



Jennifer Weston

jweston@horizonshinecoaching.co.uk
+44 (0) 7515 750 737
www.horizonshinecoaching.co.uk



Weight loss from the inside-out: thoughts from a mindful eating advocate

By Jennifer Weston

With the trends in obesity on the rise within the UK and Ireland, there is much for public health authorities and health care providers to do in terms of improving the health and life expectancy of the general public. Statistics from the 2014 Health Survey in England (HSE) estimate that 61.7% of adults in the UK are classified as overweight or obese and although this trend is slowing down, it steadily continues to rise. In recent years, research and funding into weight management services has increased in some areas of the UK, however these tend to operate on a referral system and are not always accessible, leaving the general population to fend for themselves. Faced with a myriad of ever-changing and conflicting nutritional advice, it comes as no surprise that individuals continue to struggle with making changes to their lifestyles in order to improve general health. Contributing towards this confusion is a growing accessibility of processed foods with a lower nutritional value, fast food outlets and takeaway services.

In addition to this, today's work-life ethic of 'work-more and live-fast' does not lend itself well to encouraging long-term and sustainable health behaviour change. Lifestyle change is not convenient, whereas accessing external resources are much more amenable to the general

public. When it comes down to making lifestyle decisions about change, many, if not most, individuals rely on their automatic thoughts to do the work. Often this quick and convenient thinking leads to seeking out quick and convenient external resources bypassing any self-reflection on the internal mechanisms that are so vital to making long-lasting changes. As an example, a person who thinks "I need to lose weight" will next consider external ways how to lose weight and may purchase a gym membership or select a diet plan to follow. Thus not giving any consideration to their own personal and internal resources such as motivation (why do I want to lose weight?), self-efficacy (do I have the ability to make this change and make it last?), self-esteem (do I have the confidence to engage in managing my weight and am I worth it?), problem-solving ability (what will I do if I start to lose track or if I am in this situation or that situation?). For a more comprehensive list of external and internal resources see *table 1*.

This is where health care practitioners in the weight management field need to impact. By bringing awareness to the importance of changing from the inside-out through emphasising the benefits of internal resource-seeking and the effectiveness of this on health and hap-

External Resource-Seeking	Internal Resource-Seeking
Finding and following nutritional advice	Reflecting on own motivation
Starting a diet plan/calorie-counting	Examining and understanding current eating habits and behaviours
Restricting food intake/purging	Assessing impact of mood on consuming food
Purchasing a gym membership	Using own senses to assess level of hunger
Purchasing exercise equipment for the home	Allowing physical sensations to guide choices
Engaging in a weight loss programme	Finding pleasure in food and exercise
Joining a weight loss community group	Cultivating gratitude and self-compassion

Table 1. External and internal resource seeking behaviours in weight management

piness. One way in which this can be achieved is by raising the profile of mindful eating in the form of psychoeducation and training.

What is mindful eating and what are the benefits?

Mindfulness or mindful meditation as it is otherwise known has been defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as, "paying attention, in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally." This involves intentionally re-focusing one's mind onto the very moment one finds their self in, leaving any judgement aside for that moment including any self-criticising thoughts. Attention is purposefully placed on what is going on inside the mind and body and what is happening in the immediate environment, therefore awareness is brought to thoughts and bodily sensations including physical sensations and external senses such as sounds and smells. In applying mindfulness to eating and drinking, intentional focus is placed on all aspects of consuming food:- purchasing items, food preparation, cooking/baking, plating up food and consuming food. Throughout this whole process attention is given to our thoughts and emotions via a variety of strategies including guided mediation and imagery

exercises. Awareness is also cultivated to bring an understanding to eating behaviours and habits therefore food is not always present in practicing the mindful eating approach. A recent review of mindfulness in eating behaviours details the mechanisms by which weight regulation can be achieved through this approach and therefore will be broken down in this article. See *Box 1 (next page)* to see how mindful eating works.

There is a wealth of empirical research which shows the effectiveness of mindful eating interventions or programmes on weight regulation in comparison to a variety of control groups including dieting and no treatment controls. However there tends to little in the way of long-term follow up and this is an area of research which needs to be addressed.

Challenges in promoting this approach to the wider public

With mindful meditation interventions for health conditions and mental health issues becoming more salient within healthcare research and services, the general public are quickly becoming more aware of the benefits of practicing mindfulness. However there continues to