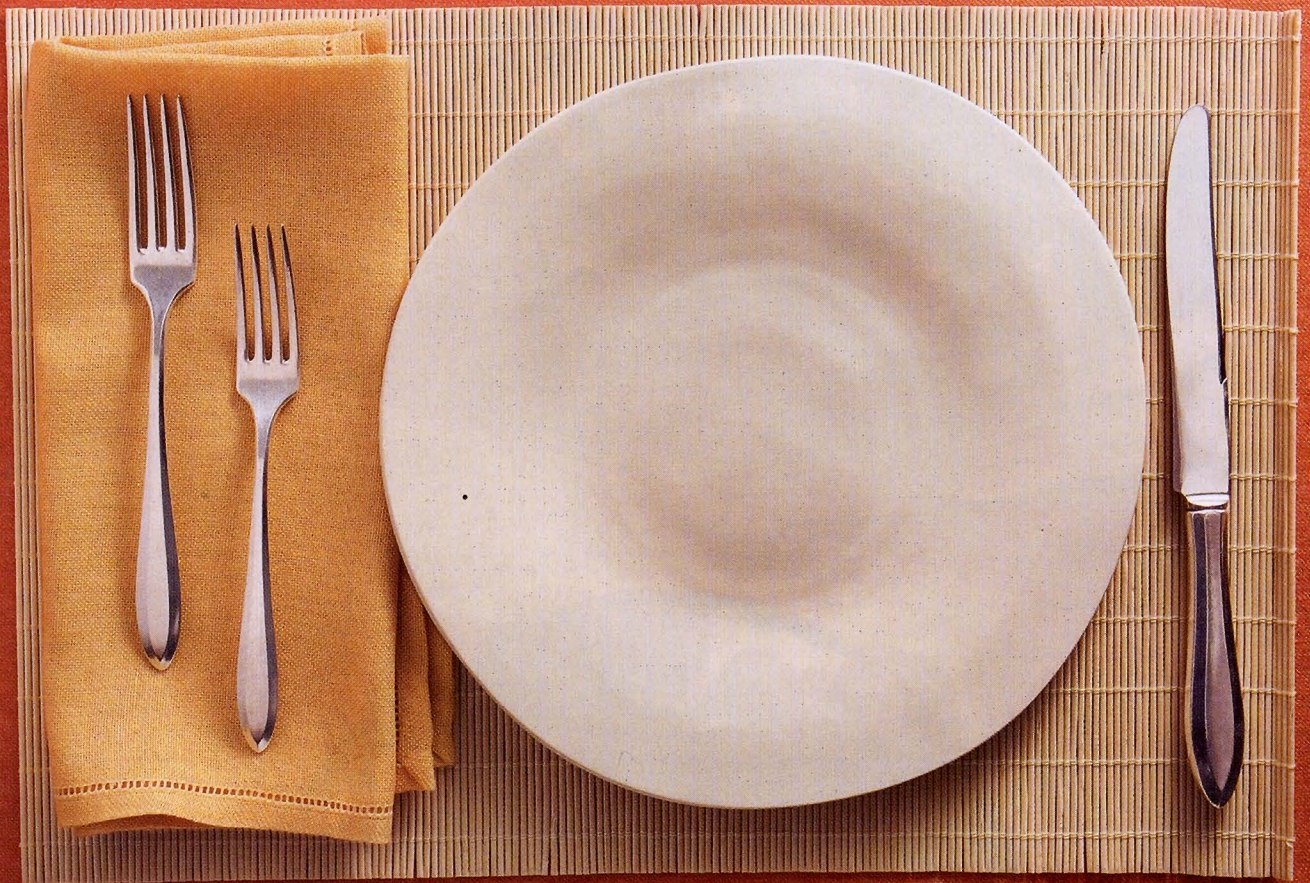
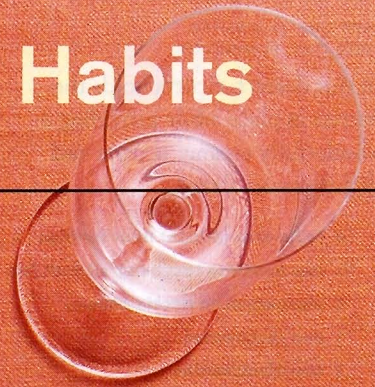


conscious
eating

Breaking Bad Eating Habits

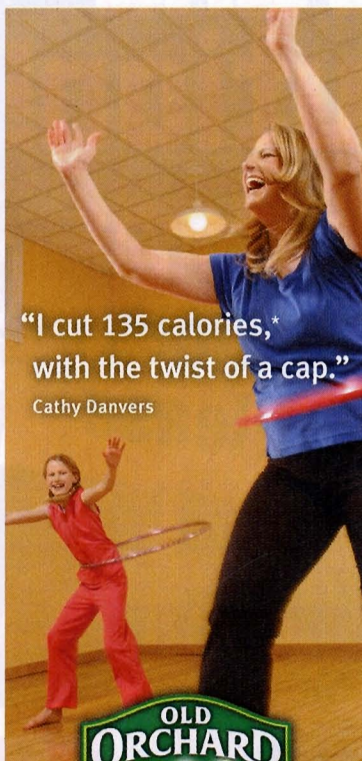
by Sharon M. Goldman

Do unhealthy patterns keep you from eating your best? Consider a more mindful approach



Trudging home after work, you envision the ultimate healthy dinner—that consummate amalgam of omega-3-rich, fiber-infused, yin-yang superfoods enhanced with a dash of chakra-balancing spices. But your intentions somehow evaporate, along with the half-wheel of cheese you down after stepping through the door.

It's no secret that maintaining a nutritious diet requires an awareness of what, when, and how much we eat. But here's the catch: Many of our eating habits are just that—habits. Whether it's snacking before dinner or eating on the run, we



"I cut 135 calories,*
with the twist of a cap."

Cathy Danvers

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conscious eating

frequently fall into patterns with little thought at all. The potential consequences of habitual eating are anything but nourishing—it can lead to health problems ranging from poor digestion to weight gain, and an increase in the stress and imbalance in our lives.

Reversing unhealthy eating habits is not about following hard-and-fast diet rules. Instead, it's about cultivating a new, conscious approach, one that starts with listening to your body. "Our systems are designed to know what we need to eat," explains Mary Taylor, a trained chef and coauthor of *What Are You Hungry For?: Women, Food, and Spirituality*. "We just need to tune in to those internal signals." Taylor likens "conscious eating" to meditation, in which practitioners watch their thoughts come and go without judgment. Rather than giving in to every food craving or ignoring your body's signals, you'll begin simply paying attention.

"Mindfulness is the missing link when it comes to healthy eating," says Ellie Krieger, a New York City-based registered dietitian and host of the Food Network's *Healthy Appetite*.

For lasting change, don't try to overhaul your approach overnight. Start gradually, focusing on the following common pitfalls; then work on your own weak spots. Throughout, be gentle with yourself. In time, you may see improvements in not only your diet but also your overall sense of well-being. "Practicing consciousness about food does more than help you eat better," notes Taylor. "It's a skill that has a way of spilling out into other areas of life."

Old Habit Speed eating

New Motto Slow down and chew

If there's one time to curb the frenetic pace of your day, it's mealtime. Eating too fast undermines healthy digestion and encourages overeating. Moreover, it precludes enjoyment. "We tend to ignore the sensory aspects of food—

the smell of it, the look of it, the taste—and just shovel it in without paying attention," says Krieger.

Intentionally engaging your senses can help you slow down. Taylor suggests making a simple "pledge of consciousness": For the first and last bites of every meal for a week, check in and notice the way your food tastes and smells, and how your body feels. "You may only remember to do it 50 percent of the time," she says, "but it's a good starting point."

Of course, paying attention to your food is tough if you're distracted. For slowdown success, try to eat at least some of your meals in peace: no watching TV, no reading e-mail or surfing the Internet, no jumping up to answer every phone call. "Do what you need to do ahead of time so that you can unplug and enjoy your meal," Taylor suggests, again advocating a gradual approach. "If you can't do it all the time, start by committing to just one distraction-free meal every other day."

Old Habit Portion overload New Motto Less is more

According to Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., author of *The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss*, neither carbs nor fats are to blame for America's obesity problem. The problem, she says, is volume: "When we pay no attention to how much we're eating, we eat too much."

Our super-sized culture doesn't help. "Dinner plates are bigger than they used to be, and restaurants serve gargantuan portions," notes Taylor. Keeping a few visual guidelines in mind can help: A 4 o.z. serving of protein is about the size of your fist, while a cup-size serving of grains or starchy vegetables is the size of your palm. Leafy greens can be eaten with abandon, as long as they're cooked without excess fat.

Being portion-conscious isn't all about weights and measures, however. Tuning in to the aesthetics of food,

explains Taylor, actually encourages healthy portions. "In Japan, food is delicately arranged so you can see its beauty," she says. "And in Chinese and Thai dishes, ingredients stand out without being overwhelmed by 10 other things." So pay attention to the color, texture, and vibrancy of specific ingredients, she suggests, and when you cook with them, try to do them visual justice. "The goal is to develop a sense of aesthetics and balance," says Taylor. Instead of heaping food on your family's plates, you'll be inspired to present each meal with care. Healthy portions are a natural result.

Old Habit Daily sweets
New Motto Cultivate the palate

It's common to crave dessert at the conclusion of every meal, even though loading up on sugar isn't in our body's best interest. "We get habituated to having sweets as a final course," explains Taylor. "They also have an addictive quality; you can feel really deprived without them."

Part of the problem, she explains, is that sugary foods can overwhelm your taste buds and dull your senses, making it harder to discern what your body really wants. (And according to Traditional Chinese Medicine, an overload

Old Habit Reckless grazing
New Motto Be prepared

Pre-dinner snacking can ruin the best-planned meal, and it's most common cause is simple: We're too hungry to wait. Letting yourself get overly hungry can lower your blood-sugar levels—a surefire way to overeat. Keep in mind that your body starts to feel hungry from one to four hours after you've eaten even the most balanced meal, so if you haven't had anything since lunch, you're bound to nosh when you walk in the door.

You can prepare for this by eating a healthy late-afternoon snack (for instance, celery and almond butter, or yogurt) and by doing some prep work (chopping vegetables or cooking rice) in the morning so that you're able to eat dinner earlier. But it's also worthwhile to attune yourself to the symptoms of hunger—along with the familiar burning sensation in the belly, you might feel light-headed or have a dry mouth or a tight throat. These symptoms are similar to those of emotional states like stress and anxiety, says Krieger, and they can lead to supremely *unconscious* eating.

"The goal is to get out of what I call 'eatwalking,' that type of numbness where you aren't even aware of what

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whole
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tion of dessert. Start by allowing your palate to experience the healthy side of sweet. "One of the best desserts I've ever had was simply sliced apples and pears with a sprinkle of cinnamon," explains Krieger. "It was special enough and topped the meal off with a sweetness that was just right."

For more on this topic, check out *Body+Soul's Conscious Eating* kit. It contains mealtime-meditation cards, a guided-meditation CD, and an original sound-healing recording. To order, visit our Web site, bodyandsoulmag.com.

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