

Without Thinking

Part 1: Hanging on to Love Handles

Mom called them love handles. Others refer to midriff bulge, beer belly, or muffin tops. By whatever name, they are extra pounds around the midsection, and they stay around. I have them. You might have them. It's time for them to go!

Not only does the waistband bind and the “skinny” shirt bulge, but belly fat is also the most harmful kind. According to Mayo Clinic, “Excess belly fat increases your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain types of cancers.” Love handles indeed! Mom was a master of the euphemism.

In searching for inspiration, I recently re-read a book I first found helpful several years ago: *Mindless Eating* by Brian Wansink. I found it intriguing the first time; this time, I am making an extra effort to apply the principles Wansink has learned from reviewing the research on eating patterns.

According to one key principle, our stomachs are poor at judging when we have had enough to eat. We rely more on signals from other parts of the body and psyche.

First, we tend to stop eating when the food is gone—and not a second before. If the bowl, box, or mug is empty we might be full (until seconds are offered, anyway).

Secondly, we tend to wait until our companions have finished eating before we declare a halt to our own. On social occasions, the duration of a meal is determined by the slowest eaters. Those who eat quickly keep on eating until the meal is over; they do not notice or register the sensation of physically “full.”

In a third example, our perception is also conditioned by how much we have chewed our food and how often we swallow our food. Calorie-dense liquids are especially sneaky because they go down so easily.

Understanding the role of cues can help us develop strategies for eating less. It works for me to use small bowls and cups so that the food is gone sooner than it is with larger vessels. I also limit social eating, choosing to meet a friend for coffee instead of lunch. Finally, I fit crunchy foods into my daily fare because I find them satisfying to chew, regardless of calorie content. Hard rye crackers and fat-free popcorn work well.

What are the effective cues that trigger you to stop eating? What strategies help you say “enough” before it is “far too much?”

To read the entire article, [click here](#).

Part 2: Eating in Orange

Fat pants? Skinny pants? The decision matters to those of us who want to drop abdominal fat. As noted above, we seldom stop eating when we're full. If not then, when? I have turned again to *Mindless Eating*, for insight.

It turns out that weight gain is not just associated with college freshmen, pregnant women, and those of us enjoying the golden years. A prison study showed that inmates are also inclined to pick up pounds (20-25 per six-month stay). Neither the gourmet food nor a sedentary lifestyle is to blame; the culprit is fashion. The standard-issue orange jumpsuit fits loosely. Its waistband never gets tight. The occupant can overeat without feeling the effect. Fitted clothing tells us when we've had enough.

The amount we eat also depends on visual cues. In one study, subjects were offered unlimited Buffalo wings while watching sports. For one group, bones from the last serving were removed when a new platter arrived. The second group nurtured a growing mound of inedible chicken parts. The second group consumed 28 percent less food than those with a tidier table. The bones told them how much they were eating.

I recently played with these two findings on my own. One day, I made a point of keeping all the plates, cups, and utensils I had used in full view. I used a new container for each serving, and left it on the counter when I was done. Wrappers and inedible parts remained as well. Nothing went into the dishwasher or the trash until the end of the day, when I took a picture of the pile.

The following week, I decided to wear my "skinny pants," which fit in the morning and snug up as the day progresses. I resisted the temptation to wear baggies around the house or to choose the next larger size for a social occasion.

Both experiments were revealing. Leaving evidence in view increased my awareness. Fitted clothing affected my behavior. I was acutely aware of how the clothing fit, which in turn slowed (and eventually stopped) my eating.

An orange jumpsuit symbolizes imprisonment. Perhaps that symbol has multiple layers of meaning. The lack of immediate feedback while we eat imprisons us in mindlessness, and potentially traps us in a body that can damage our health and happiness. I don't want to wear skinny pants every day, and I don't want to pile dishes and trash on the counter as a new habit. However, I learned from the experiments.

How might you use the evidence from these studies to increase your mindfulness and manage your eating more carefully?

Part 3: Two Hundred Times a Day

This is the third and final part to the *Mindless Eating* trilogy, with a tip of the hat to author Brian Wansink. This time we are looking at the link between the eyes, the brain, and the mouth. The more of a food we see, the more we eat. Simple enough in concept, but is it supported by the facts?

Food-habit research has taken on the challenge. A study of office workers discovered key truths around the omnipresent candy dish. Seventy-one percent more candy was consumed from glass candy dishes than from white ones. The more visible the food, the more was eaten. In another study, food wrapped in clear plastic disappeared more quickly than the same food in aluminum foil. Additional research yields similar findings.

We are faced with more than 200 choices about food each day: whether or not, what, and how much to eat. Those choices are driven by our thoughts. Our thoughts are affected by our senses. The more of a given food we see, the more we think about it, and the more often we choose to eat it. I have tested this concept at home, and have developed some promising new habits.

Many foods have been out of view for years: we don't keep chips, cookies, or ice cream on hand. Other foods I consider staples, and they are always in the house. Some, like peanut butter and cold cereal, are easy to over-indulge. I started putting PB in the frig, behind the plain yogurt and skim milk. I moved the cereal from a clear jar to an opaque canister, behind the rolled oats. Voila! I don't think about those foods nearly as often, and sometimes I go all day before deciding to indulge a modest serving.

It's not all about "no." I also want to eat more fruits and veggies. I go through cycles of effort to set a small bowl of each on the counter, in full view: grapes, cherries, snap peas, carrots, baby tomatoes. By dinnertime, I have finished them off. It is easy to munch these healthy foods, as I used to munch candy from an office-mate's desk.

How might this finding work in your life? Do you think more about the foods you see? Which foods deserve the back of the shelf, and which the foreground? Are some safer if left in the store? How do you want to experiment with this idea?