Beware of claims that mindful eating will help you lose weight

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Mindful eating is increasingly being promoted as a solution to being overweight. Mindful eating, we are promised, will help us eat less, transform our relationship with food and end our battle with weight once and for all. The truth is, we simply can't say with confidence that mindful eating can help with weight management.

This is not because of a lack of trials. There have been plenty of evaluations of mindfulness-based weight-loss programmes, and many of these have shown that people do indeed lose weight. But these programmes tend to incorporate other elements that have little to do with mindfulness. For example, people may be provided with nutritional advice or be prompted to think about their motivations for weight loss. They are also likely to attend group-based workshops and, in doing so, may benefit from the support and encouragement of other group members. As such, we don't know whether it's the mindful eating that's helping these people lose weight or the non-mindfulness bits of the programmes.

It's much easier to rule out these factors with experiments in a laboratory. And here there is good evidence that some mindful eating strategies can influence what a person eats. In particular, getting someone to focus on the sensory properties of their food while eating (for example its taste, texture, look and smell) can reduce the amount of high-calorie snack food they eat later on. But we don't really know why.

One possibility is that this approach lets people maximise the amount of sensory pleasure they get from their food, as opposed to simply eating in order to fill up. This could lead to a person choosing to eat less because the more we eat a food, the less pleasure we get from it; the first bite of a large chocolate brownie may taste quite heavenly, the last bite possibly a little sickly. So if we stop eating sooner, the average amount of sensory pleasure we get from the experience will be greater than if we proceed to stuff down every last morsel.

But, if this is the case, this strategy could cause someone to eat more when they're not hungry, because food can be pleasurable even when we're full, such as when we eat dessert after a large main course. It may also have little effect on those who are dieting if they are already restricting their portion sizes (and getting them to focus on sensory

pleasure could make them forget about their weight-loss goals). Indeed, although this type of mindful-eating strategy has been found to reduce snacking in both normal weight and overweight people, none of this research has been specifically carried out with people who are trying to lose weight, nor have the effects been carefully examined outside the lab. It's possible that people compensate for reduced intake on one occasion by eating more at another time.

Thinking about food-related thoughts

Another mindful eating strategy that has been shown to influence eating behaviour is that of noticing people's thoughts about food and trying to create a distance between the thoughts and the person. For example, a individual might be asked to think of themselves as the driver of a bus, and all their thoughts about food ("I really need chocolate", "I deserve chocolate", "I can't cope without chocolate") as noisy passengers on the bus; the passengers can make as much racket as they like, but the driver is still in charge of deciding where they go. This type of strategy has been shown to help people resist tempting foods.

But, again, these studies were conducted with people who were interested in eating more healthily, not people who were dieting to lose weight. In fact, other similar research suggests this type of strategy may have no additional advantage for those who already have weight-loss goals in mind.

Other mindful eating strategies

Of course the two strategies described above are not the only ways of eating mindfully. As well as paying attention to what you're eating, and noticing your food-related thoughts, mindful eating can also be about becoming more aware of feelings of hunger and fullness or of particular

cues that trigger over indulgence (a work success, a lover's rejection). In principle they could help someone manage problem eating, which may in turn help them lose weight. But at this point we simply don't have the evidence to state this with confidence. So, although there may be many good reasons to eat mindfully, losing weight is not necessarily one of them.

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