



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 8,2 (4/2014)

Mindful Conversations: The Path to Great Relationships

© Daniel Ellenberg, PhD & Judith Bell, MS

Relationships are key to feeling happy and successful in life. Yet relationships, both personal and professional, are not without challenges. It's the rare person who has not had a seemingly strong and solid romantic relationship take a sudden or slow turn south—only to end with hard feelings. Even friends of many years can have an argument that leads to a falling out. Similarly, work relationships that started out well can sour and end abruptly. Seemingly minor events can lead to problems that seem insurmountable.

While we cannot avoid all misunderstandings and problems in relationships, we can develop and master skills that maximize the possibility of creating and sustaining healthy and satisfying relationships. In this article, we address some common relational challenges and suggest a set of tried and true mindful conversation tools that will help you increase your relational skills and success. These tools will enhance your conversations whether you consider yourself to be unskillful, moderately skillful, or extremely skillful at navigating relationships.

We'll begin with an interaction between Jerry and Paul who became friends after meeting at a meditation center 5 years ago.

Greetings

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Jerry calls Paul one morning and, despite knowing better, begins questioning Paul in an accusatory tone: “Hi. Why didn’t you call me last night? You told me you would.”

Paul, having barely removed the sleep from his eyes, notices Jerry’s irritation and responds quickly, “I got caught up talking with my ex. We had something to work out and it took longer than I thought it would.”

Unimpressed with Paul’s reason, yet trying to be mindful, Jerry continues, “You could have at least texted to let me know you couldn’t talk until today.”

Paul, feeling increasingly defensive and just wanting the issue to go away and the conversation to end, retorts with irritation in his voice. “Just let it go. It’s not that big a deal.”

Jerry feels his blood pressure and voice rising and his jaw tightening even more. “Well, it is a big deal to me. I was waiting for your call.”

Paul’s heart is now racing. He feels blamed. “I had no idea you were sitting around waiting for my call. I figured you had other things to do and we would talk today.”

Jerry, losing any semblance of equanimity: “But I was waiting to hear from you. You know that my car is in the shop and I need a ride to the meditation workshop this weekend. You certainly could have been more mindful of my need to find a ride.”

Paul, feeling a bit sheepish, replies, “Actually, I didn’t know you were counting on me for a ride but I am going and I will pick you up.”

Jerry, relieved that he will have a ride, responds, “Thanks, even though I find it hard to believe that you didn’t know I was counting on you for a ride.”

Clearly, it could have been an easier, less stressful conversation. What went wrong?

1. For starters, Jerry assumes negative intent with Paul from the beginning. He barely says hello before asking his question with an accusatory tone. His tone indicates that he is clearly triggered when he calls Paul. Similarly, the syntax of “Why didn’t you...” and “You told me you would...” is a dead giveaway that he is feeling annoyed.
2. Paul notices the tone but doesn’t address his awareness of Jerry’s irritation when he gives his reason (or excuse). Paul remembers that he had said he would call Jerry and feels guilty that he hasn’t. Paul’s response addresses the content of the question rather than expressing empathy and compassion for his friend Jerry.
3. We know that Jerry’s annoyance and pain is not assuaged by Paul’s reason/excuse as evidenced by Jerry’s retort admonishing Paul that he should have at least texted.
4. Hearing blame again, Paul then attempts to dismiss and de-legitimize Jerry’s reaction with an injunction, “Just let it go.”
5. Jerry experiences Paul as saying, “You’re being petty,” which only makes the problem worse and increases his anger. Jerry’s raised voice is his way of saying to Paul, “Pay attention to what I am saying. Take my experience seriously without dismissing it. And do what you say you’re going to do.”
6. Paul becomes more defensive as Jerry paints the picture which reveals Paul’s failure to make good on his commitment and the impact that this is having on Jerry. Though Jerry hasn’t expressed it directly, it is starting to sink in that he, Paul, has let his friend down. Rather than admit and address it, he defends his position more aggressively.
7. Jerry’s inability to calm himself is directly related to his anxiety about dealing with a practical problem—getting a ride—and his desire to solidify plans for the weekend. Compounding this is Jerry’s belief (which came out as an accusation) that Paul is not being thoughtful of him.
8. Hearing Paul tell him that he’ll give him a ride and knowing that his immediate problem is solved, Jerry feels relieved yet his final comment reveals the persistence of his annoyance with his friend.

Though the problem of the ride is solved, the feelings and thoughts from the negative interaction persist. Jerry's story that Paul thinks about himself first and is not very thoughtful of others is validated. Paul's story that Jerry takes things personally and blames him a lot is also validated. Neither of them uses this experience to learn more about themselves or each other.

You've probably noticed that mishaps and misunderstandings occur frequently for some folks and for others, not so much. You can develop the skill set so that these misunderstandings happen less frequently and/or you are able to move through them more readily and gracefully when they occur.

So first, let's delve more deeply into what is really going on beneath the surface. Metaphorically speaking, people are talking about the ping pong balls on top of the table while the driving forces are the hidden bowling balls that are rolling beneath the table. People rarely talk about the bowling balls. They simply argue about the ping pong balls.



In order to learn from this experience so that we can have a more productive and easier conversation, let's take a look at the bowling balls and explore what was happening in Jerry and Paul, respectively. By examining how each of them contributed to the conversation going south, we can then look at how each of them could have participated more skillfully. Lastly, we'll do a "Take Two" and redo the conversation using a few of our principles.

Before exploring Jerry and Paul's personal bowling balls, let's understand bowling balls in general. They are the defensive reactions that grow out of the "core beliefs" we have about ourselves and other people that influence and impact our emotional reactions and behavior. These beliefs, often called "schemas" in psychology, form the invisible lens through which we perceive and interact with others. Schemas allow us to take shortcuts in interpreting the vast amount of information that we encounter constantly.

Because our schemas are designed to help us take shortcuts, they include a lot of assumptions. Just because we believe something doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. Yet we behave as if it's true. And, completely outside of our awareness, these beliefs or schemas also affect how we feel. They even contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies.

The three core beliefs that comprise our "self-concept" are significance, competence, and lovability (Schutz 1984). If, for example, we believe, even unconsciously, that we are insignificant, we will interpret events through this lens. An unreturned phone call; a colleague walking past us without a gesture of acknowledgment; not receiving an invitation to a dinner party; all of these things will filter through our unconscious belief or fear and further validate our lack of importance. If we cannot fix the bike, if we have a failed stock prediction, or if our supervisor has not given us the lead on a special project, it can trigger the "I'm incompetent" core belief. The fear or belief that "I'm not lovable" arises when we perceive that a friend, family member, or colleague rejects our ideas, preferences, or choices in some way. Really, any situation can trigger our core beliefs. Understanding our self-concept beliefs helps us make sense of the seemingly inexplicable reasons why people (including ourselves) behave as they do. This desire to understand ourselves and others is exactly why the focus on awareness has persisted over centuries in spiritual traditions, pervades the self-help literature, and is the only skill that maintains its position on the top of the list in the field of leadership development.

With a set of tools, our increased awareness can help us become more skillful at addressing or navigating around the bowling balls. The end result: we have less drama, greater peace,

more satisfaction, greater ease, and more love in our relationships.

Before presenting the skillset, let's look at a few of the principles that underlie our work. All of the principles we present here fall in the larger category of mindfulness. However, for our purposes now, we're presenting them as follows with our working definitions:

- a) Be aware: the ability to know one's self; to look internally and find images, thoughts, feelings, and sensations that give us a deeper knowledge about ourselves than we had previously
- b) Be intentional: to focus the mind on an issue, subject, or conversational theme without being sidetracked, though allowing for serendipitous associations related to the primary focus
- c) Be compassionate: to use empathy to connect with another, remembering that the other's feelings are part of the human experience with which you let yourself identify; it's being a part of humanity
- d) Be authentic: authentic responses come from your undefended self, allowing you to feel and be the most genuine aspects of yourself



- e) Be curious: to be inquisitive, to be eager to learn about the other as well as yourself; to suspend any beliefs you have that you already know the whole story

Let's look at how Jerry and Paul might have engaged in the conversation differently had they used these principles. We'll give a few examples that touch on several principles.

Had Jerry been more aware of himself, more authentic (which by definition means less defensive), and curious, he might have started the conversation by saying something like, "Hi Paul. I'm wondering what happened last night. You were going to call me and didn't, so I'm wondering what happened."

Had Paul had greater awareness, diminished his own defensiveness (thus responded authentically rather than defensively), and become curious, he might have been able to comment on the irritation he heard in Jerry's voice at the beginning by saying something like, "It sounds like you're irritated. What's up? What's bothering you?"

In both of the examples above, neither Jerry nor Paul are accusing the other or taking a rigid position.

Bringing in the principle related to compassion, the conversation could resemble the following example:

Jerry (after Paul says that he was on the phone with his ex): "Wow. Was it a difficult conversation? Did you two work out whatever was going on? I can understand that you might have forgotten to return my call if that's what was happening."

Paul (after Jerry suggests that he could at least have texted): "Hey man, I really get that you were bothered when I didn't call as I said I would. That's understandable."

And here are two examples that use the principle related to intention:

Jerry might have thought about what he wanted to accomplish during his conversation with Paul other than securing a ride. Had he thought about their five year friendship and prepared for the conversation with the intention to deepen or at least maintain their positive relationship, Jerry might have started the conversation with, "Hey Paul. You and I have been friends for five years and I consider you one of my good friends. So, I'd like to clear up

something so that it doesn't get in the way."

If Paul used more intentionality, he might have said early in the conversation, "It seems like we're both irritated with the other. Let's talk about what's going on. You're one of my good friends and I want to keep it that way."

SCHEMA

The acronym SCHEMA represents a model we developed to help our clients shift from a defensive stance and unskillful beliefs and behaviors to more authentic, skillful modes of interacting. Here is the summary description:

Self

Co-creation

Hopes

Empathy

Mental map

Action plan

Self means that we include ourselves. Usually, when we're triggered, we make the other person into the enemy and we feel victimized. We forget that we are a part of the interaction. The moment we include ourselves in the story as a participant rather than a victim, there is the possibility of change. This is particularly true if we explore how the other



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person's behavior triggered us at a self-concept level. One way to remember to include yourself in the story is to say to yourself, "Even though this other person did [x] to me, I know that I am a part of the story. What might my part be? What fears do I have about myself that might be getting triggered?"

how we contributed to the development of the situation, we can imagine that we could have a part in changing it for the better. Without this step, we continue to feel victimized, impotent, and resentful. This step does not imply equal or symmetrical contribution. It does not imply that there are no victims. However, it helps us shift out of feelings of helplessness and resentment into a sense of empowerment and the belief that we can make a positive difference. Focusing on co-creation helps mitigate the human propensity to blame and points us toward how we ourselves can contribute to a meaningful outcome or solution (Schutz 1994). One way to shift into a co-creation mindset is to ask yourself, "What could I have done differently that might have had a positive impact on the situation?" By considering what we might have done differently before, we are primed to think of what we could do differently now.

Co-creation means that we have contributed to what has occurred, even if only minimally. If we reflect on

Hopes relate to our desired outcome. By framing our hopes in a positive way we can communicate with others more mindfully. We also prime our brain for finding a good solution. Getting clear about what we hope for regarding the outcome and what we hope for regarding our own behavior during the conversation helps us navigate through the challenging moments. When we are able to imagine a positive outcome, we set the stage so that the best we hope for can be accomplished and we make it more likely to happen. However, it is important to focus on hopes for yourself rather than focusing on your hopes regarding the other person's behavior. One way to get in touch with your hopes is to ask

these questions: “How do I want this conversation to end? How do I want to feel at the end of the interaction? What is the best possible resolution I can imagine?” As Einstein said, “You are only limited by what you cannot imagine.”

Empathy allows us to imagine what it’s like to be the other person who we feel challenged by currently. This helps us gain perspective and let go of the very human tendency to take things personally and egocentrically. It opens up the field of possibilities by helping us minimize the tendency to defend by fighting, fleeing, freezing, or appeasing and to maximize the higher cortical skills of attending and befriending. The moment we feel empathy, resentment and blame dissipate. A way to catalyze your feelings of empathy is to imagine yourself as the other person and then ask, “How might I see the situation from their perspective? From their perspective, how might I feel about the situation? If I were that person, how might I feel scared or hurt?”

Mental maps help us envision desirable results and realize when we are off course during the interaction. It helps us course-correct by operating as our North Star. It works in conjunction with hopes to keep us on our path so that we can realize our hopes. Rather than



going into shame or blame when we are off course, having a strong mental map lets us be more resilient during the conversation. This makes it more likely that we will reach our goal. A great question to ask that allows you to gain clarity about your mental map is, “How would I navigate through this situation if I knew that I would be able to help us reach a good resolution? How would I navigate if I knew that success meant receiving an extremely positive reward for a beneficial outcome?”

Action plans help us gain perspective by creating small steps in the process, thereby dissipating a feeling of overwhelm or confusion. These plans provide milestones that enable us to experience small successes at each marker. If we celebrate each accomplishment, this provides fuel that motivates us to continue to a positive outcome with minimal stress. A good way to create an action plan is to ask these kinds of questions: “What is the first step? How do I diminish my defensiveness so that I can behave in the way I choose? Then, what is the next step? How can I shift from knowing to curiosity so that I can find out more about the other? Next, how do I articulate and express what I hope to accomplish in this conversation?” The answers to these kinds of questions form the beginning of your action plan.

Using the principles above and SCHEMA, let’s do a “Take Two” and a “Take Three” on the conversation between Jerry and Paul. In “Take Two” we’ll have Jerry start the conversation differently and interact differently. In “Take Three” we’ll have Jerry start the conversation with a defensive tone and Paul will respond non-defensively.

Take Two:

Jerry: “Hi Paul, I noticed that I didn’t hear back from you last night. Is anything wrong? Did something come up?”

Paul: “Oh, that’s right. I told you I was going to call. I’m sorry that I forgot. I got so caught up with my ex that I forgot everything else. Big apologies. What’s on your mind?”

Jerry: “Truth be told, I felt upset when I didn’t hear from you and I realized that I started thinking that you were blowing me off. I realize now that you weren’t. Sorry for not believing in you. That has more to do with my fears about being ignored than it has to do with you.”

Paul: “Hey, I’m really sorry I didn’t let you know. I realize I could have done it differently. At least I could have sent an email at the end of the conversation with my ex. Are we still okay? Remembering things I promise is not my strong suit. I know it’s something I have to work on. Next time I promise something, feel free to remind me. I won’t feel offended.”

Take Three:

Jerry starts the same way with an accusatory tone of voice, asking the same questions with blame implied: “Hi. Why didn’t you call me last night? You told me you would.”

Paul: “Wow, you’re right. I said I would call and didn’t. I’m so sorry. It has nothing to do with you. I got caught up with my ex. I know we were going to talk about the meditation retreat this weekend. Since your car is in the shop, do you want a ride?”

* * *

By practicing the principles of increased awareness, focused intention, greater compassion,



more authenticity and increased curiosity, you will find that you become more innovative as you navigate through mindful conversations.

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To learn more about the principles and practices that underlie mindful conversations, you can sign up for their weekly newsletter [PeRLs of Wisdom](#) and check out monthly topics at <http://rewireleadership.com/topics>.

Mindful Conversations

A Benefit Workshop for the Wellspring Institute Saturday, June 14, 2014

Your relationships, both personal and professional, are central to your success and happiness. Conversations are the lifeblood of all relationships.

We'll cover principles of mindful conversations that, when understood and practiced, lead to more joyful, fulfilling, and collaborative relationships—and greater inner peace and resilience.

Grounded in both research and practice, you'll learn effective approaches to:

- **Transform** misunderstandings and potential conflicts into greater opportunities for connecting
- **Plan** important conversations and maximize the probability of successful results
- **Apply** mindfulness and compassion to where it's often needed most: Relationships
- **Learn** a step by step process to initiate important conversations
- **Handle** circumstances in which you feel blindsided by someone initiating a conversation
- **Overcome** the negative impact of the survival brain on making relationships work

The workshop is fast-moving, hyper-focused on super effective things you can actually DO, and lots of fun. Your presenters are Judith Bell, MS, and Daniel Ellenberg, PhD, co-authors of *Lovers for Life* and principals of Rewire Leadership™ and Relationships That Work®.

This workshop will benefit the [Wellspring Institute For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#), which publishes the [Wise Brain Bulletin](#), offers all the great resources at [WiseBrain.org](#) and hosts the [Skillful Means Wiki](#) (methods for psychological and spiritual growth). Registration is \$50 and 3 CE credits are available for an additional \$20.

For a good cause, this will be a fun, informative, and useful experience that could make a huge difference in all of your relationships. Tell a friend for twice the good karma – putting the word out to others will be a wonderful contribution to the good work of the Institute!

Register online at <http://www.wisebrain.org/mindful-conversations>

Neuroplasticity

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Part 1

Mind is what the brain does.
Brain is what the mind does.
As your brain changes, your mind changes.
As your mind changes, your brain changes.
Material traces shift immaterial thought.
Immaterial thought leaves material traces.
Neurons fire, oxygen and glucose rise or fall
neurochemicals cascade and sculpt your brain
And remain
The creator becomes the creation.
The creation creates the creator.
How you feel strands the fiber of your brain:
You are transformed, forever changed.
Positive facts become positive experience.
Positive experience become positive facts.
You're captive on the carrousel of mind
You go round and round in the circle game...
regardless of awareness or your name.

Part 2

My Spiral-Up Coach gives corkscrew moves
To keep my energy in the grooves.
Mind calisthenics beef up my brain
with neurogenesis (or some other name)
In-spired by tango, this whole fandango,
Might help me find the keys I lost
(The ones I replaced at tremendous cost)
My libido needs stroking
Your name needs provoking...
What was I saying?
Oh yes, why I'm here?
Will you rub my back my dear?
I come here if I recall the day
Or, if my son is going this way.
Pay attention? Okay, Alright
Needn't get so damn up tight!
I do yoga so I won't fall ova
My nails need a polish; My hair is a mess.
Why I'm here is anyone's guess...

The Gift of Attuned Eating

© Judith Matz, LCSW

Attunement means “to bring into harmony” and bringing harmony into your relationship with food allows you to experience the nourishment and joy of eating that is your birthright. Becoming an attuned eater – honoring your internal, physical signals to guide you in deciding when, what, and how much to eat – is a transformative process that enables you to trust your inner wisdom as you take care of your needs both at the kitchen table and out in the world. In fact, attuned eating leads to attuned living.

In his book *Mindsight*, Dan Siegel describes mental health as a function of integration, in contrast to states of rigidity or chaos (or both) that characterize the symptoms of disorders listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, which is used by mental health professionals to diagnose various disorders. This framework aptly captures the struggles of people who are caught in the rigidity of dieting or preoccupied with “healthy” eating on the one hand and/or experiencing the chaos of overeating or bingeing on the other hand. Attuned eating represents the integration that is possible as people learn to tune in and honor their natural cues for hunger and satiety.

Take a moment to ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you know when you are hungry?
- Do you eat when you are hungry?
- Do you eat what you are hungry for?
- Do you stop when you are full?

To the extent you answered “yes” to these questions, you’re in tune with your body’s natural hunger signals. To the extent that you replied “no” to these statements, you may be out of touch with your true hunger needs. Many people are disconnected from their natural hunger and, instead, try to follow external rules for eating that can either become overly

rigid and/or lead to out of control eating as they break through their food restrictions. Attuned eating offers a balanced, flexible approach to eating.

Attuned eating, also referred to as intuitive eating, guides you as you decide when, what and how much to eat; while it encompasses mindful eating, attuned eating offers a broader framework to cultivate a healthy and peaceful relationship with food. For some people, attuned eating is a powerful way to heal a disordered relationship with food, while for others, simply becoming more aware of hunger and satiety leads to a more satisfying relationship with food.

The Steps of Attuned Eating

Identifying Physical Hunger

The first step in the process of attuned eating is to identify your physical hunger. When I ask my workshop participants, “How do you know when you’re physically hungry?” common responses include: headache, fatigue, growling stomach, irritability, emptiness,



weakness, shakiness, gnawing, and light-headedness. All of these responses encompass physical sensations, and recognizing these sensations is essential in your ability to move in the direction of attuned eating. Symptoms such as headaches, weakness, shakiness, irritability and light-headedness indicate that you've waited too long to eat – these sensations are physically uncomfortable. While a growling stomach can indicate physical hunger, stomachs can growl at other times, such as during digestion. Therefore, tuning into a gnawing or empty sensation offers a more accurate cue for identifying physical hunger.

If you have lost touch with your physical hunger, you may find that by the time you notice it you're already ravenous. Unfortunately, once you become that hungry you're at high risk for overeating; you are much more likely to eat whatever is available and to eat more food than you need. However, as you consistently ask yourself, "Am I hungry?" you'll become better able to recognize these signals so that you can honor your body's needs.

The Hunger Scale can help you pay more attention to the different levels of hunger and fullness that you experience. Whether you have become completely disconnected from your physical hunger – or you are interested in increasing your attunement – this scale offers a tool to expand your ability to notice internal states. You may also find it useful to assign numbers to the Hunger Scale, so that 1 means "starving," 5 means "not hungry/not full," and 9 means "stuffed." Ideally, you would stay in the range of about 3 to 7 so that you don't become too hungry or overfull. At the same time, these numbers should not be turned into a new set of rules where you judge yourself as "good" because you ate at a 3, or "bad" because you ate to a 9. Rather, the Hunger Scale offers guidelines on your journey to become an attuned eater.

Hunger Scale

Starving

Very Hungry

Hungry

Somewhat Hungry

Not Hungry/Not Full

Somewhat Full

Full

Very Full

Stuffed

Making The Match

The next step in attuned eating is to decide what to eat when you're physically hungry. There's so much information floating around about what you should and shouldn't eat – and much of the information is contradictory. Often, foods such as fruit, salads or raw vegetables are deemed “good” while pizza, cake and ice cream are considered to be “bad.” However, when people eliminate categories of food, especially in pursuit of weight loss, they frequently experience deprivation that ultimately leads to overeating the very foods they tried to avoid. Instead, as you choose what food(s) to eat, it's important to think about what will satisfy you.

In order to understand the importance of “making the match,” think of a time when you were hungry and ate something that you were “supposed” to eat, rather than what you were truly hungry for. How did you feel? Workshop participants used words such as, “unsatisfied,” “disappointed,” “uncomfortable,” “agitated” and “deprived” to describe their experiences. Now, think of a time when you were hungry and ate exactly what you were hungry for. How did you feel? Under these circumstances participants shared that they felt, “content,” “satisfied,” “nourished,” “calm” and “good.”



Making the match means taking into consideration not only how a particular food will taste, but also how it will feel in your body. Frequently, clients I work with are so used to deciding what to eat based on external rules, that when I ask them what they are hungry for (when they are physically hungry) they really don't know the answer. If that's true for you, it's useful ask yourself a series of questions: "Do I want something hot; cold; crunchy mushy; smooth; salty; spicy; bland?" Your choice will have something to do with how the food tastes in your mouth; after all, there's no reason to consume food that doesn't taste good to you. But it's also important to think beyond taste and imagine how the food will feel in your body. Is it too light or too heavy? Can you tell if your body craves protein, fat, or carbohydrates?

The idea of truly paying attention to physical cues may be a novel idea at first, but over time you will find that as you experiment and listen to the feedback from your body, you will begin to collect attuned eating experiences. Ultimately, when it comes to making a match, your goal is to answer the following questions: "How will this food feel in my body? Is that the way I want to feel?" After all, eating a salad when you're hungry for a cookie is no more satisfying than eating a cookie when you're hungry for a salad!



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

As I mentioned earlier, attuned eating is flexible. This means if you have a particular philosophy regarding eating, such as being vegetarian or keeping kosher, you can honor these preferences by making matches that fit in within your value system. Likewise, if you have medical concerns, adjustments that take your health into consideration fit

well under the rubric of attuned eating. For example, a person with high cholesterol who notices he wants something cold, creamy, and sweet, may choose a dish of sorbet over ice cream most of the time in order to reduce the amount of saturated fat he consumes. At the same time, on a hot summer day when ice cream feels like the perfect match, he may choose that food and eat the amount needed to feel satisfied, without that decision leading to overeating. It should be noted here that when people make choices to pass up the foods they are hungry for because they want to lose weight, this action almost always backfires; you may find yourself overeating at a later time to “make up” for the deprivation and/or become preoccupied with food as you remain vigilant over your diet. On the other hand, when nutritional choices are made with the intention of supporting and nourishing your body, they are likely to feel caretaking and typically do not lead to a sense of deprivation.

Stopping When Full/Satisfied

The final step in attuned eating is knowing when to stop, which happens by paying attention to how your body feels. Most people find that they have an easier time recognizing their signals for hunger than noticing their signals for satiation. For all attuned eaters, in order for there to be a signal to stop, there needs to have been a signal to start. If you turn to food and start eating for reasons other than physical hunger, you will not be able to rely on an internal cue to stop yourself from overeating.

Likewise, matching plays an important role in the ability to stop. If you eat exactly what you are hungry for when you are hungry, you will find a moment when your stomach feels satisfied. On the other hand, if you judge food as “bad” and try to eat your way around it, you may find your stomach feeling overfull, even though you don’t feel satisfied. This occurred for Lisa as she avoided the pizza she served to a group of friends gathered at her

house and, instead, ate only the salad. She ate enough of the salad that she felt very full, but something was missing for her. After her friends were gone, she found herself having several slices of pizza, but because she was already full her body felt uncomfortable when she was done. As Lisa reflected on her experience, she realized that she would have felt better both physically and emotionally if she had let go of her judgments and stayed in tune with herself by having both the salad and pizza at the meal.

You can use the Hunger Scale provided above to stay in touch with how full you want your body to feel. One of the biggest keys to being able to stop when full is to remind yourself that when you experience physical hunger again, you will feed yourself. For example, Stacy ate lunch at her workplace knowing that she wouldn't eat again until she arrived at home six hours later. Given that long stretch of time between eating experiences, it isn't surprising that Stacy often ate past fullness at lunch in hopes that this would carry her through until dinnertime. By making the simple adjustment of keeping a variety of food with her at work – and giving herself full permission to eat again when she became hungry – Stacy was able to honor her internal cues for fullness and stop eating. This left her feeling significantly more comfortable and energetic during her afternoons.



Remember to AIM

As you work toward noticing and honoring your fullness, the steps of attunement, intention, and mindfulness (AIM) can support you in your ability to stop eating at the point of satisfaction. Attunement occurs as you notice your physical hunger and honor it by choosing the food(s) that satisfy you. Before you begin to eat, it's helpful to set an intention about how full you want to feel at the end of your eating experience. You can then visualize the food you are about to eat and think about the level of comfort you want to achieve at the end of your eating experience, as well as 15 or 20 minutes later. You may want to start with the amount of food on your plate that you imagine will satisfy you – with full permission to get more if needed. Or, if there is more on your plate than you think you will need, you can move some aside as a reminder to check in with your stomach before proceeding to eat the remainder. While at first you may find that you don't know how much food it will take to feel full without under or overeating, remember that this is a time of experimentation. The more you practice, the stronger the connection between your stomach and your brain will become.



Mindfulness describes the process of bringing awareness to an experience without judgment, distraction, or expectation, and bringing that mindfulness to the process of attuned eating deepens the pleasure of the experience as you savor the taste and sensation of food without judgment. You will also become better able to notice your satisfaction level so that you can decide to stop eating when you reach the level of fullness that feels most comfortable to you.

Taking in the Good

In our second edition of *Beyond a Shadow of a Diet: The Comprehensive Guide to Treating Binge Eating Disorder, Compulsive Eating, and Emotional Overeating*, Ellen Frankel and I describe how we've applied Rick Hanson's process of Taking in the Good™ at our workshops to help people build positive experiences with attuned eating. Frequently, people who struggle with issues of overeating use all or nothing thinking, so that a "bad" experience leads to a belief that nothing is going well in their relationship with food. As with other aspects of life, it is important to deepen and embody the positive eating experiences as they occur by following the three steps of taking in the good:

- 1) With your eyes closed, think about a time you were hungry, ate exactly what you were hungry for and stopped when you were full.
- 2) Now, savor the experience as you hold it in your attention for the next 10, 20, or 30 seconds rather than getting distracted by something else. Soften and open to the experience; let it fill your mind; give over to it in your body. The longer something is held in awareness and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons that fire and thus wire together, and the stronger the trace in implicit memory.
- 3) Intend and sense the experience seeping into you, perhaps as a warm glow spreading through your chest.

As Rick so eloquently explains, "any single instance of taking in the good will usually make just a little difference. But over time those little differences will add up, gradually weaving positive experiences into the fabric of your brain and your whole being." This is a wonderful technique for people to use on their journey to become attuned eaters.

Attuned Eating Leads to Attuned Living

Think about people who are attuned eaters. Each time they eat, they convey the important message to themselves that they have needs, and that these needs can be met in a reliable fashion. Rather than creating anxiety, eating brings the physical pleasure of satiation and the psychological satisfaction of self-care, reminiscent of an earlier time in life when others provided for them.

Now think about the internal life of people who go on diets, become obsessed with healthy eating and/or overeat. Each decision about what to eat is fraught with anxiety. They are constantly preoccupied as they struggle with guilt over eating too much, making “bad” choices, eating the “right” thing but feeling deprived, or wondering whether it’s okay to eat at all. These thoughts take up space in their minds and drain mental energy from other endeavors including work, relationships, and hobbies. Unlike attuned eaters who gain constant positive feedback from their eating experiences, disconnected eaters usually feel depleted by their preoccupation with food and/or weight. For many, their tremendous, ongoing anxiety about their eating experiences reduces their capacity to tolerate other uncomfortable emotions, resulting in feelings such as lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness.



As you accumulate attuned eating experiences, you strengthen your inner self both in the realm of eating and in other aspects of your life. Each time you eat when you're hungry, you convey to yourself that you have needs. Each time you make a match with a particular food, you communicate to yourself that your needs are important and specific. Each time you stop when you're satisfied, you let yourself know that your needs can be fulfilled. These basic but significant acts provide you with a consistent and reliable internal structure – important aspects of good caretaking. You may even find that this satisfying, calm and consistent relationship with food transfers into other areas of your life as attuned eating often leads to attuned living!

Pause for a moment and think about your level of hunger or fullness right now. If you are hungry, will you honor this need by feeding yourself? Do you have the type(s) of food available to satisfy your hunger? If you are already full, can you wait to eat until you're hungry again?

All of us need to eat many times each day, offering infinite opportunities ahead to practice and accumulate attuned eating experiences. As you bring this attunement into your life day in and day out, you're likely to discover a more peaceful and satisfying relationship with food, your body and yourself—a wonderful gift indeed!

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Judith Matz, LCSW is co-author of two books on the topics of eating and weight issues: *Beyond a Shadow of a Diet: The Comprehensive Guide to Treating Binge Eating Disorder, Compulsive Eating and Emotional Overeating* and *The Diet Survivors Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance and Self-Care*. She is the director of the Chicago Center for Overcoming Overeating, Inc. and has a private practice in Skokie, IL. Judith is a frequent presenter at local and national conferences. Descriptions of her work have appeared in the media including the *LA Times*, *Fitness*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Self, Shape*, *Today's Dietitian*, *Diabetes Self-Management*, *Psychotherapy Networker*, and *NBC News Chicago* with Nesita Kwan, and she appears in the documentary *America The Beautiful 2: The Thin Commandments*.



You can find more info at www.judithmatz.com and www.dietsurvivors.com

Skillful Means

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Acting With Intention

Purpose / Effects

Setting an intention before beginning a task or activity can help guide your actions so that they are in line with your values. Doing this can support personal growth and positively influence your actions, work, and relationships.

Method

Summary

Before you start an activity, set an intention for what you would like to embody and cultivate. Carry your intention with you throughout the day and change it as necessary.

Long Version

- Before beginning a task or activity, ask yourself what you wish to embody or cultivate during your work.
 - You can set an intention for any activity, such as meditating, going to a meeting, having dinner with your family, or having a conversation with a coworker.
 - Intentions can include practicing more self-compassion, deep listening, gratitude, and cultivating supportive relationships.
- When setting your intention, try to clarify what is most needed in that moment.
- Try to mindfully carry this intention with you as you proceed, checking in

periodically to re-align yourself if you forget.

- At the end of the day reflect on whether you remembered your intention(s) and how often you followed them.

- Look for specific instances and congratulate yourself for any times, however few or brief, that you embodied your intention and then congratulate yourself!

- Optionally, in addition to specific intentions for a certain activity, you can also set a more general intention for your day when you wake up each morning.

History

Setting an intention for your day or before an activity is a common practice in various cultures. In the Buddhist tradition, Right Intention is the second teaching in the Noble Eightfold Path. It includes committing oneself to personal growth and ethical behavior, resisting unhealthy desire, and not causing harm to oneself or others.

Cautions

Be careful not to confuse intentions with goals. Goals occur in the future, while intentions can be embodied in each moment.

Also, remember that acting according to your intentions takes time and practice. Please be kind to yourself if you do not remember your intentions. It is common for people to forget their intention shortly after forming it, and even remembering it once throughout the day is worthy of celebration.

See Also

[Identifying Personal Values](#)

[Realizing Intention](#)

[Self Affirmations to Reduce Self-Control Failure](#)

External Links

[Article by meditation teacher Phillip Moffit about intention](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.