



Mindful Calorie Counting

I usually associate calorie counting with diets and consider it very different from a mindful eating approach, but a new job has me rethinking this. I'm the dietitian for a clinical research study for weight loss, and the participants are asked to follow a reduced calorie diet. They are also tracking their fat intake, which has been a real eye-opener.

It is fascinating to see the distribution of calories and fats throughout the day and how they add up. As you might guess, eating out contributes big chunks of calories and fats to the daily total, but even the healthy foods add up.

Now that I think about it, I have periodically tracked my own calories. I didn't think of it as a diet, I just wanted to know how much I was eating and where my calories came from. It is always surprising to find how much I really eat of foods that I didn't think were part of my diet.



Occasional calorie counting can be useful when done in a mindful way. Mindfulness is about paying attention and suspending judgment, so it makes sense that calorie counting can be mindful if done in a non-judgmental way that enhances awareness. Think of it as simply gathering information. Having that information allows you to make informed choices; it increases your options.

It is not unlike developing a budget—you balance funds available with the purchase of the things that are most important to you. When you track where your money goes, feeling guilty about what you spend it on doesn't change anything. Change comes from becoming aware and making conscious choices next time. The same with tracking your calories: it allows you to spend them on your priorities.

For example, participants in the study have been alarmed to find out how many calories and fat are in a slice of Costco pizza, serving of ribs, or Chinese dinner. The way I see it, as long as they don't know, they'll continue to make the same choices without ever knowing the impact. Now they have new information which helps them choose where they want to spend their calories.

It's funny, even though I generally know which foods are high in calories and fats, the actual numbers still surprise me, especially in the context of one day's intake. Somehow I've always rationalized that my favorite Red Thai Curry is mostly vegetables; but now that I'm aware of just how much calories and fat the coconut milk adds, I think I'll choose it less often. Or eat less. Or compensate by eating less of something else. See how nice it is to have choices!

While mindful calorie counting can be a useful awareness tool, it is not enough by itself. In the study, even when participants reach their calorie and fat targets, I'm still encouraging them to spread their calories out over the whole day and to choose more fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Maintaining blood sugar levels helps avoid crashes and cravings, and makes it easier to create sustainable healthy habits.

It is still important to tune in to the senses, to get the direct experience (and enjoyment) of eating, and to notice how different foods make you feel. When you use a range of mindful eating techniques, food is nourishing and satisfying; you eat in a way that feels right in your body.

When you count calories without mindfulness, it is often a forced restriction. It is easy to be critical of your choices and to feel like a success or failure based on your food record. This approach often brings resistance and a reluctance to record the "bad" days. Yet with mindfulness that is the most helpful time to tune in your awareness—in a gentle and loving way. The goal is to learn, not to beat yourself up. Like most things, bringing an attitude of curiosity and adventure can make a big difference.

Mindful calorie counting can be one healthy habits tool in a toolbox with many useful tools. If you think you'd like to give it a try, the Calorie King book is small, packed with information and costs less than \$10.00. If you like doing things online, there are a number of free programs available, including mypyramid.com, fitday.com and sparkelpeople.com. Just remember to be mindful and to have the intention of gathering useful information so that you have more choice!

Recipes for the Month

Black Bean Salsa Salad with Strawberries

Spring Veggie Quinoa Salad

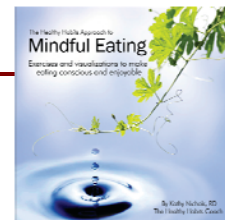
Click the links to the recipe, or find them on my blog at

www.HealthyHabitsCoach.wordpress.com.



Mindful Eating CD

I appreciate your response to the new Mindful Eating CD, it's been getting great reviews! Thank you to those of you who came to the CD release party; it was fun—especially the mindful chocolate tasting. The CD is for sale on my website.



Kathy Nichols: Life Coach & Registered Dietitian

Are you ready to stop dieting and looking for a way of eating that is sustainable, enjoyable and healthy?

Discover Wellness from the Inside Out!

