



Mindful Eating and Weight Loss

Hosts: Rebecca Gillett, MS OTR/L, and Julie Eller

Guest: Jennifer Daubenmier, PhD

Paying attention to how you eat, not just what you eat, is a key part of managing arthritis. But gaining control over mindless munching and comfort eating can be difficult during stressful times, and even more so when you're also dealing with a chronic disease.

In this episode, our guest expert will guide us through how a mindful approach to eating can help us manage our weight and stick to a healthy, balanced diet, without all the gimmicks and weight-loss trends. You'll also learn strategies to help you cultivate a healthy relationship with your body and food to help you achieve weight loss and nutrition goals for your arthritis management.

Jennifer Daubenmier is a PhD and associate professor from the wholistic health studies program at San Francisco State University. She received her doctorate in social psychology with an interest in Buddhist psychology at University of California, Berkeley and conducts clinical trial research on the impact of Eastern mind/body healing practices, including meditation, mindful eating and yoga on psychological well-being and health outcomes. Her research was featured in Emmy-nominated HBO documentary film series on obesity, *The Weight of a Nation*, along with numerous other news outlets and magazines and scientific journals.

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Transcript: Mindful Eating and Weight Loss

PODCAST OPEN

Welcome to Live Yes! With Arthritis, from the Arthritis Foundation. You may have arthritis, but it doesn't have you. Here, you'll learn things that can help you improve your life and turn No into Yes. This podcast is for the growing community of people like you who really care about conquering arthritis once and for all. Our hosts are arthritis patients Rebecca and Julie, and they are asking the questions you want answers to. Listen in.

Rebecca Gillett:

Welcome to the Live Yes! With Arthritis podcast. I'm Rebecca, an occupational therapist living with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

Julie Eller:

And I'm Julie, a JA patient who's passionate about making sure all patients have a voice.

MUSIC BRIDGE

Rebecca:

Thanks for joining us on this episode of the Live Yes with Arthritis Podcast. Today we are talking about mindful eating and weight loss and how that might be able to help us manage our arthritis. Eating and weight loss is always something that we talk about a lot when it comes to managing arthritis and it's not easy. We all know that.

Julie:

That's right. And I think one of the things I like so much about today's topic is that mindful eating is not a new diet with a lot of rules. It's really just a way to change how you think about food.

Rebecca:

Yeah. It's another way to tune into your body and just be more aware of the things that you do. And in this topic, specifically, the things that you eat and how you eat it and when you eat it. And thinking about it a little bit more, more awareness to help us manage our arthritis.

Julie:

We are so excited to have Jennifer Daubenmeier, a PhD and associate professor from the wholistic health studies program at San Francisco State University, joining us on our podcast today. Prior to her tenure at San Francisco State, she was an assistant professor at the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. She received her doctorate in social psychology with an interest in Buddhist psychology at University of California, Berkeley. She conducts



clinical trial research on the impact of Eastern mind/body healing practices, including meditation, mindful eating and yoga on psychological well-being and health outcomes. Her research was featured in Emmy-nominated HBO documentary film series on obesity, *The Weight of a Nation*, along with numerous other news outlets and magazines and scientific journals.

We are so excited to have her here today! Welcome, Dr. Daubenmeier.

Dr. Jennifer Daubenmie:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Julie:

To kick us off, do you mind just defining for us what mindful eating is and how we can think about it?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Mindfulness often is described in the scientific literature as paying attention with intention. So, on purpose, to our ongoing, present-moment experience in a non-judgmental way. Without that kind of running commentary that we have where we're kind of judging everything that we see as it's happening. An open-minded curiosity towards whatever's in our field of awareness.

Julie:

That's a really beautiful concept and a difficult one for me. I am very much go, go, go. I live in a city. I love that kind of city busy lifestyle. So, mindfulness is a task that can be difficult for me. How do I apply it when it comes to mindful eating?

Dr. Daubenmier:

When it comes to eating, you know, eating is such a visual feast experience. If we bring our senses to the experience. Just noticing the visual colors, the shapes, the textures of the food. Noticing our reactions to looking at the food, our anticipation of desire or pleasure. Noticing the taste, the flavors, as we can. Even the sounds of the food. And our actual experience of eating and how it's impacting us in terms of our own fullness, satiety, pleasure, the satisfaction with the food. So, any awareness you can bring to the foods in the process of eating could constitute mindful eating.

Rebecca:

That's a hard concept, because one of the things you said in describing what mindfulness is: It's without judgment. And I feel like a lot of times when you talk about eating, we either are judging ourselves, or we feel like others around us are judging us. So, how do you mindfully eat? A lot of us do it, right? We comfort eat. And when you look at chronic pain, we emotional stress eat. How do you mindfully eat without judging yourself in that process?

Dr. Daubenmier:

I think it's helpful to understand a little bit about what we know about eating in our culture. In our time and place, in our bodies. Our bodies evolved to crave sugary foods, high-caloric foods, especially



under times of stress, as a way to replenish the fuel for our body. And so, our body also was designed to really conserve calories. It's a balancing act? It's not to say never stress eat, right?

Rebecca:
That's impossible.

Dr. Daubenmier:
Right. But we can learn ways to manage our stress, to acknowledge it and cope with it, and kind of getting at the roots of what's driving our hunger in some ways. And kind of being curious about that.

Rebecca:
Yeah. (laughs) I'm accused of being terrible about cravings by my son and my husband. My son actually has created it into kind of like a game show title where: "She craves it! She makes it!" He says it like he's a game show host. It's hysterical. And I always say, yeah, I'm an advertiser's dream. Or if somebody mentions a food or talks about it, and it gets in my head, I'm like, ooh, I gotta have that. And you can bet we're gonna eat that, probably within the next couple days or the next week. Are there any strategies that we can employ to kind of control that?

Dr. Daubenmier:
In mindful eating, we have a practice called surfing the urge. (laughter) Recognizing that we're gonna have cravings, and they kind of peak. There's kind of a growing sensation to them. But they're kind of temporary at the same time. And they will kind of dissipate. And so, with a mindfulness practice, we can learn to really explore those cravings in our body. What are the sensations that we're feeling? What are the images that are coming up?

And being present to those, kind of breathing with them. This is where a mindfulness practice in general is helpful to support these challenging moments when we're experiencing a craving. Kind of tuning in to what we're feeling in our mind, in our body. Breathing with it. And it'll eventually dissipate.

Julie:
Yeah. I think that one of the things I struggle with in my need for control, 'cause I have a lot of need for control when I live with a disease that is hard to control, is really being conscious of portions. And not caving to a craving. And also, you know, when I do cave, not waiting so long that when I crave something and I finally give in to it, that I overindulge in it. But instead, taking some time, it's like OK, wow, this girl really needs some chocolate. Let's have some chocolate today so that when I do finally cave into it, it's not a box of chocolates and hot chocolate and three lava cakes later, right? (laughter)

Are there some mindful eating practices that could help kind of guide that type of portion control? Craving control?

Dr. Daubenmier:



Yeah. I think this is where we can really kind of slow it down and take that one piece of chocolate at a time and really kind of savoring it. And really seeing how much we are really enjoying it. Oftentimes, people report feeling greater satisfaction with less quantity of food.

Julie:

I think that's definitely true for me. When I think about Christmastime in particular, my partner's family is from England and they love English chocolate. And we eat it in excess at Christmastime. But my favorite thing to do is just to have one square of Cadbury chocolate with a cup of tea, no sugar, just milk and English tea. And if I can do that and really focus on it, the experience, I can have a little bit of chocolate, a little bit of tea. And it's a perfect experience.

Dr. Daubenmier:

Our taste buds like a variety of different tastes. That keeps it interesting and alive. So, I think that's a really nice other strategy, to mix it with other tastes. And also I liked the way you described it. It almost felt like a ritual any in a way, you know? (laughing)

Julie:

It kind of feels that way. Yeah. (laughs) And it makes things a little bit easier. But I know that sometimes I can get into that ritual a little bit too often. And having self-compassion in those moments, when I maybe have indulged a little bit too much, is difficult. Especially because I can get into some very negative head spaces and start feeling negatively about my self-image. What strategies or coping mechanisms might you recommend?

Dr. Daubenmier:

I think first just really being able to acknowledge the judgments that we have. Sometimes, they go on unconsciously, and we're reacting to them and believing them to be true. But if we can just say, "Wow, I am really being mean to myself right now. I'm really harsh to myself." You know, would I say this to my friend? Or someone I really care about? And kind of letting that sink in. So, this practice is not a quick fix, I would say. It's like a lifetime of practice, really. An exploration.

PROMO:

Your input makes a world of difference in getting more arthritis research funding and changing policies that help those in the arthritis community. Make change happen by participating in the Live Yes! INSIGHTS survey for adults and for JA parents. Go to <https://www.arthritis.org/liveyes/insights> to get started.

Rebecca:

Oftentimes, we read about or talk about food journaling. So, if you were gonna food journal, is that another way to help work on being more mindful with your eating?

Dr. Daubenmier:



We use that technique in our studies a lot. And certainly a lot of research shows that if you keep like a food log, that helps. That monitoring helps with dietary intentions over the long term. We have a mindful food journal. And so, we're recording not just what we eat but actually how we're feeling when we're eating. I think that's a great idea.

Rebecca:

Yeah. I think about this past year. I think all of us are judging ourselves. I know I am. My COVID-19 that I gained. It's been a rough year. And we all need to, you know, be a little gentle with ourselves. That not only have a lot of us living with chronic disease or arthritis been worried about contracting COVID and becoming ill and all of the fear and unknown. Sure, you're stuck at home. Food is right there all the time.

Are there strategies that you can suggest for people to kind of be a little bit more compassionate about the tumultuous year we've had, when it comes to our weight gain or maybe loss for some if they got sick? How do we we manage that?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Figuring out what our emotional needs are, how we can really best serve ourselves during this time. If it's talking things out with our family. We're at home. Kind of recognizing what everyone's going through, realizing you're not alone. Reaching out for support is really important. And if you're wanting to make adjustments to your diet at this time, I think being very modest and kind of realistic.

Kind of letting go of this, what we call, black and white thinking, you know? Either I'm all-in or I'm all-out of whatever diet plan I'm in. And allowing some flexibility in our day to day, because it is so unpredictable and so stressful in so many ways.

Rebecca:

Yeah. I think if there's anything the pandemic has taught us is that we need to be flexible and have to adapt to things that we don't even know what we're gonna have to do, right?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Yeah. It's also a time when we are kind of homebound in a way. And so, we're kind of protected in some ways from all the multiple distractions in the outer world. This can also be an opportunity to start looking within more. Paying attention to our bodies more. How food's affecting us, especially if we have a chronic condition.

Julie:

I think a lot about weight management and arthritis. I think that's one of the main things that people hear as a first line of defense when you're starting to feel joint pain: Start thinking about losing some weight. Sometimes I hear from our community that that messaging can be overdone. Or that they got into that head space and then became overly restrictive. And their food behaviors became disordered. Can you talk a little bit about how maybe mindful eating can be a tool to help tune in?



Dr. Daubenmier:

The mainstream diet plans are very rule oriented. Right? Kind of be on this plan. Follow this regimen. And so, mindful eating allows a lot more flexibility in that process, realizing that, first of all, we're all unique. We're all very individual. And one size isn't gonna fit everyone. We're cultivating our inner wisdom. So, we can talk about the outer wisdom of what we know about nutrition and health.

And then there's our inner wisdom of how this food is making my body feel, and what I need. Giving ourselves the flexibility, and empowering ourselves, to make healthy choices within bounds. Taking in what we know from what the experts tell us and then what our body's telling us.

Julie:

I have the broad wisdom of what goes on with the arthritis community. And I have that because of this amazing volunteer and staff network at the Arthritis Foundation. But I also have this inner wisdom that says: OK, that joint, that's not exercise pain, that is some arthritis pain. And thinking about developing additional inner wisdom, that's an empowering idea. I think that we could apply that to other things, whether it's mindfulness eating, meditation or any other behavior.

Would you call mindful eating a diet? Or is it more of a thinking behavior? A strategy for living? Would you call it a diet in the same way that you would keto?

Dr. Daubenmier:

It's more of a way of eating.

Rebecca:

A lifestyle.

Dr. Daubenmier:

Yeah, than a prescription of what to eat. It's a complement to other diet plans, I would say. You could have like a mindful keto diet approach, you know? It's flexible and adaptable that way.

Rebecca:

Just being more in tune with what you are eating and why you're eating it. And how it might affect your body, too.

PROMO:

The Arthritis Foundation is always looking for new ways to inform you about the things you want to know more about. Check out our webinars — in real time or on demand. Visit <https://www.arthritis.org/events/webinars> to learn more.

Rebecca:



I know you do a lot of research, and we were hoping you could tell us a little bit more about how you would apply mindful eating to weight loss interventions based on some of the studies that you've conducted.

Dr. Daubenmier:

We have developed a 15-week program. There are other similar programs out there that people can explore. But there are some basic skills we teach in a sequential order that seem to be helpful. We start off doing like a mindful raisin exercise. So, eating, like, three raisins very slowly for 10 minutes, just to get people to understand the experience of mindful eating.

But then we start paying attention to sensations of hunger. Like how do we recognize physical hunger in our body? How do we know what that is like on a scale from one to 10? If you're a six, how do you know that? Where do you feel that in your body, or your energy or your mind? How do we differentiate that from emotional hunger, right? Or the hunger we have for dessert when we're already full from our dinner.

We're looking at these different components of eating. Then, how do we work with those foods that we really like and tend to overeat, but want to eat in a more moderate way?

We also teach people to become aware of their triggers and how to think proactively in different situations. Using the food records is an important part of the program, like a mindful food record as well. We support that with an ongoing meditation practice, too.

Julie:

Nice. All of those sound like success strategies for me. Can we talk a little bit more about what are some of those social supports that might exist? Like, how would I get started at home? And could I incorporate it into my family life? What should I do if I were to get started with mindful eating?

Dr. Daubenmier:

I think I would look for some support online. There's different resources available. There's an app that you can download called Eat Right Now. That's helpful and can provide some guided meditations. The Center for Mindful Eating has some resources as well, to help people get started. I would find a guided program or guided meditations that can guide you and start small. Start simple. Maybe let your family know that you're interested in this. And asking them what they can do to support you or not judge or make fun of you in some way.

Or maybe even want to join with you. A friend that you have. Trying it together and have a buddy that you can check in with, I think is helpful. But starting kind of really simple. Like one, you know, kind of snack or day or something. Writing, keeping a food journal, a log of your reactions coming up for you. Slowly, then maybe trying a meal, maybe breakfast. Where you feel like it can be just kind of part of your routine. I think when we are having meals with others, or outside our home, it becomes more challenging. So, kind of recognizing that.



Rebecca:

In the research that you've conducted so far, I know you've done some specific to, like, diabetes. Does the research support using a practice of mindful eating, helping people lose weight or manage diabetes or other chronic conditions?

Dr. Daubenmier:

We've done some different studies in different populations. One population of people who had obesity; a subset was at risk for diabetes. Overall, we found that mindfulness was helpful in stabilizing fasting glucose levels, which is kind of the marker for diabetes, compared to our control group, who didn't have the mindfulness training but had the regular weight loss program.

We definitely found this benefit in glucose levels. That encouraged us to integrate mindful eating into interventions to people with type 2 diabetes. Testing out different dietary approaches to diabetes. Mindful eating supports those programs. And participants really report it being very helpful and motivating when they're really needing to make big dietary changes for their health.

Rebecca:

A lot of people with arthritis often might have a comorbidity of diabetes as well. So, a two-prong approach to weight loss and managing your overall health maybe is taking that practice of more mindful eating. Is there also disparity across socio-economic ranges or cultures that you notice where mindful eating might play a bigger role in helping people manage their health?

Dr. Daubenmier:

My group has been doing some research to really address this question because a lot of studies haven't looked at mindful eating in diverse communities. And we had an opportunity to do so. And we actually found that mindful eating was really beneficial for people of lower socio-economic backgrounds and for people of color. It helped them maintain weight loss over time, a year after the program ended.

We still saw the usual disparities that we see where people of color and people from lower socio-economic groups tend to lose less weight overall. But the mindful eating helped to mitigate some of that disparity. So, this is encouraging for future research. And I think it starts to give confidence that these findings can generalize to a wide variety of populations.

Rebecca:

One other thing that I know is part of your research, too, is the stress eating and the compulsive eating. There's some research that you're doing on that and how it influences metabolic health, with a mindfulness-based weight loss intervention approach.

Dr. Daubenmier:



People differ in the degree of compulsive eating symptoms that they show. We have binge eating disorder. We actually find that people who have higher levels of compulsive eating, or tend to binge eat more frequently, really are the ones who benefit a lot from mindful eating. So, you might think the reserve might be true, right?

Rebecca:
Right.

Dr. Daubenmier:

"I've got this big problem. How can mindful eating help?" Well, it seems like mindful eating is especially helpful in working with those tendencies, where eating feels out of control. And improvements in compulsive eating is associated with greater weight loss, too.

Rebecca:

It's all so very behavioral. And I guess one thing that I think of: If I want a concrete strategy to start out practicing mindful eating, to me, since food is so visual, a lot of these diet programs and things that people wanna do, you have to count your calories.

Or you have to portion control. And I think that simple act, of portion controlling or logging your calories for this piece of food that you may or may not choose to eat, makes it a mindful experience. Would that be correct in saying?

Dr. Daubenmier:

I think yeah, it has the potential to really pay attention to your food that way. I think that's a lovely integration. So, it doesn't feel like this dry kind of mathematical process that you're doing. But it slows things down so you can relate to your food and appreciate it, you know, visually.

Rebecca:

Yeah. Versus taking your bag of chips. I put some in a bowl and eat that versus grazing. And just knocking the whole bag down before you know it. You're sitting there watching something, eating a bag of chips. And that's a perfect example of not mindfully eating. You're just taking in all those calories, not paying attention to if you're full or do you even like the taste, or are you even hungry?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Yeah. One of my colleagues, she uses the phrase of being like a gourmet chef in our approach to food. So, really, enjoying the food that you do have rather than feeling deprived.

Julie:

What I like about mindful eating is that you don't necessarily have to change the foods you eat immediately. But your relationship to how you're eating them. And kind of moving more slowly. I like that because you don't have to wait to start. You could be listening to this podcast right now and eating a power bar in the morning, and trying it in this mindful eating way. (laughter)



Dr. Daubenmier:

Exactly. Or when you're cooking. When you're shopping, too. And I think if you're really being mindful of your food, there's kind of a natural curiosity about where it came from. How it was produced and grown. And that kind of expands our appreciation of the food.

Rebecca:

Is it better for somebody who wants to look at mindful eating as a way to help with weight loss for them to start a practice of just general mindfulness for a little while before applying it to their eating habits? Would that be a better way to approach it if you're new to meditation and mindfulness?

Dr. Daubenmier:

I think it can be helpful if you're willing to give that a try. You could be doing very short, like three-minute mindfulness of breathing meditations. Just taking a couple minutes to breathe throughout the day, noticing the breath. Begin to kind of train our minds, starting to kind of rewire our brains a little bit away from constant distraction to bringing it back to the present moment. And just taking maybe 30 seconds before you eat, and just sitting there breathing for 30 seconds, checking in with how you're feeling: what your mood is, what's going on with you. And letting that help inform how you eat, what you choose to eat. If you can kind of just incorporate it ...

Rebecca:

... into your day, or the routine of what you're doing. So, is it better for somebody to just kind of start this practice out, you know, eating alone? Or within a group? Is there one way that's better to start out?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Yeah. Well, I think if you're learning, if you find a group that's offering an online class or something, I think that support is very helpful. Having a teacher, having a guide. Some of our research is showing that the teacher does matter.

I think the Eat Right Now app can fill the role of a teacher in some ways, too. Having the group support is helpful. Otherwise, I think still practicing alone is good to start. It's just a simpler environment. Less distractions. But if you have a buddy who's on board with you, doing it together and being able to share your experience, I think is helpful, too.

Julie:

I think some of the easiest ways to find buddies in our community is by checking out some of the Arthritis Foundation resources, especially our Online Community forums. We have got so many folks on there trying new things every day to help alleviate some of the symptoms of their arthritis. If you are looking for a buddy, it's a great place to post and maybe find someone who you can practice some mindful eating with from afar.



PROMO:

The Arthritis Foundation is working with researchers at Johns Hopkins University to recruit patients for an important study. It's about the impact of COVID-19 vaccines on people with immune compromising conditions like rheumatoid arthritis. Learn more and see if you're eligible to participate at vaccineresponse.org.

Julie:

I think there's so much to the concept of mindful eating that feels really promising. And I think even asking yourself the question before you have your meal: Does this meal really nurture my body? That's a great way to start. But I wonder is it a little bit counterintuitive? Does that create an opportunity for judgment in yourself? Or is it a part of the natural process for mindful eating? What do you think?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Asking yourself is this nourishing for my body is just a wonderful question, and it's part of like a wise discernment. I wouldn't think of that as a judgment in terms of, you know, when I say a judgment, it kind of means not to be evaluating ourselves as good or bad or right or wrong. Especially when it comes to food. We can do that so easily. So, I think that's an important distinction to make.

Julie:

It's not about being good or bad. It's just about what's going to nourish your body. I love that. Do you have maybe some top three takeaways that you would love our listeners to leave us with today?

Dr. Daubenmier:

Yeah. So, I think the first is listen to your body. And learning to trust the wisdom of your body to guide you. And to be gentle to yourself. To be kind to yourself. Perhaps imagining yourself like a little child or a little baby who you are caring for. That very generous attitude towards yourself. And then I would say, don't give up. Just every day is a new day. Every moment is a new moment. You can just start fresh. In each moment. And letting go of the past judgments.

Julie:

Beautiful, beautiful kind of sentiment to leave our listeners with. Thank you so much.

Rebecca:

Thanks so much for joining us today.

Dr. Daubenmier:

Thank you so much for inviting me. And it's a pleasure talking with you both.

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