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NUTRITION SEGMENT FEBRUARY 4, 2008: MINDLESS EATING

I think we all agree that the mind plays more of a role in eating than the stomach. Mindless eating is eating food when we are not hungry. Most of us mindlessly eat throughout the day when we're not paying attention to what we're doing. And, many of us mindlessly overeat when we lose touch with our internal cues and become influenced by external cues – some of which we are not even aware.

Interesting research has been done by Cornell Professor Brian Wansink on why we eat more than we realize. He found out we overeat because of family and friends, packages and plates, names and numbers, labels and lights, colors and candles, shapes and smells, distractions and distances, cupboards and containers. And we don't even realize it!

EXTERNAL CUES THAT INFLUENCE HOW MUCH WE EAT:

LARGER PORTIONS: We eat more food when given larger portions. We tend to eat what is put in front of us whether we are hungry or not and sometimes whether it tastes good or not

Have you ever been to a restaurant and been served a huge amount of food and say to self, I will never eat all that and before long you've finished the whole plate?

SHAPE: We eat more from larger packages, bowls, and plates. Package size gives a perceptual consumption cue as to what is acceptable.

Tip: Repackage foods into smaller containers to remind yourself of smaller consumption norms. Plate smaller dinner portions in advance. Never eat from a package. Always transfer food to a plate or bowl instead of eating directly out of the pan.

VARIETY: When variety increases, people eat more. For example, when people were offered three different types of yogurt, they ate as much as 300% more than when offered only one type. Having a variety of foods available makes people think that they will enjoy the foods more.

Tip: At buffets, try not to have more than three-four different foods at the same time and definitely take small samplings of them. Avoid multiple bowls of the same food when at parties or receptions because they increase a perception of variety.

PROXIMITY: We eat more food when it's nearby, within reach and convenient, like chocolates in a clear bowl.

Tip: It's best to keep unhealthy snack foods in hard-to-reach places and carrots front and center, washed and ready. It's also best to not leave serving bowls and platters on the dinner table. Keep second servings a safe distance away.

BOTTOM LINE: It's important to realize that we make more than 200 food decisions per day, which takes a lot of effort. Help yourself out by managing your environment so it works for you rather than against you. Remember, it's easier to manage your **environment** than it is to manage **yourself** in an uncontrolled environment.

Brian Wansink was recently named executive director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. For more information, visit www.mindlesseating.com.

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