

MIND *to* MOUTH



A Busy Chick's Guide to
Mindful Mealtime Moments

HEATHER SEARS

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Breathe. Taste. Savor. Smile.

—Heather Sears

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A Day in the Life of a Mindful Busy Chick

Workday Lunch

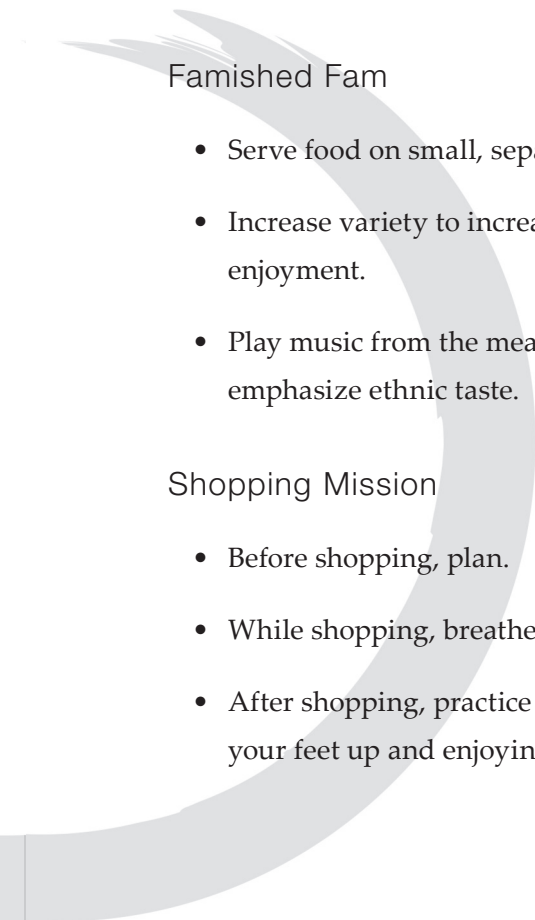
- Create a mindful food space.
- Listen to your tummy; eat at your own pace and not the pace of the office.
- Remove distractions; if in a crunch, set a timer and stay screen-free until it goes off.

In the Car

- Eat only at stoplights.
- Keep your eyes on the road.
- If kids are in the back, breathe; don't yell.

At the Bar

- With wine, chill; let your mind be still.
- Notice noise: find a quiet spot to maximize flavor.
- Lean in to the conversation, and savor.



Famished Fam

- Serve food on small, separate plates.
- Increase variety to increase attention and enjoyment.
- Play music from the meal's country of origin to emphasize ethnic taste.

Shopping Mission

- Before shopping, plan.
- While shopping, breathe.
- After shopping, practice self-kindness by putting your feet up and enjoying a rest!



Introduction

Too Busy to Swallow

Growing up, I could often be found sitting barefoot at the family table, long hair uncombed, eating fresh, homemade yogurt. My mom grew alfalfa sprouts on the counter. The tomatoes and cucumbers came from the garden. And we regularly visited the health food co-op for bulk grains and carob treats. This was way before it was trendy—back when chia seeds were used in chia pets, not puddings. My mom was a beautiful mix of earthy artist and self-educated sophistication, and she taught me what it meant to nourish myself with real food.

Her influence led me to other forms of nourishment too. In a moment of curiosity one day while I was in high school, I picked up one of my mom's books about meditation. I started attending weekly meditation

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sessions with her and developed a daily practice of my own, which helped calm my turbulent teenage thoughts and moody emotions. In those early years, I was training my attention and cultivating inner stillness late into the night.

Fast forward to today. I'm now an urban mom who works in the always-on world of digital media. Life seems to have gotten progressively denser: multichannel work demands, childcare and mommy duties, household management, trying to squeeze in a workout (often unsuccessfully), planning and prepping every meal. Rinse. Repeat. Repeat.

The modern treadmill.

For years, I rushed through day after day as I tried to check every item off my growing to-do list. This pace sped up when I was working from home with my son in preschool, intensely multitasking to get work finished before pick-up time. And then I started choking.

I would be triple-tasking as usual while eating my lunch at the counter or even while walking to the table. The food would get caught in my throat and just not go down. I would have to sit very still for what felt like an eternity, hacking away, waiting for my throat to clear so I could swallow.

This happened repeatedly. At the same time, I was making progressively less healthy, more impulsive

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and convenient food choices for my family and myself, serving a diet of microwaved mush and takeout.

I'm part country girl—tied to the land, drawn to farm-fresh food and home cooking—and part city chick, happy to embrace tech and packaged time-savers that help me get it all done. But the woes of modern life had taken over; I felt like I'd lost a part of myself. I didn't feel like me. While I still valued and craved nourishing, delicious mealtime experiences, I was focused on getting each gotta-do done and had lost the sparks of inspiration that in the past drove the creation of meals filled with flavor, warmth, and contentment: the food that restored and revived me. I was cooking and eating but not at all satisfied.

This had become a pattern, and something had to change. While I wanted to blame someone or something else, namely my cats for not intervening when they saw me making poor choices, I realized that what I needed to change was me.

So, what exactly was going on here? I knew how to make healthy food choices. My mom had given me many lessons about reading food labels: that's why only the best chocolate will do! I knew how to cook, from time spent in the family kitchen and in more formal culinary school classes, and I enjoyed it. I also loved food. I'd tasted my way around the globe, and

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had taken over 30 food-focused trips to France, Italy, and Switzerland. With all this attention to the subject, I *thought* I was self-aware. But I was doing none of the things I knew to do.

So, I started observing and asking questions. I watched my head and heart and behavior in the context of mealtimes and I began researching. I looked into societal trends, our eating environment, and food marketing.

I harkened back to my university days as an Asian Studies major and dug into ancient books about meditation and mindfulness; reviewed food psychology and gastrophysics research; and interviewed corporate executives, chefs, and mindfulness experts. I tapped into my professional marketing knowledge and existing meditation practice. I drank a lot of wine and coffee while discussing the topic with girlfriends. They were facing similar challenges.

This book shares my journey—my struggles and my questions, my discoveries, and the solution that worked for me, one based on ancient wisdom combined with modern data, and grounded in fun, practical ideas for how you can apply it within your active life. Let's face it: our lives don't slow down just because we start choking or need to lose weight or want more zen during dinnertime. But as busy as we are, we can still make

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changes that allow us to start nourishing ourselves again, or maybe even for the first time.

And I've learned that it begins with being mindful.

Mindfulness brings so many benefits, and it's simple once we know how to do it and start to notice differences, pay attention to new things, and get interested in what's around us. In the pages ahead, I'll give you tips on how to do this, and share interesting data about environmental triggers, mental blind spots, and contextual influences, all of which will help you start noticing things you may have overlooked before. This will help you begin to create great meals with intention.

After reading, practicing, and journaling your way through this book, you will have a working knowledge of mindfulness and a simple practice to get you started; you will be more aware of and equipped to respond to the forces you are up against on your mealtime journey; and you will have a deeper appreciation for yourself and your innate ability to create any mealtime outcome you desire.

That's what I experienced, and what I hope for you. This exploration has been a gift, and I want to share it. And also, because through this process, I discovered how many subliminal influences we must contend with. We need presence of mind if we are to make

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healthy choices regarding food and make our experiences with the food we eat satisfyingly our own.

To get there, I promise you won't need to pull out your old college textbooks or even go to a yoga studio (unless you want to). These pages draw upon my research, interviews, and decades-long practice of mindfulness and meditation, and put it all together in a way you can use, starting right now.

Here are three key takeaways:

It's them. It's me. If not now, when?

It's them. There are a number of surprising, practically invisible, coming-from-all-directions external influences and mixed messages that impact our mealtime behavior and enjoyment. These stem from many things, including environmental sources and the use of digital devices.

It's me. We experience many nonlinear and transient internal moments of assessment, intent, and decision on our journey to mealtime outcomes. Our minds create our meal experiences, and it starts way before the first bite. We have assumptions and habits that drive our actions and direct our attention. Our attitudes are trained to be expectant and impulsive these days.

If not now, when? We must practice mindfulness in real time. Meditation is very helpful, but it's not the main event—each moment presents an opportunity to

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create our experience if we are interested enough to notice. While it takes a little nudge to your attention to remember to be present in the moment, it is not difficult. It is a skill that can be easily learned, and success can be tasted immediately.

All this led me to the realization that conscious, mindful micro-moments while on my food-consumption journey were the answer to my problems. *How* we plan, shop, and prepare our meals greatly impacts what we put in our mouths. Our state of being during the many moments of our journey can make the difference between a rushed, crappy meal that we don't even notice we are eating and a wholesome, nourishing, tasty meal that was prepared efficiently and with grace.

Luckily, this pivot in approach is not one more thing to *do*. Because seriously, who has more time in the day? It's an inner shift.

Once I made this shift to a more mindful state of being, I noticed changes that brought surprising but pleasant results: I have more time, joy, space for kindness, and more money in my pocket. I have less anxiety, and I dropped excess weight.

I saved time by reshaping my attitude and approach to planning meals and shopping, by using digital technology to support my needs, and by developing

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a conscious relationship with my phone, email inbox, and social media accounts. I stopped compulsively checking all digital channels, which has given me at least 50 hours back daily. Okay, maybe not 50, but it feels like 50!

The joy I experience during mealtime has increased because I consciously appreciate my surroundings and actually taste my food, even on those rare occasions when I eat with my phone nearby. It's still a process, and it's important to recognize that life happens, and we won't always be 100 percent present. As I became more aware of the food I was eating and its various tastes and textures, I developed new preferences in coffee, water, apples, chocolate, and pizza. And, I can now tell you exactly how I like my oatmeal prepared. I have also identified a few foods that don't suit me anymore.

More joy led to more space for kindness in my heart and, hence, my meals. When I slowed down what was going on in my head, there was an immediate opening of my heart. Increased kindness to myself translated to more kindness to my family. I say yes more: to a cup of tea and piece of cake at 4:00 p.m., to my son's request to make Play-Doh fantasy worlds on the kitchen floor while I'm cooking, to eating breakfast as a picnic in front of the fireplace on cold winter days. The

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kindness and openheartedness replaced some habitual resistance and inner criticizing. Now we have more togetherness and less irritation.

And if all that wasn't enough, we spend less on food now. All the preplanning, prep, and choosing foods that better suit us reduced our takeout, delivery, and grocery expenses. When I reviewed our accounts, we decreased costs by 14–24 percent!

I lost the guilt I used to feel over our food spending, and along with it, the anxiety I used to feel when preparing meals. The sometimes grumpy predinner behavior of my family did not change—I did. And my approach to serving meals has evolved along the way. As it has changed, my son's attitude has too. He seems to complain less, and as any mom can tell you, that's a big stress relief.

I've cleansed my kitchen of clutter—and expired spices, vitamins, and almond milk. It's now a welcoming, calming space for creating mealtime experiences that satisfy everyone at our table.

Now that I'm better in touch with my feelings and sense of hunger and satisfaction, I've switched up how much and when I eat. I also switched my fitness practice because I'm more aware of what works best for me given my constraints. I dropped some weight and feel at ease, happy. Referring to a picture taken recently,

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my husband actually said that I looked like Jennifer Aniston! And while I don't believe that I look like her, I know I glow like she does because I feel great, and great shows.

Now I've got a homemade green smoothie groove goin' on, and I make many more satisfying, personalized food choices for my family and me.

I used to think I didn't have time to cook healthy meals, but now I do so weekly. And btw, I take a high-low approach to eating where I'm hands-on where it counts for me and use other options for the rest: frozen pizza alongside fresh salad with apples and pinot noir, homemade curried squash soup with store-bought naan, freshly baked healthy breakfast cookies and Starbucks coffee, premade mac and cheese with fresh-roasted chicken. Mindfulness helps me make choices I feel good about, and it helps me make these choices efficiently.

This is **A Busy Chick's** approach to mindful meal-times. It is a way of being. A practice of presence and awareness. It's designed to help you consciously reshape your choices and perspectives in real time. And it's as easy as ABC.

When I want to ground myself in mindful presence, in the Now, I do what I call an ABC check-in. You can do them too. In a check-in, we simply focus on **Attention**

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to the present moment; **Breathing**, to center the mind and move from our chattering narrative to calmly and directly experience life as it is; and **Curiosity**, which causes us to tune in to ourselves and explore our environment, to get to know what is happening in our mind, body, and heart as well as our surroundings.

I'll go into more detail about the ABC check-ins in chapter 2. Just be aware of them for now because mindfulness allows us to disrupt preprogrammed narratives and inputs and allows us to consciously choose our responses to incoming information based on new awareness.

Repeating these ABC moments many times as we plan, shop, prepare, and eat builds an intimate understanding of ourselves through our skillful observation. The repetition also builds mind muscle memory that leads to heightened awareness and conscious choices becoming natural habits over time.

So, what type of mealtime experience do you want to create, and how do you want to feel along the way to creating it? You will develop your own food groove. Each of our journeys unfolds in unique, personal ways, but we're all influenced by many of the same factors, and we can all benefit from what I've discovered.

Each moment on your journey, whether you are on the go and trying to figure out dinner or at the holiday

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table with in-laws, holds potential for lighthearted ease, profound appreciation, and great contentment. By increasing your knowledge of mealtime influencers and practicing mindful ABCs, you can enter into the present moment and taste the joy that is waiting for you.

And joy tastes great, kind of like jelly beans on a sunny day.