

# Mindfulness – Tools to Assist the Registered Dietitian in Working with Clients who have Eating Disorders

## Scenario

*Mindfulness is defined as maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. It also means being aware of these thoughts and feelings without passing judgment on oneself. Its origins come from a Buddhist meditation practice and philosophy. Mindfulness is considered an effective practice with or without the religious context of Buddhism. The objective of mindfulness is to live a life that is more internally centered, meaningful, and with deeper inner peace by using its practices.*

## Application to Eating Disorder Treatment

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and DBT are methods of treatment for eating disorders. CBT targets thoughts and emotions behind why the client is using eating disorder behaviors. Mindfulness is a key feature of DBT. There is a growing body of research that indicates DBT is an effective treatment option for eating disorders.<sup>7</sup>

- Randomized controlled trials have tested the efficacy of DBT for the treatment of binge eating disorder (BED) featuring mindfulness, emotion regulation, and distress tolerance training.<sup>1</sup>
- Application of mindfulness may differ based on the type of eating disorders and the age of the patient. Those with BED should be familiarized with it early on in the recovery process. This helps to restore the relationship and negative emotions the client has with food and eating.
- Creating a new disposition towards eating can enhance cognitive flexibility, which in turn, will lower the need to control or change surroundings. Mindful-related exercises require continuous effort and practice that will lead to more acceptance and sincere appreciation.<sup>5</sup>

## Benefits of Mindfulness Practices in Eating Disorders:

- Healing begins when mindfulness is void of self-judgment and judgment of others. Making this separation benefits the client and brings a more positive body image outlook to the forefront.
- Being present and focused in the moment means not thinking about the future or the past – just what’s happening right now. It is a powerful tool to leave the guilt in the past and dissipate the anxiety of the future.
- Patients learn to trust and understand the messages given by their body and begin to focus on inner qualities instead of physical experience.
- Individuals can appreciate mealtime by experiencing and being intuitive to all the parts of their food by observing taste, texture, and smell, while taking time to appreciate the dining experience.



## Tips to Take With You

Further studies are warranted to understand how mindful yoga and meditation can affect the cerebral cortex in order to potentially diminish the impulsivity along with irrational thoughts and behaviors involved in eating disorders.

## Contact SCAN

[www.scandpg.org](http://www.scandpg.org)  
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Written by SCAN registered dietitian nutritionists (RDN) to provide nutrition guidance. The key to optimal meal planning is individualization. For personalized nutrition plans contact a SCAN sports dietitian by accessing “Find a SCAN Dietitian” at [www.scandpg.org](http://www.scandpg.org)

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## Current Research on Mindfulness and its Benefits:

- Many eating disorders coexist with other mental disorders such as depression. Studies have discovered that mindfulness can bring out positive emotions and suppress negative emotions and stress.<sup>6</sup>
- Practicing mindfulness meditation can boost the immune system and help fight off illness.<sup>3</sup>
- Mindfulness helps focus, which can combat distractions and improve attention.<sup>6</sup>
- A study that looked at stress reduction showed that mindfulness-based therapy may be useful in altering affective and cognitive processes that underlie multiple clinical issues.<sup>4</sup>
- Mindfulness teaches patients to use alternatives to avoidant-based coping and recognize underlying reasons for maladaptive behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

## Practice Tools of Mindfulness for Clients with Eating Disorders:

- Set an intention before mealtime where the client focuses on something specific i.e., flavor, texture, or eating slowly.
- Put the fork down between bites to naturally slow down the consumption process. This gives the client time to really savor what they are eating.
- Learn hunger cues and how to abide by them. Check levels of fullness at the start of the meal, in the middle, and afterwards.
- Allow space for conversation or journaling about the emotions that may come up during mealtime. A food and feelings log is a great tool to use for documentation.

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