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Savor the moment

Zeroing in on your meal can help you avoid unnecessary holiday calories

By Erin Hanafy

“Hey, everybody, it’s holiday time! Temptation is everywhere! To avoid becoming more stuffed than the turkey, we’ll tell you how you can survive without becoming so bloated that your spouse leaves you, the neighborhood kids mock you and you become a lumpy, enormous, flatulent shut-in ...”

That’s the annual holiday reminder, of course. But all the anticipation and worry about what you might eat in a single 24-hour period could actually amplify the

effects of a gluttonous feast.

Excessive stress activates the body’s alarm system — the “fight or flight” response — and triggers the adrenal glands to release hormones such as cortisol, which is associated with obesity, heart disease and depression.

Cortisol is a cruel multitasker — it also slows down bodily functions that are not essential in an emergency situation, such as digestion. So your overindulgence sits uncomfortably in your gut for a longer



time.

One way to avoid this cascading error is to stop focusing on calories and focus on your mindset.

This approach is called mindful eating, which sounds vaguely New Age-y, because it is associated with Eastern philosophy and the Buddhist principle of mindfulness. But it's pretty similar to the advice most moms dole out: Take smaller bites. Chew your food thoroughly. And most important, eat more slowly.

Just slowing down can cut your caloric intake significantly, according to a 2006 University of Rhode Island study. In the study, participants were given a large plate of pasta during two different visits. When they were encouraged to eat quickly, they finished in nine minutes; when they were told to slow down, they took 29 minutes — and consumed 12 percent fewer calories.

Mindful eating also stresses the pleasure of meals: fully appreciating the smell, color and texture of food, as well as the family and friends at the dinner table. Paying such close attention to the sensa-

tions surrounding the meal is thought to be another deterrent to overeating because the sensation of fullness is more acutely felt.

Best of all, if your mind is occupied with the task of trying to perceive every molecule of goodness in each buttered, gravy-covered, marshmallow-topped morsel, it is less likely to be in stress mode.

So, just for this week: Stop clicking on link bait that promises a “weird old trick” to weight loss, stop pouncing on magazines offering stars' secrets to maintaining their weight and stop watching the same stock footage of families tearing into turkey legs that every city's “Good Morning, ___!” clone uses with its annual, unnecessary warning.

Instead, skip the dread. Anticipate the pleasure of the meal, without guilt: the food, the drink, the relatives you're excited to see, the new friends who will grace your table, the new babies who have been born and the lost loved ones you'll remember together. And, by God, there will be football. ■

SWIPE DOWN FOR MORE 

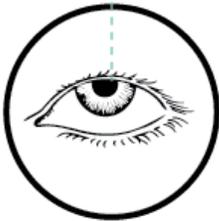
Watch what you eat

A daily five-minute practice, like this one developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn for the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, can help you avoid overeating and feel more satiated.

1. Hold a small food item in your hand — like a piece of fruit or a cracker.



2. Look at the food for about a minute — noticing the small details of its appearance.



3. Smell it for at least a minute. Observe your body's reaction.



4. Put the food in your mouth, without chewing or swallowing it. For about a minute, observe the texture and flavor on your tongue while you hold it in your mouth.

5. Begin to chew, as slowly as possible.

6. Swallow the food item, then note any lingering taste in your mouth.

7. Take note of any thoughts or feelings that arose during the exercise.