

# Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance



- **Mindful eating**

**Eating, just like breathing, is something that we often take completely for granted.**

Think about the last thing you ate. Did you pay full attention to the taste, the texture, the smell? Did you stop to notice what it looked like? What it sounded like? Did you allow yourself to really enjoy it? Did you take a moment to pause afterward and really savour the experience?

There is a better than average chance that the answer to at least some of these questions is 'No'.

When we do something repeatedly, we often go off into automatic pilot. It is a natural habit of the mind to start taking things for granted once we have experienced them a few times. We generally start off being naturally curious about them as we explore them and familiarise ourselves with the new experience. But then we go off into default mode.

## **Why practise mindful eating?**

We practise mindful eating for two main reasons. The first is that eating is an excellent everyday activity to bring attention to. The second is that actually paying attention to what and how we eat has a number of important benefits for our health and wellbeing.

## **Really eating our food**

When we are eating mindlessly, we tend to be restricted to tasting (and perhaps smelling) our food. But when we bring full attention and a genuine sense of curiosity to eating, we quickly notice that eating is an activity that involves all five senses.

We can start to do this by feeling the texture of what we are eating, either in our fingers or in our mouth. We can tune into the weight and consistency of the food. When we look closely we can start to really notice what it looks like. We can see how the food was formed and can take a moment to reflect on the process of its creation. If it is a natural food we can reflect on the growing process, on the sun and the rain and the connection with the earth. If it is an artificial food, we can reflect on the manufacturing process.

We can take time to become aware of who and what was involved in getting the food to us. Connecting with our food in this way helps us to understand the interconnectedness of things and can give rise to a genuine appreciation of what we are eating.

This helps to prevent us from taking eating for granted. And as eating becomes more conscious, we can find that we become more aware of other everyday activities, such as

walking, talking and doing household chores. This serves to bring mindfulness more fully into our daily lives.

## **The health benefits of eating mindfully**

As we start to eat with more awareness and engagement, we connect more fully with our food and with the act of eating it. If we pause just before we put the food in our mouth, we might notice our mouth starting to water as our body synthesises and secretes saliva. If we pay close attention we might start to feel sensations in our stomach that signal our body making further preparations to digest the food we are about to eat. What this teaches us is that digestion begins before we put food into our mouth (this is called the cephalic phase of digestion).

But this only happens if we pay attention! If we don't, and just eat mindlessly, these processes don't take place and we don't digest our food as well. This is how most of us eat, most of the time. Notice your automatic pilot tendency to turn on the TV or read something next time you make yourself a snack or a cup of tea.

## **Chewing our food**

When we eat mindfully, we notice that part of the automatic pilot of eating is swallowing almost as soon as we put food in our mouth. If we pause and continue chewing, we break the food down more and mix it with saliva better, assisting the digestion process and allowing us to absorb the nutrients better.

People who start eating mindfully also tend to report changes to the types and amount of food that they eat. Pausing after eating each mouthful lets us savour the experience, meaning that we don't need to eat as much to get the same level of enjoyment. We also have an opportunity to notice the effect of eating that amount of that particular food on our body.

We naturally start eating more of what our body actually needs, and avoiding foods that lead to indigestion or other unpleasant feelings.