

Be It Resolved: Embracing Mindful Snacking for the New Year

By Jennifer LaRue Huget

As we race through the holiday season toward a brand new year, I find myself thinking of ways in which I can improve myself and my life in 2015.

Among the many areas in which I'd like to do better is my approach to eating. Though I generally maintain a healthful diet, I sometimes find myself eating without quite knowing why – especially when it comes to snacking.

My focus on that aspect of my eating habits stems in large part from the experience I had recently when I was invited by Mondelēz International to moderate a virtual panel discussion around the notion of Mindful Snacking. Given my work as the former nutrition columnist at *The Washington Post*, my interest was piqued right away. And I really got intrigued by the questions the panelists addressed: What does “mindful snacking” mean? How can people practice mindfulness when it comes to snacking? And how can we incorporate mindful snacking into our daily lives?

I've been returning to those questions time and again as I look toward the New Year, a time when so many of us resolve to make positive changes in our lives. Are there ways in which I might use the concepts of mindfulness and mindful snacking to support my efforts to eat more healthfully in the coming year and beyond?

The short answer is yes, absolutely!

The expert panel included Dr. Jean Kristeller, co-founder of The Center for Mindful Eating and professor emeritus at Indiana State University; Maria Alvarado, Vice President of Consumer Insight and Strategy at Mondelēz International; and, Dr. Michelle May, a mindful eating expert and former family physician who founded the Am I Hungry?® Mindful Eating Programs. Their answers to those basic questions about mindful snacking paved the way for me to use that concept to shape my plans for a healthy 2015.

But let's take a step back, now. Before we can talk about mindful snacking, it's important to understand what mindfulness is – and what it isn't. According to Jean Kristeller, mindfulness is a quality we all have the capacity to use, and understanding it isn't rocket science. It's simply the act of deliberately directing attention without judgment toward what is important for you in the moment and noticing your thoughts and feelings during that time. She went on to explain that mindfulness can be cultivated through simple practice, and it's a very powerful way to take control of your reactions rather than feeling compelled or overwhelmed by them. Kristeller also said that being mindful is more about being in the moment, being awake (versus in a trance, as many people believe), being truly present and giving that quality of thoughtful awareness. That's something we all can strive toward, right?

This common-sense explanation from Dr. Kristeller helped set the stage for another important question: Why do people snack? What we learned from Maria Alvarado is that

people around the world snack in different ways, at different times of day and by choosing different foods, but the basic reasons for snacking are the same everywhere.

The first reason is to fuel your day if you're hungry or need energy. The second is more emotional and pleasure-based, or what she calls a treat. We snack after dinner to have that little piece of chocolate that helps us relax or in the afternoon to take a pause and talk to a colleague. The last reason people snack is to get a boost, to help wake up in the morning or give that extra kick to keep you going during the day when your energy has dropped. Alvarado concluded that, based on what Mondelēz observed around the world, people that eat proper meals find that snacking between those meals can add variety and richness to their diet and make little moments of pleasure with friends and family really count. Imagine how that might enrich life in the coming year and beyond!

Once we learned about mindfulness and the reasons why people snack, Dr. Michelle May helped us determine if these two concepts can co-exist. She started by saying that the world is filled with emotional triggers that can lead us to mindless eating. Employing mindfulness can help us counter those triggers. But mindful snacking doesn't start and end with paying close attention to what you're eating when you're eating it. Mindful snacking is eating with intention and attention, which is really just purpose and awareness. It's about the entire decision-making process that goes into eating, beginning with the choices we make in the grocery store.

For those looking to be more mindful when it comes time to fuel, treat, or boost, Dr. May says start by asking, "Why am I eating?" Asking this question can help us tune in and pay attention to what is happening in our own bodies with the intention of identifying what our true need is in that moment. It can also help us snack more mindfully because the answer to this question affects every decision that follows. Then, pause to ask, "Am I hungry?" If you *are* hungry, you can choose what and how much to eat, and find the right snack for the moment.

An important concept Dr. May shared is that no foods are off limits— if we can embrace the very simple nutrition concepts of balance, variety, and moderation, then we can balance eating for nourishment with eating for enjoyment. Preparation is key in helping us do this. Having meals and snacks available that are satisfying and that don't leave us reaching for whatever is available is important. Preparing meals, learning cooking techniques, and having convenient foods on hand that are a great balance of delicious and nutritious can help people snack more mindfully. Dr. May concluded that with mindfulness we can have a great big life, and food can be part of the pleasure.

I like that thought. In fact, I like the whole idea of mindful snacking, as it was presented by our panelists. It all boils down to being more aware of what's going on in your body and mind when making decisions about snacking. That strikes me as both powerful and empowering.

So, yes, I am convinced that mindfulness and snacking can co-exist. In fact, as I said as the discussion was ending, I don't think I'll ever snack mindlessly again. I feel a New Year's resolution shaping up here!

Jennifer LaRue Huget, former "Eat, Drink and Be Healthy" columnist for The Washington Post, is currently a freelance writer and children's book author. A part-time yoga teacher and, until recently, a long-time yo-yo dieter, she is glad to be learning to practice mindfulness in many areas of her life, including in the way she makes food choices.