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WEEKLY COLUMN

Mindless Eating—and What You Can Do About It
Women's Health

By Martin Brown, updated 5/21/2008 at 11:05:54 PM



You've heard this lament before: "Why can't I find a diet that works? Not for a week, a month, or a year, but one that gets the weight off, and *keeps it off.*"

It's a fascinating issue, when you stop to give it a little thought. Sounds simple, but I've been writing articles on various health issues for over fifteen years, and the frustration over finding a "diet that works" is a subject that comes up over and over again.

Perhaps I'm a habitual optimist, but I continue to believe that just such a diet solution really does exist. Like an alternative source of energy that frees us from our dependency on foreign oil, it's certainly something I'd like to see happen in my lifetime. I'm guessing you would too!

Recently I read *Mindless Eating, Why We Eat Much More Than We Think* by Brian Wansink, professor of marketing and nutritional science at Cornell University. Wansink, an Iowa native who earned his doctorate at Stanford University, has set out a fascinating premise. Perhaps, in the final analysis, our ongoing weight problems are as much a function of HOW we eat as opposed to WHAT we eat.

Wansink and his students have conducted some amazing studies over the years that demonstrate that our urge to graze is far more powerful than we might consciously suspect. Wansink and his clever colleagues have proven a variety of interesting behaviors that we homo sapiens demonstrate consistently when presented with food.

Here are just a few of those results:

The Super Bowl Sit-Down.

People in Wansink's tests when invited to a Super Bowl party all enjoyed a variety of treats including Buffalo wings. But, the groups whose plates were bussed and clean plates were put down in their place, consistently eat more than those who hesitated going for another wing, seeing the pile of bones before them. All tolled those who had a pile of bones in front of them throughout the game ate 28% fewer wings. In calories that's a big difference.

Glass Acts.

Another example was using a wide glass as opposed to a tall thin glass. People given a 12 oz. drink in a tall glass were equally satisfied as those having a 16 oz. drink in a shorter, but wider glass. This is because all of us are wired to be more impressed by things that are tall rather than high.

Bowled Over.

A third example was the endless bowl of soup. Participants in this experiment had equal portions served in 18 oz bowls but with one important difference. Some of those bowls were wired underneath the table to pump additional soup into the bowl. When reaching the bottom of the bowl, or simply when told to stop both groups assumed they had consumed the same amount of food not knowing that the group with the bottomless bowl consumed *almost 75% more soup.* Again, both groups declared themselves to be totally satisfied.

What has been learned from all this, and many other creative trials, is that a lot of **what we call "satisfied" has to do with an eye-mind-stomach connection.** Given bigger portions we eat what is put before us. This is the basic reason that when fast food chains began to compete with each other in serving 32 oz. drinks, and jumbo fries, people slid into consuming hundreds of additional calories and just as easily slid out of one dress or pants size and into another.

The important message in Wansink's work is that nearly all of us are prone to mindless consumption of food if we are unaware of the pitfalls. Now obviously no one is going to pump more soup into your bowl, but I have noticed that during a big TV event like the Super Bowl, I'll restart eating when the evidence of what I have eaten in the first half has been removed. Further I know that I can be equally satisfied with a large portion of pasta or a more modest serving.

A lot of this is nothing more than 150 calories here and 150 calories there. In truth, however, over the long haul, that is where most of our excess weight comes from. It's not from eating three good meals a day it comes from overeating yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

So what practical steps can we take in changing this mindless behavior?

Here are a few easy strategies you can follow:

Pre-plate your food.

First don't get the jumbo dinner plates. We tend to fill our plate regardless of the size of that plate. Some people have 8-inch plates, some have 10, and some have 12. There's a lot of mindless eating that falls between those margins. As for pre-plate that means setting your plate up, taking all that you want, but knowing that grazing out of the pot is not an option. In other words condition yourself that what you see on your plate is what you're having for dinner. If there's more casserole in the dish than what you need to fill your plate, put it up in a food container and put it in the fridge before you even sit down.

Next don't leave open packaged food on the dinner table.

Or, most deadly, don't leave it on the coffee table in front of the couch, in front of the TV. Whether it's high calorie chips, or fat free cookies, if your taking a snack put it on a plate, wrap-up the package and put it back in the cabinet. Will you go back for seconds? Yes, you might do that. But if you do this consistently, you will tire of the trips back and forth to the kitchen, not to mention the guilt you will begin to feel as you take this walk of shame. This is a whole lot better than the open bag of chips that we keep sticking our paw into until we hit the bottom of the bag.

Home alone—with the wrong kind of food.

A third easy change you can make is to remember this simple fact: nearly 75% of the calories we consume, on average of course, comes from the food we bring into the house from the grocery store.

It's unlikely that at 9 pm at night you are going to get into the car and run to the store for a package of cookies. But if those cookies are sitting in the cabinet, that's an invitation to trouble.

The bottom line to all this is one simple message: *whenever we make it easy for ourselves to consume extra calories, there is a good chance that we're going to do that.*

And while the eating is mindless, the results are long term—and nearly always regretted.

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Forty years ago American society came to a quiet consensus that one measure of a good life was to own cabinets filled with food. It might have been a belated reaction of the greatest generation whose parents suffered through the great depression. In any event, Boomers embraced this concept and passed it along to their successors. And the Costcos and the Sam's Clubs of the world have helped us to achieve that "dream."

Calories in today's world, as a percentage of your overall income, come at a cheaper price than at any other time in recorded history. It's a classic example of being careful about what you wish for, When whatever we want to eat is in easy reach, as Wansink has shown us, we're going to take it and put it in our mouths.

Diets are great, but they don't last. And the faster you lose pounds, the more likely you are to regain your lost weight. This is not dieting so much as it is establishing new habits in both eating food, and shopping for food.

When it comes to our natural predisposition to overeat, we have no hope of making positive changes in the future *if we don't recognize where we have gone wrong in the past.*

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