimates we make more than 200 food choices every day. "We’re just too distracted to notice most of them," writes the Cornell nutrition researcher in his 2010 book, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*.

We eat with our eyes, not with our stomachs. Research has shown that we usually decide how much to eat, when to eat, and even what to eat, because of what we see in our eating environment, not just because of hunger. Factors such as how much food is on the table or in the package, and even how big the tableware is influence how much food we eat and how many calories we consume. The effect is huge. Eating a mere 50 more calories a day can result in a five-pound weight gain over a year.

**The size of your tableware**

Have you ever noticed that dinner plates from the ‘50s and ‘60s are nowhere near as wide as today’s plates? People tended to be skinnier back then too. Young and old, diners will cover their plates with food no matter the size of their plates, so large plates lead to large servings and more calories consumed. A two-inch difference in plate diameter – say from 12 inches to 10 inches – would result in 20 percent fewer calories being served. Dr. Wansink estimates that this simple change could result in a weight loss of around 18 pounds per year for an average size adult.

Bowl size has an influence on serving size as well. In one experiment, Dr. Wansink invited 85 nutrition experts to an ice cream social. He wanted to test his theory that the size of the bowl unknowingly influences how much a person eats. The guests with larger bowls served themselves about a third more ice cream that those with the smaller bowls. (Don’t forget that these were professionals who investigate eating habits and who ought to recognize how much ice cream they’re scooping into their bowls!)

There’s often a big disconnect between the size of standard cereal bowls and the serving size indicated on a cereal’s Nutrition Facts panel. The typical serving size on a cereal box label is usually ½ to 1 cup, with calories ranging from 100 to 160 calories. But that cupful of cereal can look pretty skimpy in your big, roomy cereal bowl so you keep pouring on the cereal – and the calories.

Is your cupboard stocked with tall, skinny drinking glasses or short, fat ones? Do you know which ones hold 8 ounces and which ones hold 12 or 14 ounces? Dr. Wansink and his team were surprised by the results of their experiments with the shape of glasses. They found that nearly everyone pours less liquid into tall, skinny glasses than into short, wide ones. When 45 bartenders were asked to pour drinks, they averaged 30 percent more liquor into the short, fat glasses.

If you’re sipping calorie-free (unsweetened) iced tea all day long from your favorite glass, you don’t need to worry about shape. But if you drink sweetened tea, sodas or other caloric beverages, you may want to opt for the tall, skinny drink to help keep calories in check.

If you’re resolved to be more mindful of the calories you consume this year, grab a ruler and a measuring cup. Measure your dinner plates. If they’re larger than 10 inches in diameter, switch to salad or lunch-size plates. Fill your cereal bowl with water and measure it. If it holds 2 cups or more, consider shopping for a daintier bowl. Test your glassware in the same way. You’ll want to stash those pint glasses at the back of the cupboard.
More tips for mindful eating
It’s not only the size and shape of your tableware that influences how much you eat. If foods are kept within sight, you’re more likely to eat more of them. Dr. Wansink suggests keeping your entrée, breads or other starches, and high-fat foods off the dinner table. Keeping them off the table allows you to linger over conversation without temptation. Do put plain veggies, salad or the fruit you’re having for dessert out on the table. Adopting this new habit could cut dinnertime calories by 15 to 20 percent.

Naturally, we all want to save money on food. But the lowest price might not be the best bargain for your health. Wansink has found that grocery shoppers who stock up at warehouse club stores and discount stores eat up to 48 percent more. If you buy in bulk, put pretzels and other snacks in single portion size bags. And never, never, ever eat out of the box.

We all love variety, and it’s fun to try lots of different foods displayed at a buffet. But that variety almost always leads to overeating. Wansink suggests you can avoid overdoing it at a buffet by telling yourself to start with just two items. For sit-down restaurant dining, he recommends ordering two appetizers instead of an entrée, or having half your dinner packed to go.

Don’t multitask while you’re eating. Being distracted by television, your cell phone, the computer or the latest People magazine can lead you to eat far more than you otherwise would. If you’re watching a movie or surfing the Web and you decide to have a snack, pause the movie or close your laptop until you’re done eating. Eat when you’re sitting down. Choose one or two areas at home and at work that are only used for eating and eat only there. For example, do not eat while standing over the sink, peering into the refrigerator or on the couch watching television.

It’s easier to change your environment than long-established eating habits. This can be done painlessly and in small steps. A diner at home can replace large tableware with smaller plates, bowls and glasses. A grocery shopper can buy smaller sizes, or create their own single-portion servings by subdividing the bargain-size bag into smaller ones. A restaurant diner can order appetizers instead of an entrée, or have half of their meal packed to go. These and other mindful eating habits can help you achieve and maintain a healthy weight over the long term.

Resources:
Slim by Design: Mindless Eating Solutions for Home, School, Grocery Stores, Restaurants, and More [Hardcover]
Brian Wansink

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