Dear Alice,

How can you tell when you're full? I am not over-weight, but I tend to over-eat. How can I know when to stop?

?Not Fully Aware

Answer

Dear Not Fully Aware,

Your question is one many people deal with. Some people were taught from an early age to finish everything on their plate, no matter how they felt. This was often rationalized by well-intentioned parents referencing the millions of starving children around the world. Unfortunately, this type of encouragement does little to teach children about listening to their bodies or learning to identify or conceptualize the feelings that come when one is satisfied with the amount or type of food they are eating. This conditioning experienced by many growing up, can carry on into adulthood. Others are out of touch with their body signals for other reasons. How often have you felt ravenously hungry and then couldn't believe how much you'd eaten? How much food does it seem to take to satisfy your hunger? Letting yourself get really, really hungry distorts awareness of body signals. If you're out of touch or ignore subtle hunger cues, it's extremely difficult to detect subtle fullness. As a result, you're only able to feel extremes. It's difficult to describe what comfortable fullness feels like inside your body, but some people express it as being satisfied and content after eating. Others say it's a subtle feeling of fullness, of not being hungry anymore (even if there's still food on their plate).

You can begin by thinking about how you are feeling while you are eating? a kind of checking in with yourself. This takes a conscious effort. Once you've eaten some of your food, consider asking yourself some of these questions: does the food (still) taste good? Is my hunger beginning to subside? After a few more bites, am I beginning to feel satisfied? Try stopping about halfway through to determine if you've had enough. Try rating your fullness from 1 - 10:

1. Ready to collapse from hunger
2. Ravenous
3. Hungry
4. I could eat something, but not very hungry
5. Neutral
6. Not hungry at all
7. Comfortably satisfied
8. Full to very full
9. Stuffed
10. Disgustingly sick

If you go from a 2 to a 9 easily, perhaps you are going for too long without food, or your last meal was too small (a problem for dieters). Maybe your last meal was lacking important satiety nutrients, such as protein, fat or fiber, which usually help to keep you satisfied over a few hours. Sometimes when we eat very quickly, a large quantity of food is consumed and before we realize it, we're stuffed. If this is your problem, try slowing down, taking your time chewing, swallowing, and resting between bites.

The most important part about eating to a pleasant fullness is to eat consciously ? to increase your awareness. This takes practice for many people. Too often, we distract ourselves with other activities ? such as studying, watching TV, or surfing the Internet, without realizing that we're full, until the entire bowl of popcorn, liter of soda, or pizza is gone. Give yourself time to enjoy and appreciate your food, and you can notice and identify its effects on your body.

For more information and insight, check out Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch's book, Intuitive Eating. If you are a Columbia student, you may want to make an appointment to speak with a nutritionist.

Best of luck!

Alice!

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