Mindful table is healthy for teens

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Writer

Dr. Jeanne Dalen, right, a research scientist at Center for Family and Adolescent Research and the University of New Mexico, ran a beta program for teens like Gabrielle Castillo, left, to help them learn the principles of mindful eating so they could change problem eating. (Jim Thompson/Albuquerque Journal)

The 411 on FEAST
A new study program, FEAST, or Family Eating Awareness and Skills for Teens, for teens 14 to 17 and their families, begins soon. For information about the FEAST study, visit ori.org/feast.

Mindful eating tips
To become more mindful about food:

- Allow yourself to become aware of the positive and nurturing opportunities available through food selection and preparation by respecting your own inner wisdom.
- Use all your senses to choose to eat food that is both satisfying and nourishing.
- Acknowledge responses to food, likes, dislikes or neutral feelings, without judgment.
- Be aware of physical hunger and satiety cues to guide your decisions to begin and end eating.
To become more mindful during meals:

- Turn off extra ‘dining companions’ during mealtime, like television, computers, phones. Distractions make us likely to eat more than we need because we don’t notice when we’re full.
- Pay attention to the food in front of you. Eat with all of your senses: what does the food smell like? Look like? Taste like? Really enjoy each meal. You’ll feel more satisfied when you’re done.
- Be mindful of thoughts and feelings that arise and notice as flavors come and go.
- Hop around your plate when you eat. Don’t just eat a single food till it is gone. We typically stop tasting our food after three bites. Food hopping keeps the meal interesting.
- Create three intentional pauses when eating: Before the first bite, during the meal and at the end of the meal. At each pause, rate your hunger on a scale from 1 to 10. Ideally, you’ll begin a meal when you’re hungry but not completely starving (a scale rating of about three), and finish a meal when you’re full but not completely stuffed (a scale rating of about seven). By attending to your body’s signals, you’ll be surprised to notice you’re really satisfied with less food.

For information about the adolescent mindful eating study, visit ori.org/feast.

– Adapted from the Center for Mindful Eating, thecenterformindfuleating.org.

The seven types of hunger
Everyone eats for many reasons. Sometimes because we’re stressed or feeling sad. Sometimes because we feel like we deserve a treat or maybe it’s our scheduled mealtime.

Eating mindfully is about expanding our awareness around food habits, so that we can make a more conscious decision of what to put in our mouths and when. Dr. Jan Chozen-Bays, author of the book “Mindful Eating,” defines seven different types of hunger as they relate to our senses: the eyes, nose, mouth, stomach, cells, mind and heart.

Becoming aware of different types of hunger and their reasons, allows us to respond consciously for better satisfaction.

1. **Eye hunger:** A beautifully presented meal is more appealing than a bucket of slop, even if the ingredients are the same. To satisfy eye hunger, we can really feast our eyes on the food before we put it in our mouths. If we mindlessly stuff our dinner in our mouths while watching TV, we’re wasting an opportunity to really appreciate it.

2. **Nose hunger:** Most of what we think of as taste is actually the aroma of the food. Our sense of smell is much more subtle than that of taste, as anyone who’s had a head cold and a stuffed up nose can testify. To satisfy your nose hunger, practice sensitizing yourself to the smell of your food, isolated from taste, by pausing before eating to really take in the aromas.

3. **Mouth hunger:** What we think of as tasty, appealing food is often socially conditioned or influenced by our upbringing. This includes how sweet or salty we want our food to be and the seasoning and spices we like. What is a delicacy in one country can be repellent to another culture. Generating greater awareness and open curiosity around the flavors and textures in our mouths as we eat can help satisfy our mouth hunger.

4. **Stomach hunger:** A rumbling stomach is one of the main ways we recognize hunger. But it doesn’t necessarily mean our body needs food. The hunger cues from the stomach are linked to the meal schedule we’ve given it. It takes practice to sense when a grumbling stomach means actual hunger.

Often, we can confuse the sensation with other feelings that affect our stomach such as anxiety or nervousness. If we feed anxiety with junk food, then get more anxious about our diet, we can spark off a negative spiral of emotional eating.
Listen and become familiar to the stomach’s cues. Delay eating when you feel hungry and become aware of the sensations. Assess your hunger on a scale from 1 to 10 before a meal, then halfway, check in again.

5. Cellular hunger: When our cells need nutrients, we might feel irritable, tired or we may get a headache. Cellular hunger is one of the hardest types of hunger to sense, even though it is the original reason for eating. When we were children, we intuitively knew when we needed to eat and what our body was craving.

Over time, we lose our ability. Through mindfulness, it’s possible to become more aware of our body’s cravings for specific nutrients and to develop some of the inner wisdom we had when we were children.

6. Mind hunger: Modern society has made us very anxious eaters. Constantly being influenced by the current fad diet or the latest nutritional guidelines or research paper, we are deafened by our inner voice telling us that one type of food is good and one type bad, meaning it’s very difficult to pick up on our body’s natural cues. The mind is very difficult to satisfy, as it is fickle and will find something new to focus on if one craving is satisfied. Mindfulness can help calm the mind and allow for a more sensitive awareness of the other cues our body is sending us.

7. Heart hunger: So much of the time, what and when we eat is linked into our emotions. We might crave certain comfort food because we were given it as a child or because we’ve associated it in our mind as a treat for when we’re feeling down. Often emotional eating is a desire to be loved or looked after.

We eat to fill a hole, but that hole often can’t be satisfied through eating. To satisfy our heart hunger, we need to find the intimacy or comfort our heart is craving. Try noticing the emotions that you’ve been feeling just before you have an urge to snack and you might be able to find other ways to satisfy them, such as calling a friend or having a cup of tea or a hot bath.

– Adapted from londonmindful.com/blog/understanding-the-seven-types-of-hunger

What if how you ate mattered as much as what you put in your mouth?

Gabrielle Castillo, 16, and her grandmother, Rita Castillo, 64, say applying principles of mindful eating has made a world of difference for their North Valley family at mealtimes.

Mindful eating means many things, but most of all it’s learning to slow down and really taste your food, rather than gobbling up hundreds of calories more before your stomach says you’re full, they say.

Gabrielle says she’s even lost a few pounds after an eight-week program, a joint research project between the local Center for Family and Adolescent Research and the University of New Mexico.

The National Institutes of Health has awarded about $800,000 to the researchers and the treatment-development program, says local researcher Jeanne Dalen. Family Eating Awareness and Skills for Teens, or FEAST, will examine the effectiveness of mindful eating for overweight adolescents, 14 to 17 years old.

Gabrielle says the project helped her analyze what she was eating and why she was eating it.

Like many overweight people, especially teenagers, Gabrielle doesn’t want to say how much she weighs, but she says her doctor told her that she was overweight and the number was unhealthy.

With help from her nutritionist and her doctor, she and her grandmother found the mindful eating program. “My grandma and I learned how to talk about eating healthier, rather than just clashing. We got new skills.”

She says she’s learned how to pause and think before she eats and notice the reaction to what she’s feeling. She learned to recognize her feelings and then discover that she didn’t always have to act on it by eating chips, candy and fast food.

“With mindfulness, you are actually able to tell what you are feeling. You don’t have to feel sad, just because someone
else is feeling sad. You can focus on yourself,” she says. “It helped me to get to know who I am right now. The program helped me physically and mentally.”

**Emotional triggers**

Gabrielle is the oldest of four sisters, all of whom her grandparents are raising. Although she and her sisters eat similar foods and portions, Gabrielle had problems with weight, she says: “My little sisters eat like grown men. They were always looking at me, putting me on a diet and not everyone else.”

That made her angry, she says. “I didn’t want people scolding me. I ate to make them mad. When my grandparents told me to eat something healthy, I would do the opposite.”

She remembers an incident of a meatless meatloaf that one little sister, then 12, concocted one evening. “Mostly it was my little sister’s idea. She wanted it done a certain way and it did not look good at all. I refused to eat it.” So Gabrielle called her cousin and they went out to get fast food, candy and chips.

But that was then.

Through the program Gabrielle has learned she likes a plate of sliced cucumbers for a snack, maybe some celery, because it’s crunchy, too. She’s learned to appreciate turkey, something she thought was tasteless in the past.

**Pilot program**

Dalen and her colleague, research scientist Janet L. Brody, are devising a pilot program for adolescents based on the beta mindful eating program that the Castillos and other local adolescents and their families completed this past fall.

Families with an overweight teenager are invited to participate in a study of mindful eating. The program is designed to promote weight loss while bringing a greater enjoyment and balance to eating. It aims also to reduce stress and manage emotions during the eight-week course, which teaches mindfulness techniques. For more information, visit ori.org/feast.

At the end of the program’s three years, it will have served about 110 individuals directly, but its scope is broader because the program can be implemented across the country, says Dalen.

“It’s really a family frame. Even in the closest families there can be issues around eating,” she adds. “Adolescents don’t want to be watched. They want to make their own choices. Families play a large role in behavior, but adolescents are learning to be more autonomous, more independent. Sometimes food is the only control adolescents feel they have in their families.”

**What the studies say**

Past studies of mindful eating, including a 2009 UNM study called MEAL, or mindful eating and living, show that adult participants lost weight, better controlled food-related anxiety behaviors like binge eating or purging and reduced stress. Markers for inflammation also declined in the UNM study.

Researchers around the country are scrambling to understand how to turn the tide of obesity for adolescents, Dalen says.

Although some studies indicated obesity in teenagers maybe slowing, the prevalence of obesity among U.S. youth, 12 to 19 years old, increased 83 percent from 1999 to 2012. Recent studies also show that young people have increasing health complications from obesity, such as diabetes. Obesity in youth is also the best predictor for continued obesity in adulthood. About 35 percent of adolescents are overweight or obese, Dalen says.

The researchers hope to learn more about adolescent eating patterns in the study, Brody says. “We need to go much
deeper into the experience to find concrete ways to make it resonate in an adolescent mind. How do you get adolescents to connect to their bodies, when they have spent so much time being embarrassed about their bodies? How do you get them to feel safe enough to talk about that?" 

**Know thyself**

Brody cautions that mindful eating is not about giving up all the food you like for plates of raw vegetables: “It’s about balance. We try to connect the inner and outer worlds.”

Dalen says they aren’t eliminating chocolate or chips from the diet, but allowing all kinds of food as long as the principles are followed. "It doesn’t mean that dietary knowledge isn’t important."

She says parents and adolescents have so many negative messages around food, that it’s no wonder than many meals are anxiety-ridden. "We all have so many invisible rules around eating. … We try to let go of the judgment. When people feel like they failed, they tend to give up. We make eating fun again. We bring the fun and curiosity back to food."

“The notion of mindfulness is that the right answer is inside us,” Dalen says. “That our inner dietitian knows what our bodies need, in our own rhythm, in our own time.”