

A Personal Reflection on Commitment 5

By Christina Grote, ITPI Board Member

I am conscious of everything I eat.

Sounds simple right? No dietary advice here, just being conscious of what you are putting in your mouth. Well, there's a little more to it, but that is the basic idea.

Why don't we recommend any particular diet?

There are as many ways of eating as there are human beings on the planet. Western diets are all over the map, from the low fat, high fiber approach of the Ornish program (favored by Leonard and Murphy in the first edition of *The Life We Are Given*), to the many versions of the Keto diets, Intermittent Fasting, and beyond. Although these plans have worked for many individuals who have tried them, collectively we have learned that a one size fits all approach to eating just doesn't work. We are all different! Different body types with their unique combination of genes process food differently, and even seem to require a different balance of nutrients. Even blood type may come into play.



So rather than recommend a particular diet, ITP recommends conscious eating – being conscious, or mindful, of what you are feeding your body, as well as how you feel during as well as after you have eaten it. The term mindfulness is defined by meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally”. Mindful, or conscious, eating is being purposefully present and paying attention, not only to what you eat, but to your experience of the food while you are eating it, noticing the smells, colors, textures and flavors. Our bodies are wise, and if we pay attention, they will let us know if they are happy with what we have given them. Notice if you feel bloated or sluggish after you eat, or if you have brain fog. Those are signs of an unhappy body. Many of us eat while we are watching tv or reading our email and barely even taste our food. If we eat unconsciously, we may eat more than we intended to, and being distracted with other things, we may not even realize that what we ate didn't make us feel that great. Slowing down to really taste, as well as chew our food thoroughly, can help the food digest better, bring a deeper appreciation of what we are eating, more satisfaction, and maybe even an awareness that, Yuck! Why am I eating that? Without judging yourself for eating that awful thing, you can choose to not eat that again.

Mindful eating is not just a fringe thing for meditators. Research has shown that mindful eating can help with weight loss as well as encouraging more healthy eating habits, and it is being promoted by the likes of The National Institutes of Health and Harvard Medical School.

Here are some Harvard's tips:

Experts suggest starting gradually with mindful eating, eating one meal a day or week in a slower, more attentive manner. *(But hey, if you want to dive in and go for it at every meal, why not? Remember, no judgement. CG)*

- Set your kitchen timer to 20 minutes and take that time to eat a normal-sized meal.
- Try eating with your non-dominant hand; if you're a righty, hold your fork in your left hand when lifting food to your mouth.
- Use chopsticks if you don't normally use them.
- Eat silently for five minutes, thinking about what it took to produce that meal, from the sun's rays to the farmer to the grocer to the cook. *(I would add that this is the perfect time to send gratitude to all involved)*
- Take small bites and chew well.
- Before opening the fridge or cabinet, take a breath and ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" You may choose to do something else, like reading or going on a short walk.¹

That last point is worth spending a little more time on, especially given the stress that we are currently experiencing due to the restrictions we are under and the deprivation we feel due to the coronavirus, COVID 19. It is natural to look for pleasure wherever we can find it when so many of our normal activities have been curtailed, like gatherings with friends and family, concerts, our workouts at the gym, so many things that we have relied upon for relaxation and enjoyment. Many of us are at home more now, in close proximity to our refrigerator and kitchen cupboards. We may be tempted to open them up because we are stressed or nervous or bored than rather being actually hungry. Sometimes we are thirsty but don't realize it. If you do choose to have a snack, savor it. Eat it mindfully, consciously. Be aware of its color, texture and taste and eat it slowly. Enjoy it.

I would add one more tip to their list:

Try to avoid reading, watching tv or working while you eat so you can pay more attention to your food. Your body will thank you. Okay, once and awhile is totally fine.

Even though ITP doesn't suggest any particular way of eating, there is a broad consensus that the closer you eat to a food's natural state the better. I don't think we can go wrong following author Michael Pollan's advice: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants"². Eat food, meaning real food, as minimally processed as possible. This way of eating is good for you and good for the environment. If you do decide to eat something less healthy once and awhile, do it consciously, without guilt, and enjoy it to the fullest. It is what you consume the majority of the time that makes the difference.

It is worth considering here that, while preparing food, the way you feel may have influence on the energy of the food, which can then be felt in subtle or not so subtle ways by those who eat it. The 1992 Mexican film *Like Water for Chocolate* demonstrates this well. A motto I like related to this idea is, "Food made with love nourishes the soul."

One last thought on this. It is a good idea to practice conscious shopping as well, buying only what we

can use in order to avoid wasting food. The USDA estimates that a shocking amount of food grown in the United States, 30-40%, is lost, either on the farm, at retail outlets or at home. When you dispose of food scraps or spoiled food, instead of sending it to the landfill, consider composting. There are many small home units available that will turn your scraps into compost for your houseplants or garden. Some cities provide composting services or support, so you can check that out in your area. In doing this we consider the whole food cycle, from beginning to end.

So, in the end, we return to simple - just commit yourself to being as conscious as you can while eating, and taking it further, being conscious not just of eating but of everything that you do. Chances are you will enjoy life more when you are there for it!

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/mindful-eating> and <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5556586/>

² See Michael Pollan's works such as *In Defense of Food*, 2008