

Mindful Eating Activity

Excerpt from Session 7 of “Mindfulness-Based Substance Abuse Treatment With Teens: A 12-Session Curriculum (Himmelstein & Saul, 2015)

For this exercise you’ll need snacks (i.e., bite size chocolate bars, strawberries, etc.) handy at your side. It’s important that you have a small snack, as the point of this exercise is for the youth to slow down as they attempt to eat mindfully. Make sure you have enough snacks to provide two to each youth, as the first part of this exercise is to learn and practice mindful eating (with the first snack), while the second part is to elicit and be mindful of craving (with the second snack).

[NOTE: We usually bring bite-sized chocolate bars, given how much the youth we work with like them, but any small snack (e.g., strawberries, as a healthy alternative) would work as well.]

This activity has 3 basic steps: 1) mindful eating instructions, 2) mindful eating exercise, and 3) the enactment of craving and practicing mindfulness.

Step 1: Mindful Eating Instructions

First, let the youth know that the next activity involves food and is a “mindful eating” activity. Briefly ask one of the youth to define mindfulness (based on memory) and instruct them to apply the definition to the experience of eating (e.g., what would mindful eating be?). Next, take out your small bag of bite-sized chocolates and place them on your lap in clear view (make sure that there are only enough bite-sized bars in the bag so that each youth participant would get one. You’ll need to have another bag hidden somewhere with more bite-sized chocolate bars that they can’t see for Step 3 of this activity). Next, explain the instructions for mindful eating. Use the talking points and example script below as a guide.

Talking Points

- Taking no less than 4 bites
- After each bite, chewing slowly
- Observing the different textures and tastes in the mouth
- Swallowing fully prior to taking another bite

Facilitator: So, we’re going to try this mindful eating exercise. This will be sort of like a meditation but we’ll be eating these bite-sized chocolate bars while doing it. I’m going to pass out these chocolate bars and each of you will get one. But when I pass them out, don’t automatically open them and eat them. Wait for me to ring the meditation bell and tell you when to start. I know these things are really small, and they’re called bite-sized so that you can take them down in one bite, but we’re going to do the opposite of that. We’re going to eat these really slowly and observe what it’s like, how different it is from eating fast. The main instructions for this activity include you having to take at least 4 bites. For each bite, close your eyes and chew slowly, feel the different tastes and textures in your mouth. Then, fully swallow that bite before taking another one. Repeat that at least four times and then we’ll talk about what the experience was like.

Step 2: Mindful Eating Exercise

Pass out the bite-sized bars and ring the meditation bell to begin the activity. Every once in a while throughout the activity, remind the youth to chew slowly and mindfully observe their experience (e.g., the textures in their mouth, the tastes, etc.). After you've noticed that each one has finished the last bite, ring the meditation bell and process the experience.

Process Mindful Eating Exercise

Use the following discussion questions to process the experience:

- What was the mindful eating activity like for you?
- How was it to eat that slowly?
- Did you notice any tastes or textures that you hadn't before?
- Do you think there's any benefit in eating food in this way on a regular basis?

Step 3: Enactment of Craving and Mindfulness Practice

This is the most important step in this activity from a substance-abuse-treatment perspective. You'll be offering the youth a taste of what it feels like to crave, or feel an urge to satisfy, and teach them how to practice mindfulness with such an experience (which may be transferable to drug cravings, as well). Start by taking out your second bag of bite-sized chocolate bars (the bag that has been hidden) and place it on your lap in clear view. You might do this in a nonchalant way, possibly even at the end of the discussion on mindful eating. Shuffle the bag through your fingers in clear view and ask, "*Does anyone want another one?*" As their faces light up, ask the follow up question. "*How much do you want another one? On a scale of from 1-10, 10 being you want another really badly.*" Field a couple of youths' answers. Tell the group you'll give them another one after the next activity.

Mindfulness of Craving Meditation. Facilitate a brief mindfulness exercise in which they are directed to become aware of the physical sensation of craving. Use the talking points and example script below as a guide.

Talking Points

- Direct awareness toward the sensation connected with the urge
- Present urge *surfing* metaphor
- Observe sensation/craving and notice its impermanence

Example Script

Facilitator: *I'm going to hand these out in a moment, and this time it's up to you whether you eat it slowly or quickly, but first I'm going to ask everyone to close their eyes, if comfortable with that, and practice a brief meditation with me.*

[Ring bell]

I want to invite you to notice where you feel that “want” for the second chocolate bar. Some of you might “want” it badly, others not so much. Just observe where you feel that “want.” Sometimes we call that an urge, or a craving, because we crave more, in this case more chocolate bars . . . Notice whether you can feel any physical sensations associated with that craving or urge . . . Maybe you feel something in your stomach, maybe you feel something in your mouth . . . Just observe. Just notice. Breathing in, and breathing out, just noticing where you can actually feel the physical sensation of the craving . . . If you can’t feel anything, that’s okay, just feel your breath in your belly. But if you can, just keep your awareness on that craving. What makes up the sensations of that craving? Are there smaller sensations? Is it always the same? Or does it change? Just notice. Just observe the sensations in this moment. All the while breathing in, and breathing out. See if you can stay with the craving until it goes away. See if, when the urge and craving arises, you can surf it like a wave until it’s gone. A wave develops speed and strength, gets big and has a peak, and eventually crashes. Imagine surfing that wave and not crashing, not giving in. Just notice the urge or craving until it’s gone, until there are no waves and the water is still. If you said you felt like a 7, 8, 9, or 10 in wanting a second chocolate bar, see if you can observe that craving and just let it pass, and watch those numbers drop, until it’s a 2, 1, or even 0 . . . Breathing in, and breathing out, as we come to a close, just listen to the sound of the bell as I ring it.

[Ring bell]

After finishing the meditation, briefly process the experience using the discussion questions below as a guide:

- How was that experience?
- Could you feel a sensation associated with craving?
- Did you have specific thoughts associated with the craving?
- Could you observe your thoughts and sensations changing?
- Were you able to *surf* the urge/craving and see it become lower?
- What else, besides with food, could being aware of cravings (and not giving into them) be beneficial for?

After completing the discussion above, pass out the second chocolate bar or snack at your own discretion. Oftentimes we’d give the youth the choice to either eat the second snack slowly and mindfully or at their own preferred pace.