Eating in the Parasympathetic

The parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for stimulation of “rest and digest” or “feed and breed” activities that occur when the body is at rest. These activities include digestion, bowel movements, urination, salivation and sexual arousal. The other part of the autonomic nervous system is the sympathetic nervous system which is responsible for “fight or flight” reactions. The body can only be in one or the other at any one time.

It is not only what we eat, but how we eat that has a profound effect on our health and wellness. To digest foods the body must maximize blood flow to the digestive organs and carry away nutrients for absorption. This requires the body to be in a state of stillness or the body slips into being under control by the sympathetic nervous system such as during walking, stress or physical agitation in which blood must go to the extremities instead of the digestive system. This is why trying to eat while walking or during stress can cause indigestion. When in a relaxed state (parasympathetic), just the thought or sight of food sets into motion the beginning processes of digestion. In the parasympathetic, the cranial nerves stimulate the salivary glands to release saliva, which contains enzymes to begin the breakdown of food and stimulates the stomach to release gastric juices, hydrochloric acid and more enzymes—all critical for complete digestion and assimilation of nutrients. How often do you assess your mental/emotional state before a meal? Have you noticed how the state you are in greatly affects not only your choices on what to eat, but also how you eat and how much you eat? Eating in a state of stress constricts blood flow to our stomach and therefore greatly impedes digestion. When digestion is not working properly bloating, gas, constipation, low energy and ultimately weight gain ensue.

Tips for Mindful Eating

When you are mindful you are fully present, in-the-moment without judgment. Many social and environmental factors can stand in the way of being able to accurately decode your body’s feedback. Mindfulness helps you break free from routine eating habits by examining the thoughts, feelings and internal pressures that affect how and why you eat (or don’t eat).

• Mindful eating encompasses using all of your senses to eat. Notice the color, smell, taste and texture of each bite. Don’t inhale… pay attention to everything.
• Sit in silence for one minute before you begin eating. Take 3 deep breaths from your diaphragm, not your chest. This will put your body into the parasympathetic. For breathing technique help, visit the American Medical Student Association: http://www.amsa.org/healingthehealer/breathing.cfm
• Only eat when you are sitting down at a table without the distractions of a TV, computer, book or magazine. When you eat—just eat...without the distractions.
• Do not eat when you are upset.
• Eat until you are 80% full. Aim to eat until you are satisfied, leaving yourself neither stuffed nor starving.
• Sit for a few minutes after you finish eating, notice how the food you just ate makes your body feel.
• When have craving, drink a glass of water and prepare yourself a healthy well-rounded snack. If after eating it you still have the craving, go for it and enjoy it.
• Think before you eat. Before you dig in, take a moment to ask yourself how hungry you are on a scale of 1 to 10, and how that hunger matches up with what you’ve got in front of you. Remember, you don’t have to clear your plate.
• Monitor your internal dialogue: Observe how critical thoughts like “I don’t want to gain the Freshman Fifteen.” or “I’m so stupid, how could I do that!” can creep into your consciousness. Negative thoughts can trigger overeating or stop you from adequately feeding your hunger. Chit chatting about dieting and fat is so commonplace that we often aren’t truly aware of the impact it might have on our self-esteem.