

CHAPTER

1

Sustainable Living, Mindful Eating



Courtesy of Maria Napoli

*Simple beauty
The silence of gazing
Slowing chewing my food
No rush
My body feels gratitude
Savoring each and every bite
On this mindful eating journey
(Napoli)*

"Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food."
—Hippocrates (460–530 B.C.)

The father of modern medicine scribed these words nearly 2,500 years ago. The words of Hippocrates have been used to communicate how a connection with nature through a relationship with food can provide health benefits far beyond any other type of "prescription". Seen through this lens, eating is an intimate way to extract life-sustaining energy from Mother Nature. The primary, ongoing way that we consciously or unconsciously relate to nature is through our food. Through the act of food consumption (eating), we assimilate the forces of nature, stored in our food (1). This transformation of stored energy into released energy providing fuel for our bodies is magical, amazing, and powerful!

Energy passes from one animal to another as they eat plants or one another. This flow of energy from one living thing to another is called a food chain or a food web (2). When we think of energy exchanges in this way, we can see the interconnections we have to plants and animals, and to the energy of nature itself. When we allow ourselves to see all living beings as part of an interconnected web, we can enhance and move toward a changed view of food and the act of eating. Nourishment becomes much more than just about what you and your family eats for dinner; it is also about the ripples that result from the need to eat, our connections to the entire world, and all inhabitants. We connect as links in the enormous food chain, and our lives depend upon our love and gratitude for all other links (3). What we eat is



linked to our awareness, and our food choices show our harmony (or disharmony) with our communities, the world, and ourselves.

DISCONNECTION AND DISHARMONY: MODERN AILMENTS?

All humans have an intrinsic, organic relationship with these fundamental elements, and disease is an outgrowth of a deficiency of one or more of them. Obesity, diabetes, and other conditions caused by poor diet and sedentary lifestyle is one consequence of disconnection to nature and food energetics.

There is a crisis of health underway which affects the health, happiness, and vitality of millions of men, women, and, sadly, children in the United States. Instead of national action to face these threats, there has been thunderous inaction, and even surrender to a powerful food industry (4). The obesity problem has been labeled by national agencies as "epidemic" (5). Within the United States, the current percentage of Americans considered overweight or obese is more than 68% (6). The good news is the numbers have plateaued—the bad news is the bigger the number, the harder it becomes mathematically to continue to climb. If things continue as they are, we face a staggering financial burden due to obesity-related illnesses.



In the United States, obesity now contributes more to chronic illness and health care costs than does smoking (7,8).

National Problem Becomes Personal Frustration

Although we have wide awareness of the national problem of obesity, we can forget the personal frustration and suffering caused from being overweight in the United States. It seems impossible to lose weight with dismal statistics showing that 95% of all dieting attempts result in abandonment with dieters regaining lost weight plus more from the starting point of the diet (9). Everywhere we turn there is evidence of both the conditions and the consequences of a weight-focused culture. Experts call the toxicity of our modern culture "obesogenic" (10). Societal forces that drive us to eat more and move less surround us. Biologically, this results in weight gain, obesity, and the many health problems and consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle. Conflicting information directs us to solve the problem in many ways; blame ourselves/personal responsibility (just eat less and move more); blame the food companies (regulate and tax junk food; restrict food advertising to kids); blame the environment (the Internet, our work life, television all cause us to sit more and move less); blame food science (high-salt, high-sugar, high-fat processed foods make us eat more and gain weight); or blame the diet business (dieting leads to weight gain 95% of the time; scientific evidence fails to support any rigid diet plans work).



Lightspring/Shutterstock.com

Disordered Eating in the Land of Plenty

The obesity problem is one consequence of living in the land of plenty. Disordered eating in our culture can be overconsumption of calories, under consumption, or even a zealous fixation on eating "clean". Some react to abundance by learning about food, and falling to the other extreme in ways that are equally disordered. Experts call this unhealthy way of eating healthy orthorexia (11).

Orthorexic eating can become almost like a religion, with a position instead of a preference. People might refuse to eat "gluten", may be over focused on eating "clean" ingredients, even refusing social commitments if the "right" kind of food is not available. At the extreme, an orthorexic person might skip a cruise vacation if they don't think they'll like the food on the ship.



Bildagentur Zoonar GmbH/Shutterstock.com

The Modern Food System and Reductionism

Modern changes such as the development of the industrialized food system have changed the role of food in our lives. It has also led to changes in how we think and feel about food. Instead of contemplating the healing and nourishing properties of food and eating, the industrialized process of food production disconnects us from plants and animals. Today we consider health as just getting through

the day, making a living, or not dropping dead. We believe that good health is the absence of disease. We look at the body as disconnected parts and pieces, we see many different doctors, one for each body part (the ear doctor, the heart doctor, the orthopedic doctor, the skin doctor). When something goes wrong in the body, instead of seeing our bodies as an integrated system, we view the disease in isolation and disconnect from our whole selves. Our model of disease and health as influenced by Modern science sees smaller and smaller parts of ourselves, bits and pieces, in order to solve the puzzle of disease. Not health . . . the disease.

We have convinced ourselves that our health has nothing to do with what we eat. We spend lots of money and time buying the best toys and gadgets of top quality, and when it comes to what we eat or put in our bodies we run to the nearest fast food

restaurant because it is easy. It's convenient. We think cooking and preparing food is just too complicated and time consuming! As a consequence, we have created a separation between food and illness in our culture.

Food Energetics: Why It Matters

The process of thinking about a disease system disconnects us from the energetics and function of food. In a process known as "reductionism" we think of food as "nutrients"—this much protein, this much iron, and this much fiber—small units of food that come from science, and the laboratory (12). For thousands of years, Ancient Wisdom viewed food differently, and studied its energetic properties. Each person was seen as an individual, and with individual constitutions, each person has their own needs for certain foods. Remedies for ailments used herbs in their whole form, often steeped in water and often as one of several ingredients (13).

Food then becomes much more than fuel, it moves beyond the science and mechanics of calories, grams, and nutrients. Food energetics matches the properties and qualities of the plant or animal—the grounded nature of root vegetables, the warming or cooling qualities of different foods—as nutritional prescriptions to help balance the body.



Hein Nouwen/Shutterstock.com



Varennik/Shutterstock.com

Where
is
my mind?

MINDFULNESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

As humans, we have the innate ability to seek out and enjoy foods that promote our health. Consuming mostly plant-based foods in their "whole" form (close to their natural state) provides the ideal human diet (14). Eating a variety of vegetables, fruits, raw nuts and seeds, beans and legumes, and whole grains provides all of the nutritional needs that humans have. These whole foods, mostly plant-based prescription, are likely close to the medicine that Hippocrates pondered nearly 3,000 years ago.

"Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."
—Michael Pollan

Michael Pollan, the food philosopher of our time, brings us closer to Hippocrates with his modern description of what is the optimal diet (15). He suggests that we don't eat anything that our great grandmother wouldn't recognize; don't eat anything incapable of rotting; avoid food that has ingredients that cannot be understood or pronounced, or has more than five ingredients; don't eat high fructose corn syrup; avoid food products that make health claims; that we shop the peripheries of supermarkets, and avoid them as much as possible; that we eat mostly plants, especially leaves; and that we remember that we are what we eat, and that we eat what we eat too. Which means it is not just what we eat, but the quality of the food we eat that matters. Energetically, it also means *how we eat* matters as

well—mindfully, in harmony with nature, aware, awake, and alive, honoring where our food came from. In short, a balanced approach that considers energetics, tastes, quality, variety, mindfulness and balance.

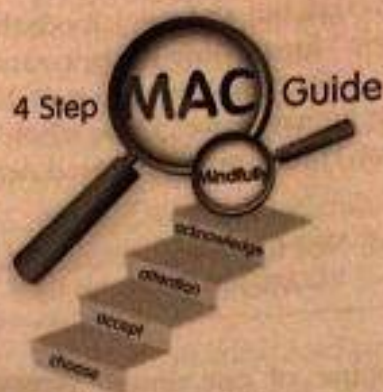
It is difficult for us to understand that food itself is good for us. We live in a world where science attempts to dissect, and then explain the "active ingredients" of food, rather than simply accept it is the whole food that has medicinal benefits. This approach, called reductionism (16), asks for the impossible, since it is simply not possible to identify all the parts, what they do, and how they work together or individually. We can, however, know that food is healing, and it is magical. Thousands of years of using food medicinally combined with current scientific research demonstrate over and over that it is a whole food, mostly plant-based diet that heals, not the dissected parts.

"Nature does a far better job of arranging for proper biological functioning than we like to admit, and once we accept the ability of the body's infinitely complex system to attain and maintain health, then the one-size fits all philosophy begins to make sense (17)."



We can imagine "one size" being whole, plant-based foods, with an almost infinite number and variety of parts acting synergistically as one, with "fits all" meaning food has the ability to act to promote and preserve health, and help heal multiple illnesses. This is a useful and powerful way to view food and its energetics, which aligns Ancient Wisdom and what we know about plants with the benefits of a whole foods mostly plant-based diet. Assimilation takes the energy that is locked up in food and releases it. This transformed energetics from plants and animals becomes the fuel that sustains our own lives and we become nourished through this natural and magical process. Each bite, if we choose to consciously acknowledge the transformation, can bring us closer to our loving connection with Mother Nature.

Sustainable Living, Mindful Eating: The Cure for What Ails Us?



The practice of mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment, without judgment. Mindfulness offers the cultivated ability to notice thoughts, habits of mind, and habits of body in ways that allow us to see what is happening right in front of us. Stopping allows us to rest the body and the mind. Looking deeply inside provides insight into our current situation. Once we notice, we can attempt the process of change in ways that are aligned with our values, circumstances, and connections to all living beings. Rather than blaming external forces and conditions for our inability to change our weight, we begin to cultivate positive habits of mind leading to sustainable eating and life patterns providing true nourishment (18).

"The federal committee responsible for nutrition guidelines is calling for the adoption of 'plant-based' diets, taxes on dessert, trained obesity 'interventionists' at worksites, and electronic monitoring of how long Americans sit in front of the television (19)."

Sustainable Living, Mindful Eating: A Journey Back Home

We're about to embark on a journey together that may challenge your assumptions about food, the act of eating, and its importance. Be curious, gentle, and kind with yourself as you travel. It can be difficult to examine our assumptions and givens about the personal act of food and eating. We can carry with us on our journey the practice of mindfulness and its tremendous benefits. You'll be invited to pause and breathe as you read this book, noticing your body, thoughts, and qualities of breath. You'll be introduced to mindful nutrition tips in the form of recipes, mindful eating activities, and other simple practices designed to help you reflect and pause. You'll learn about different aspects of our food system that many consider broken and unsustainable (20). Some of this information will be new and may be troubling; it is powerful stuff. Remember to be kind, curious, and gentle with your journey. Feel your body and your breath as you embark on your travels, always remembering that knowing is part of mindfulness: once we notice, we have the opportunity to change.

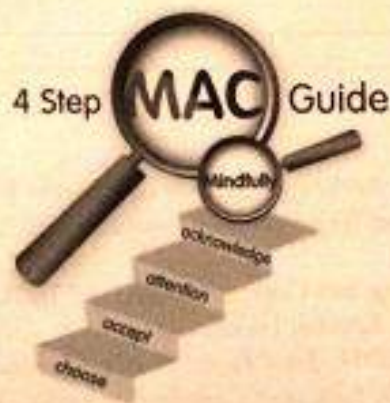
MINDFUL EATING: THE MODERN PRESCRIPTION

High-speed living moves much of our eating to autopilot. We do not pay attention to how much food is served or how much we've eaten, what our food tastes like, what it's made from, or even if we like it! This means we've lost touch with cues reflecting hunger or fullness. Mindlessly eating meal after meal, snack after snack, we fall victim to portion distortion, poor food quality, and mindless munching. We think little about the quality or quantity of our food. We pop processed "food like substances" into our microwaves, dashing from one activity to another.

Cues for mindless eating reach beyond super-sized containers and the sizes of our plates. Our food environment through advertising and endless exposure encourages fast food consumption of poor quality food, purchasing highly processed "dead" food from the supermarkets and 24-hour snacking. All of these cues combined with our hectic lifestyles encourage mindless eating without regard for what our bodies truly need.

Practicing mindfulness can help us notice the external cues that keep us trapped in patterns of unsustainable mindless eating. Instead, through paying attention and noticing with curiosity, we can find new ways of nourishment through healthful foods that are sustainable, delicious, and truly satisfying. The practice of eating mindfully provides endless opportunities for self-exploration, discovery, and ultimately joy as we reconnect to the nourishing powers and energetics of plants and their special healing energetics.

Let's Reflect on the Mindful MAC FOUR STEP Guide



BEGIN YOUR MINDFUL EATING AND DRINKING EXPERIENCE USING THE MAC GUIDE
SAVORING AND NOTICING EACH STEP FROM BEGINNING TO END

