

susan albers, psyd
foreword by lillian cheung, dsc, rd



eating mindfully
SECOND EDITION

how to end mindless eating &
enjoy a balanced relationship with food

“In this new edition of *Eating Mindfully*, Susan Albers gives more advice to those who truly care about what they eat. This book will help the consumer understand that the choices we make each day about what we buy have differing impacts on the world around us and on our own health. Hers is a reasoned voice in an environment where the fast food industry is still urging us to buy cheap food, not revealing the hidden costs. If you want to be healthy and care about a healthy planet, this is a book that will help you.”

—Jane Goodall, PhD, DBE, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and a United Nations Messenger of Peace

“Albers guides you with compassion and great insight through a journey into your eating habits. How you eat will be transformed and your relationship with food will be revolutionized.”

—Margaret Floyd, NTP, author of *Eat Naked*

“*Eating Mindfully* is a must-have book for people who want to deepen their mind-body connection through the experience of eating. It is chock-full of practical skill-building steps and written in a genuinely compassionate manner that will inspire you. Inner peace begins with compassion from within, not from perpetual food fights at the dinner table or within the battleground of your mind. This book will show you how to tap your innate ability to make peace with your eating. *Eating Mindfully* is a welcome respite.”

—Evelyn Tribole, MS, RD, coauthor of *Intuitive Eating*

“This is a simple and powerful book—one that takes the reader on a journey within to find solutions to their own individual eating difficulties.”

—Denise Lamothe, PsyD, HHD, author of *The Taming of the Chew*

“The practice of mindful eating is like going on an archeological dig through layers of symptoms to the truth underneath. Albers has given us an excellent map! Her book makes clear that problem eating can be a great teacher if only we stop to listen. I highly recommend this gentle, respectful, practical guide.”

—Lindsey Hall, author of *Bulimia: A Guide to Recovery* and *Anorexia Nervosa: A Guide to Recovery*

“We eat to live, yet some of us lose perspective and control of our relationship with food. Albers, drawing upon the powerful integration of

Eastern wisdom and Western science, guides us along a practical journey of mindfulness pointing to acceptance of our bodies and ourselves.”

—Thomas F. Cash, PhD, professor of psychology at Old Dominion University and author of *The Body Image Workbook*

“Susan Albers explores crucial spiritual dimensions that are so often overlooked in our relationship with food. Readers will easily identify the habits that trap them in cycles of mindless dieting, bingeing, and chaotic eating and help them cultivate a compassionate relationship between mind, body, thoughts, and feelings.”

—Rita Freedman, PhD, author of *Bodylove: Learning to Like Our Looks and Ourselves*

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This book is dedicated to my favorite dining companions—Brookie & Jack.

Author's Note

Shortly after I began working as a therapist, I became mindful of the enormous amount of suffering that hunger, weight, and eating issues cause. This book is my attempt to help prevent further suffering and to provide comfort to those already touched by it. For this reason, I dedicate this book to all those who are struggling to overcome mindless eating. *I wish you the best on your journey to a mindful relationship with food.*

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Foreword

Food is essential to sustain our lives. Yet our relationship with food in the twenty-first century has become both complex and challenging.

Nutrition science has made major advances over the past thirty years, and we all know that what we choose to eat affects our health and that we can significantly reduce our risk of getting diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, and other debilitating diseases by making healthy food choices. Though nutrition advice in the media can be confusing at times, we are not lacking in science-based information on what to eat to maintain our health.

So, in the face of this broad understanding, the primary question becomes: why do so many people make food choices that can be damaging not only to their physical health but also to their emotional well-being? The answer lies in our surroundings.

We are living in what many call a “toxic food environment.” Sadly, many of us are not fully aware of just how toxic it is—and how it affects us. We are surrounded by supersized and superprocessed foods and beverages that we can eat and drink almost anywhere: in the car, at the shopping mall, at our desks. Scientists are investigating whether these highly processed foods can cause changes in our brains that lead us to devour far more food than our bodies need—a state that some call “conditioned hypereating.”

We also live in a toxic media environment. Through televisions, computers, smartphones, and other media, our senses are constantly bombarded with images and commercials driving us to eat more. The assault is unending. The result: we are conditioned to incessantly overeat, overriding our sense of fullness again and again. The media also perpetuates the ideal of thinness, leading us to be dissatisfied with our bodies. This pervasive uneasiness with our size and shape can lead to disordered eating and, potentially, to eating disorders.

Our hectic modern lives certainly don’t help us make wiser food choices. The pace of life was much slower before the arrival of the Internet. People did not expect us to reply to their letters within the same day. Nowadays, with e-mail as our major mode of communication, we are bombarded with correspondence with the expectation of a reply within hours, even minutes. Multitasking has become a way of life, and we rarely pay attention to what we eat, how we eat, why we eat what we eat, and how much we eat. In other words, we eat mindlessly.

Stress contributes to mindless eating, and this stress-eating connection is all the more worrisome because the United States is in the middle of a stress epidemic. The majority of Americans experience moderate to high levels of stress, and many people respond to stress by overeating or eating unhealthy foods. Stress adversely affects our whole being, including our immune and cardiovascular systems. It is also associated with depression and heart disease.

What’s the culmination of all these societal conditions and trends? The obesity

epidemic, with all of its dire health and economic consequences. In the United States, one out of three adults is obese. If the epidemic is not controlled, half of all adult Americans may be obese by 2030. Meanwhile, eating disorders and disordered weight control are common among our youth.

Why is this so alarming? Obesity affects every organ in our bodies. It increases the risks of diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, depression, and other major chronic diseases. Our health care system is already overwhelmed, and obesity may drive it to the breaking point. Furthermore, if we do not turn the obesity epidemic around, this generation of children may have shorter life spans than their parents. Eating disorders and disordered weight control behaviors can also have dire health consequences, such as heart and gastrointestinal problems, osteoporosis, psychiatric illness, substance use, and risk of premature death. As we are now beginning to learn, eating disorders and obesity share similar risk factors—among them dieting, media exposure, and body dissatisfaction—and these similarities are driving researchers to explore whether we can take a broader look at prevention.

What can be done to reverse the worrisome social trends? During the past few decades, public health experts have shifted to emphasize social responsibility for healthy eating. We need to foster healthy communities to ensure that healthy choices are easy choices for all. Yet we cannot ignore personal responsibility, for the simple fact is that what and how much people decide to eat determines their ultimate health status.

One promising solution to keep us on the healthy-eating and healthy-living track while reducing our stress is the practice of mindfulness. Simply put, mindfulness means being completely aware of all that is within ourselves and around us, from moment to moment, without preconceived notions, using a beginner's mind. Mindfulness can be cultivated through meditative practice, and it can also be woven into our everyday lives and actions. People from all walks of life have practiced mindfulness for thousands of years as a way to maintain their health and well-being. Yet scientists have only recently shown increased interest in the effect of mindfulness on health. For example, the National Institutes of Health funded only three studies on mindfulness in 1999. In 2010, it funded over 100 studies. Areas of research include the effect of mindfulness practice on stress reduction, depression, hot flashes, addiction, irritable bowel syndrome, parenting, diabetes, cancer survival, disordered eating, and weight management.

There are ongoing studies suggesting that mindfulness practice can alter the way our brains function, and recent advances in neurobehavioral research support a new framework of weight management based on how brain processes affect eating behavior via the food reward system. This is especially challenging because we are living in an obesity-promoting environment with many opportunities for reinforcing food rewards. Increasingly, experts view mindfulness practice and training of the mind as important approaches that can help people deal with such environments, maintain their healthy weight, and have a healthy relationship with food.

Susan Albers recognized the importance of mindful eating decades ago when she was an exchange student in Japan. She was among the first to introduce the concept of

mindful eating to the public when she released the first edition of *Eating Mindfully* in 2003. Her book offers a lucid and compelling introduction to the essential concepts of mindful eating. And it offers concrete exercises that show us how to use mindfulness practice—namely, mindfulness of the mind itself, the body, our feelings, and our thoughts—to transform our uneasy relationship with food. We learn how to hear our inner “food critic,” how to sort out cravings of the heart from cravings of hunger, and how to break out of the routine of mindless eating. This second edition builds on her extensive experience working with patients and clients. It is a treasure for all of us.

—Lilian Cheung, DSc, RD

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A noble person is mindful and thankful for the favors he receives from others.

—Buddha

Thank you to New Harbinger Publications for enthusiastically suggesting the second edition of *Eating Mindfully!* I appreciate the opportunity to update readers with the latest mindful eating information and to share many more mindful eating tips. During the past few years, there have been several advances in mindful eating. Since *Eating Mindfully* was published, I've written four more books on how to eat mindfully and cope with comfort eating. I hope to write many more.

I also graciously thank all the readers for their feedback on the first edition of *Eating Mindfully*. If this book touched one life, it completed its mission. I'm happy to say, based on the reader response, that it has touched many. I'm sending you a virtual thank-you for inviting this book into your life and onto your kitchen table.

Thank you to the professionals who are doing research and teaching others about mindful eating. I admire your passion and dedication. Some of these individuals I know personally, others I've exchanged e-mails with, and a few I have never met but have admired their work from afar. These include Jean L. Kristeller, Ruth Q. Wolever, Evelyn Tribole, Elyse Resch, Michael Pollan, Dean Ornish, Jeffrey Brantley, Jan Chozen Bays, Dr. Jane Goodall, Geneen Roth, Ruth Baer, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Marsha Linehan, Debra Safer, Megrette Fletcher, Marion Nestle, Christopher Garmen, Ellen Langer, Lilian Cheung, Thich Nhat Hanh, Brian Wansink, Jamie Oliver, Mark Bittman, Dr. Mehmet Oz, Dr. Michael Roizen, Ron Siegal, Steven C. Hayes, Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, John Teasdale, and Daniel Siegal. These are just a few people on quite a long list. There are many more fantastic professionals dedicated to helping people transform their relationship to food and embrace mindful eating.

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Introduction

How common and effortless it is to eat in an uncontrolled, unaware, *mindless* manner. If you've ever continued to snack when you were full, cut calories despite being hungry, or used guilt to guide your eating, you've experienced mindless eating firsthand. Let's face it. Deciding what to eat is not an easy task. It's so tricky that in the United States eating concerns and weight obsessions have reached epidemic proportions, with serious health, emotional, and economic consequences for a large part of the population. We desperately need something new to help us overcome these issues—and mindful eating might be the answer.

What is mindful eating? A few weeks ago, I discovered an excellent example of it, and the incident involves the best chocolate lava cake I've ever had. You might be wondering how dessert fits into a book about managing your weight and healthy eating. If you want to know the answer, keep reading. Mindful eating, as you will learn in this book, is eating more consciously so you can eat just enough to be satisfied—without eating too much or too little. It sounds simple, but if you've ever tried it, you know it's much easier said than done. Yet, it is an essential skill for managing your weight.

I was at one of my favorite restaurants, a tiny bistro with a menu that changes by season, with a good friend whose name also happens to be Susan. When the waitress arrived, Susan asked to hear the dessert special first. She was interested in the bistro's signature dessert, a warm chocolate fudge molten lava cake. Susan wanted to know, up front, whether the cake was still on the menu because it would impact what she ordered for dinner. If they offered the lava cake, she figured she'd order an appetizer and the cake, no entrée. If not, she'd skip dessert all together and just order an entrée. She said, "I'm going to *make* room, not *find* room." Knowing this dessert was on the menu helped her choose her meal wisely. She had plenty of room for dessert without feeling overly stuffed. The cake was warm and gooey, and the melted chocolate ran down it like a river.

In general, mindful eating is like this example—learning to eat the things you love in a sensible way. It's breaking old, mindless eating habits and closely gauging your appetite to eat just when you are hungry and stop when you are satisfied. This is a skill that helps you to get to a healthy weight. In this book, you will learn much more about how making simple changes like this can make a big difference to your weight and health.

You may also be wondering what turns an everyday activity like eating into such an overwhelming process. The answer to that question is, of course, a complex one. Throughout this book, we will return to that question with some answers. But the bottom line is this: to make smart, healthy eating choices, your body and mind work together to send you essential cues about what you need and want to eat. These cues give you information about *how much* and *what* to eat. The sensations and emotions that signal when you're full, famished, or just wanting to eat something rich and

delicious are a complex combination of bodily and emotional feelings. If you are attentive and responsive to these cues, your eating will be healthier and well regulated.

In this book, you will learn how mindlessness corrupts the way you eat a meal and how it manifests in a variety of eating problems. You will gain insight into why *mindfulness*, which is, of course, the opposite of *mindlessness*, can provide you with valuable skills to control the way you eat.

Welcome

Welcome to the second edition of *Eating Mindfully!* When *Eating Mindfully* was first published, it was among the first mindful eating resources available. Although there were authors and teachers beginning to buzz about mindfulness and its applications to daily life, at the time *Eating Mindfully* was pretty unique. The book examined eating struggles through a different lens—from a new blend of clinical psychology and the ancient wisdom of mindfulness. Having worked with many clients who struggle with eating issues, I wanted the first edition to be very practical and directly applicable to the very real issues people struggle with at the table. Back then, I was excited to apply what I knew of the healing properties of mindfulness to coping with eating problems. Mindfulness was beginning to be used as a treatment for numerous physical and emotional problems. But it had not yet been widely applied to eating. This has changed.

During the past few years, to my excitement, the interest in mindful eating has increased exponentially. It's been on the televised news, in magazines, discussed in newspapers, part of support groups, and embraced by celebrities. In part, mindful eating has received attention due to new research. If you haven't heard of mindful eating yet, that's okay. This book will remedy that by teaching you the ins and outs of eating with awareness. Recently, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, a group of independent professionals that gives nutrition recommendations to the government, deemed mindful eating to be an effective tool for managing one's weight (see www.cnpp.usda.gov/dietaryguidelines.htm for the latest report). Despite this, unfortunately, many people still have not heard of mindful eating. Given our global concern over healthy eating, eating disorders, and the emotional and physical consequences of obesity, it would be helpful for everyone to know what mindful eating is and how to put it into practice. This book will help accomplish that goal.

What's New in This Book?

The purpose of the first edition was to explain how mindfulness skills could apply to all types of problematic eating. At that time, mindfulness was a new concept to many. Therefore, it was important to start with the basics. The book was written to be a solid introduction to mindful eating. You didn't need any previous knowledge or experience with this concept. However, for those who are familiar with mindful eating, it helped to organize the ideas. No matter where you were in your journey to mindful eating, the

first edition could be helpful to you.

Ten years later, the second edition starts with answers to a few of the common questions readers ask most often. Almost all the tips from the previous book are included, and some of the sections have been edited to reflect my evolving understanding of mindfulness. I've also added a new type of mindless eater: the occasional mindless eater. Mindful eating isn't just for problematic eaters or dieters. It's for everyone. Realistically, no one has *perfect* mindful eating. Many people try their best to eat healthfully but experience a bit of mindless eating now and then.

Part V is a completely new addition. It includes fast and easy ways to incorporate mindful eating into your life and is structured as a checklist—you can literally check off the tips as you learn to apply them to your eating regimen. Mindful eating doesn't have to take a lot of time or require radical changes. The new section contains 59 mindful eating tips to help you cope with emotional eating and teach you how to slow down when you eat. Plus you'll find mindful eating quotations that may help motivate you on your journey to mindfulness. There are also many new exercises in each section to help you to become a mindful eater. Finally, there are new resources for finding help and support.

What's Unique about This Book?

If you've read other books on mindful eating, you'll notice that there are several things that are truly unique about *Eating Mindfully*. First of all, this book is totally about you and for you. While I use some personal examples to help illustrate my points and share a bit about myself, this is *not* a book about my eating journey. I want the reader—you—only to be present with your own experience and to be focusing on what works for you. Second, I guarantee that many of the examples in this book will be familiar to you. That's because they are based on real-life struggles that come to my attention every day in my work as a practicing psychologist. The third characteristic that distinguishes *Eating Mindfully* from similar books is that mine is based on the philosophy of mindfulness rather than corresponding spiritual aspects. This concept is based on mindfulness as a way of thinking and living. Being more mindful can help all aspects of your life, not just how you eat.

What Is Mindful Eating?

I used to have a habit of flopping down on the couch every night and watching TV with a huge bowl of pretzels or chips. I would mindlessly munch on my snacks. Halfway through the TV show, I'd suddenly realize that I'd eaten the whole thing! This is when I would get up and go for more. Now, I make sure that I taste each bite.

—Rachel

Among many other things, mindful eating includes feeling the texture of each potato chip on your fingers as you pick it up, and then tasting the salt when you put the chip

on your tongue. It's being aware of and listening to the loud crunch of each bite, and the noise that the chewing makes in your head.

When you are eating the chips mindfully, you take note of their consistency against your tongue and the pressure of your teeth grinding together. You feel your saliva moistening the chips and filling the back of your throat, as the chewed food slides down. Mindful eating is feeling the food in your stomach and experiencing pleasure—or whatever you feel—from eating it. When you are watchful, you notice how your stomach expands and feels fuller while you are eating. You experience each bite from start to finish. You slow down every aspect of the eating process to be fully aware of its different parts, and to feel connected to it.

This is only one small example of mindful eating, and many others are included throughout this book. The main message to keep in mind while you read on is that *the key to changing the way you eat is not to develop discipline over your fork but to master control of your mind*. You can do this by studying and understanding your thinking patterns, emotional moods, and various appetites, instead of allowing your old, habitual thoughts to be in control.

Mindful eating is ...

- Being aware of *how* you eat.
- Knowing your hunger and fullness cues.
- Sensing and savoring food—truly tasting it.
- Paying attention to the process of eating—for instance, noticing your hand picking up your fork.
- Understanding your emotional triggers—the feelings that urge you to eat or not eat.
- Eating to nourish your body and meet your hunger accurately.
- Adopting a mindful mind-set, one in which you don't judge yourself.
- Being present and aware of your appetite as it changes.
- Having a conscious awareness of your food choices.
- Being alert and observant to how you think about food.
- Letting go of critical thoughts.
- Diligently heeding pre- and post-eating feelings.
- Acknowledging food for what it is rather than categorizing it as good or bad.
- Demonstrating compassion toward self and others.

- Accepting self and body as they are.

Mindless eating is ...

- Eating triggered by emotional rather than physical hunger.
- Eating routinely—done in habitual ways.
- Multitasking while eating (watching TV, driving, or talking while consuming food).
- Grazing on food.
- Skipping breakfast or other meals.
- Ignoring hunger and body cues (for example, a rumbling stomach or low energy).
- Continuing to eat despite feeling full.
- Eating everything on your plate regardless of the portion size, a.k.a. being a member of the Clean Plate Club.
- Following the motto “Live to Eat” rather than “Eat to Live.”
- Eating for comfort.
- Eating as if in a trance.
- Believing that you have little or no control.
- Allowing the shoulds and shouldn’ts to dominate food consumption.

Shifting Out of Autopilot Eating

At the heart of mindless eating are autopilot actions. Think for a moment about what it feels like to drive on autopilot—and then suddenly experience that wake-up moment when you realize that you’ve zoned out. It’s the shift in consciousness that happens when you are abruptly aware that you’ve driven to work instead of home or missed your exit. Your hands turned the wheel and your foot pushed the pedal. However, your mind was elsewhere. This shows how easy it is to do even complex things, like driving, with no thought at all. If you can drive on autopilot, consider how effortless it is to eat in this mode. Just pick up your fork and eat. No thought involved.

Unfortunately, behaviors and thoughts that slip out of your awareness are bound to continue and take you places you do not intend to go. Aspects of yourself that are unhealthy can persist without you even knowing it. For example, you might say to yourself automatically, “Eight o’clock, time for a snack.” Or whenever you sit down

on the couch to watch TV, it's always with a bowl of ice cream. Or maybe you mechanically chomp on cereal right out of the box when you are stressed out. These mindless eating habits are like reflexes. You do them so automatically that eating can be like tying your shoe or brushing your teeth—something you do with little thought.

If you have mindless eating routines, they are going to remain exactly as they are, unless you first become aware of them. When eating habits are in your consciousness, you can begin to think of creative options to change them. You *can* find healthy ways to break out of your old routines.

To Be Mindful ...

At this very moment while you are reading, you are getting your first taste of being mindful. To truly comprehend these chapters, you must shift out of autopilot and attend to the words before you. When you are mindful, you use all of your senses, not just your eyes, to read. You also notice and think about your reactions as you read. Most important, you welcome in what you are reading without judgment.

After the first edition of *Eating Mindfully*, I wrote a workbook to accompany it called *Eat, Drink, and Be Mindful*. I outlined seven skills that can help create a more mindful eater. You may want to keep these aspects of mindfulness in mind as you read this book.

- **Awareness:** Tune in to your senses. Notice. Taste. Smell. Look. Touch.
- **Observation:** See yourself from a distance, as if watching yourself in a movie. Observe the way you eat. Fast? Slow? Small bites? Handfuls at a time?
- **Being in the Moment:** Be in the present moment. When you eat, just eat. Don't worry about the past or the future. You can change only what you eat right now.
- **Letting Go:** Stop holding on tightly to thoughts and feelings that urge you to eat (or not eat). Learn how to let go of an urge or craving without necessarily having to respond to it.
- **Minding Your Environment:** Look around you. Notice what triggers you to eat. The presence of food? Commercials that advertise chocolate to soothe stress?
- **Being nonjudgmental:** Lose the criticism and guilty words. Instead, focus on talking compassionately and kindly to yourself. This will help you to be more honest with yourself about what and how much to eat. Be impartial. Just witness, don't judge.
- **Acceptance:** Be okay with things as they are. Stop fighting with your body and your eating. Instead, listen to your body.

Ten Common Questions about Mindful Eating

Readers have asked many wonderful questions during the past few years, like “I love ice cream. Can I still eat sweets mindfully?” and “What is the best way to start improving my eating habits?” Here are the ten most popular questions on the minds of readers, and their answers.

“IF I START EATING MINDFULLY, WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY WEIGHT? WILL I LOSE WEIGHT?”

For many people, the answer is “Yes, it’s likely that you will lose weight.” But, more often than not, I say, “It depends.” Let me explain in more detail. When you are engaged in mindless eating habits, you are not meeting your body’s needs in some way. It might mean that you are eating portion sizes that are too large, which makes you gain weight. However, if you are dieting or restricting, you aren’t getting enough calories or nutrients. This might mean that your body is struggling to maintain a healthy minimum weight.

The bottom line is that this book focuses on improving your eating habits. When you do so, the weight will generally take care of itself. You will notice that this book doesn’t hammer in the message “You need to lose weight.” The emphasis is more about being healthy than being thin or losing weight. This might mean getting more nutrients or taking better care of yourself. But weight loss can definitely happen as a result of mindful eating. Eating just the right amount needed to make your body function, without giving it too much excess, will allow your body to settle at your natural weight. Ask yourself, when was the last time your body seemed to be at a healthy place—in regard to your weight, health, and feeling good overall?

“IS ‘EATING MINDFULLY’ A DIET? WHAT’S WRONG WITH DIETING?”

It’s likely that you’ve already read many diet books. Although this book is about helping you eat better and manage your weight, you may be relieved to find that it is not a new “fad diet.” Fad diets, like the cabbage soup diet, no-sugar diet, and low-fat diet, come and go in popularity. Mindful eating is radically different. It’s not about cutting out food groups or starving yourself. It is something you do for the long term rather than something you go “on” and “off.”

Diets contain rules created for you; they are external pieces of advice. Mindful eating is tuning inward to use your intuitive wisdom to find what works for you. A diet may dictate, for example, that you can’t eat sugar. But what happens when it is your birthday and your daughter makes you a birthday cake?

Having a meal plan created by a dietitian is different than a diet. A dietitian helps you develop a well-balanced menu. He or she tailors it to your body’s needs rather than you trying to fit into the regulations of a particular diet. Having a professional help you choose healthy foods is a great idea.

Thus, dieting can be incredibly detrimental to your emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Diets can inhibit your ability to accurately decode your body’s messages and feedback. The dieting lifestyle is akin to taking a knife and cutting the connection that is your body’s only line of communication with your head.