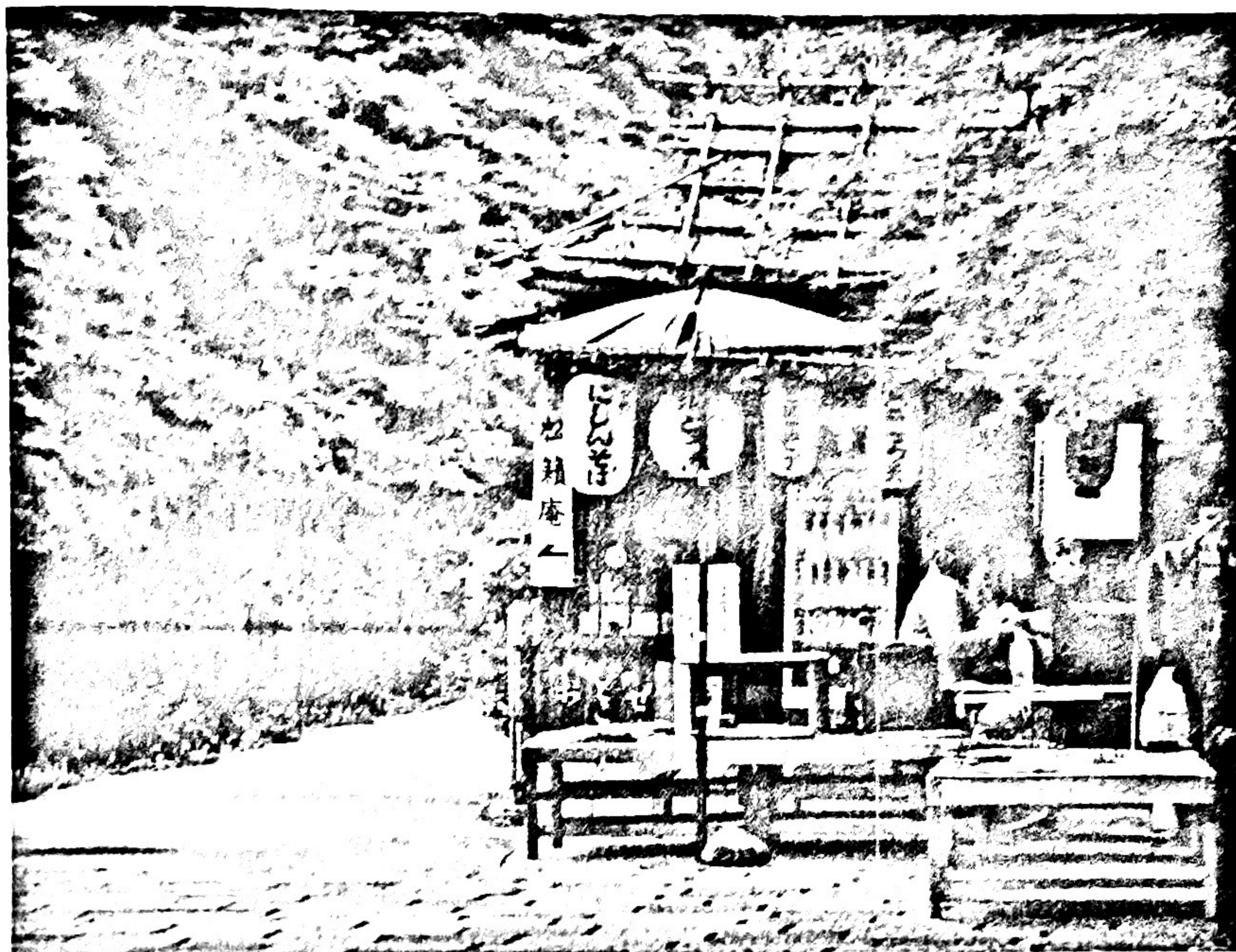


# Mindful Eating—A Sustainable Practice for Lifelong Weight Maintenance



*Acknowledging my eating experience  
Paying attention to the tastes, smells, and textures  
Accepting each bite with joy  
Choosing to chew slowly  
My mouth waters with delight  
Mindfully enjoying the beauty of nature*

(Napoli)

“One hundred years ago all we ate was local, organic food; grass-fed, real whole food. There were no fast-food restaurants, there was no junk food, there was no frozen food. There was just what your mother or grandmother made. Most meals were eaten at home. In the modern age that tradition, that knowledge, is being lost (1).”

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When one thinks about eating an image of sitting down with loved ones enjoying a meal may come to mind. Sharing a meal engages us in emotional, social, verbal, and familial ways. If we stop and reflect a moment, the entire process of eating, beginning with choosing foods, often gathered the same day as they were eaten combined with exercise and socializing while collecting food, preparing the foods, often by small groups of family members, and finally eating the foods surrounded by those who gathered and prepared was a mindful event, present in every aspect. All cultures have various ceremonies, traditions, and foods that are

relevant to their health and overall well-being. What we eat, in addition to the environment we eat in, has historically been significant in daily life. Today, we unfortunately have developed a problem with food and eating. We eat alone, in our cars, while working at our desks, isolated, and disconnected from others and from the act of eating. In the search for answers, blame has been laid on the food industry, on the reliance we have for fast food, on sugar, on processed foods, on advertising, and even on the diet business (2–7). One of the most devastating results of our problem eating is obesity. Obesity is a problem in our culture; experts call it an “epidemic” and suggest multiple causes and conditions for its increasing prevalence (8, 9). The gathering of food and preparing it in modern cultures is practically non-existent. This eliminates any exercise associated with gathering food which may be a contributing factor to today’s obesity.

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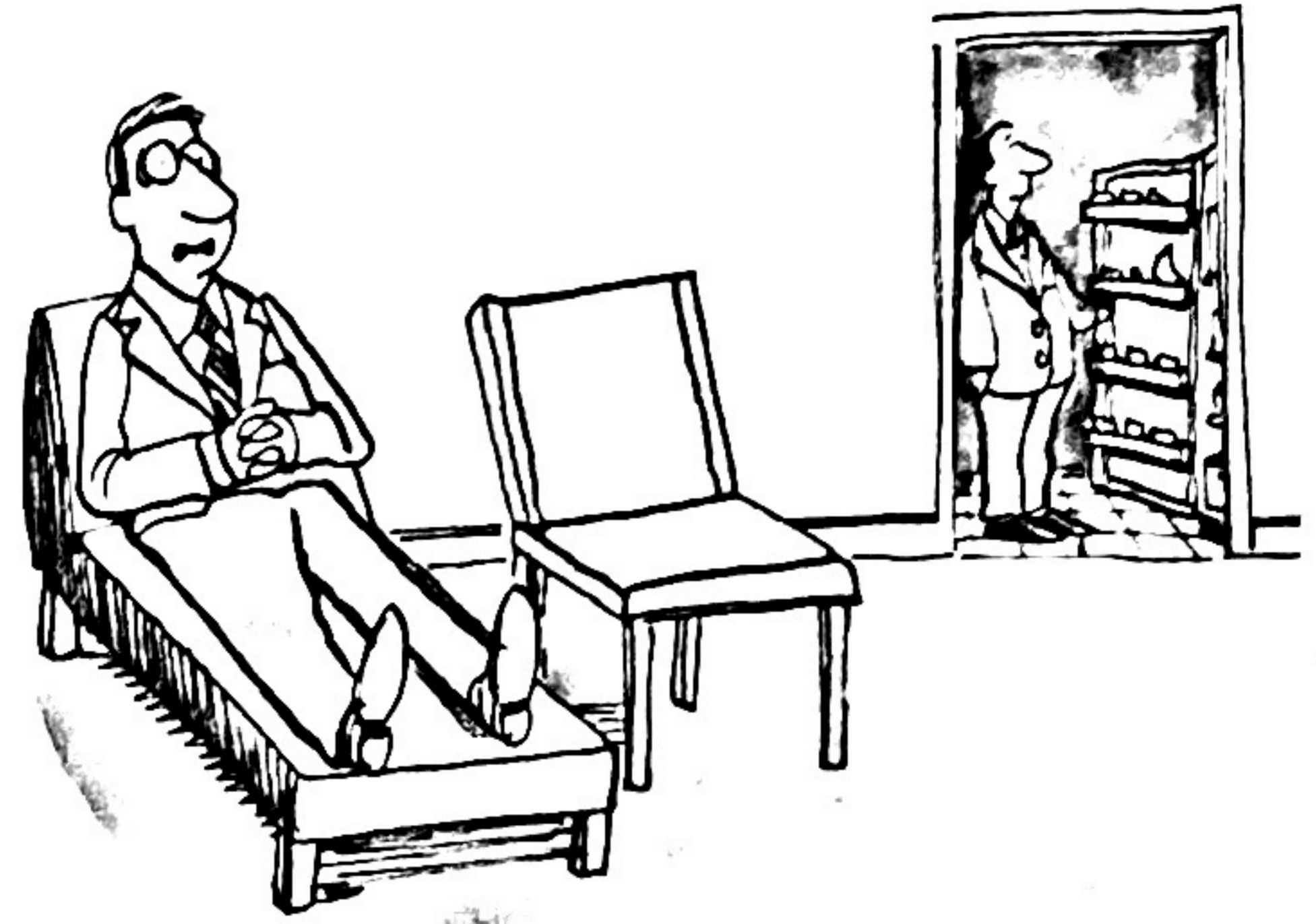
In an interesting twist, research has considered the habit-driven nature of eating and concludes that familiar behavioral patterns can lead to overeating and unwanted weight gain. Cohen and Babey describe the automatic or unconscious food choices people make as “heuristic”, meaning that they rely on familiar experiences and simple procedures to arrive at “adequate, though often imperfect” solutions (10). Heuristic eating, is learned food behavior that is unregulated by deliberative thought and decision making. We might rely on heuristic cues to determine food intake because it may be less taxing than making conscious choices. The problem is this behavioral habit tends to result in food selections that are not optimal. For example,

parents who work late and leave work feeling stressed out may be more likely to pick up burgers and fries for themselves and their children than to cook a healthful meal.

Habitual, non-reflective eating choices are difficult to change. Given the wide availability and relative convenience and affordability of most fast food, such behavior tends to support large portion sizes and unhealthy food choices. Research into heuristic eating behavior suggesting a strong unit bias (“a sense that a single entity . . . is the appropriate amount”) in human food choices has led to the gradual expansion of portion sizes in many fast-food restaurants and elsewhere.

Take a mindful MAC moment and think about an eating habit you have developed and use the MAC Model to examine the experience:

**The MAC Model:** To begin learning how to live mindfully we use the “Mindful MAC Model” with its four simple steps to approach each and every precious moment, (1) acknowledging, (2) paying attention to, (3) accepting without judgment, and (4) making a choice in all of your experiences. Simply stated, it’s your life, make each experience count (11).



“Another problem is that I haven’t had dinner with my family for a week.”

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What are you aware of? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What choice are you making about this habit?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



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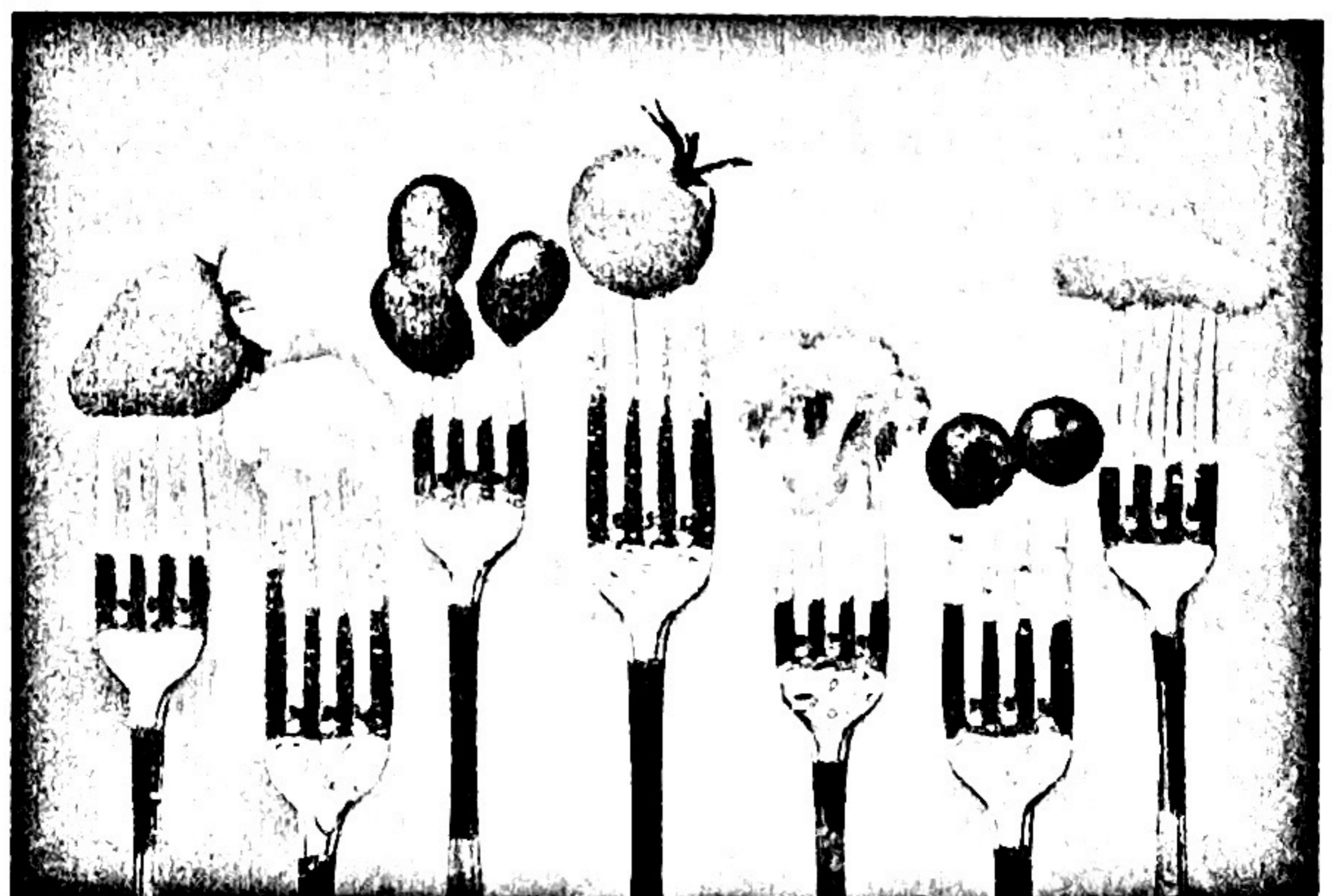
**Why this matters:** It is remarkable to notice that our eating behavior is habit driven. This might mean that losing weight, or normalizing our weight for life, is simply a matter of developing new habits. This idea is closely aligned with mindfulness practices, which allow us to notice our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without judgment.

Instead of looking for who or what to blame for our weight and eating issues, what if we take responsibility for our own eating habits, and begin to think about where we eat, who we eat with, and how we eat? Let’s consider an approach to eating which has mindfulness at its core, and curiosity, kindness, and gentleness as its process—*Mindful Eating*.

Using the MAC model as our guide, mindful eating is acknowledging our experience just as it is; paying attention to our experience using our senses, body, and emotions; accepting our experience without judgment and making a choice how we show up for our eating experience. Mindfulness practice offers a way to address difficulties with food, eating, and weight in an approach that offers freedom through gentleness and kindness. Eating mindfully allows noticing ourselves with curiosity, kindness, and compassion. This approach to nourishment offers lifelong weight management and effortless weight loss (12).

We begin by answering the following questions:

- Am I aware of when I am hungry?
- Do I eat when I am hungry?
- Do I know what I am hungry for?



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- What qualities does the food have?
  - Cool, creamy, crunchy, sweet, salty, or savory?
- Am I really hungry for food, or something else?
- Do I stop eating when I am full or satisfied?

If any of these questions are difficult for you to answer, you're not alone. Our fast-paced lives discourage mindful eating, which requires tuning in, paying attention, and staying centered. Many of us eat while distracted, whether we are watching TV, driving, or working. Often, we eat while talking on our smart phones or when surfing the Internet. In the rush to get things done we shovel food down filling one forkful after another and swallow without tasting (13).

Fullness and satisfaction is subtle, and sometimes quickly moving through meals leads to missing the signals the body sends to the brain. Overeating becomes unconscious; far past "enough"; it happens again becoming an established habit. Struggling with weight, we wonder what we're so hungry for. Experts say that it is not only important what we eat, but, how we eat (12,13). By paying attention and making the choice to eat mindfully, through practice the experience of how to be fully satisfied by food without overeating becomes realized.

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## RESEARCH ON THE PROBLEM: DIETING AND BODY DISSATISFACTION

Dieting and the pursuit for thinness is entrenched in Western culture and leads to increasing numbers of approaches that restrict calories, promote unhealthy eating, and require external food "rules" to induce weight loss. In addition, traditional diets that restrict calories or entire food groups have little long-term success. These programs have high dropout rates. Participants rarely maintain weight loss and

sometimes gain back even more weight than they lost during the diet intervention (14–17). Evidence suggests frequency of dieting directly leads to weight gain (18–22).

In addition to being an unsuccessful way to lose weight, dieting is a known risk factor for unhealthy weight control behaviors, including the development of binge eating and other eating disorders (7, 19).

Instead of considering another diet, which we know from research is doomed to fail, try eating more mindfully. Developing a mindful eating practice is a way to live sustainably, in harmony with your own body appetites and rhythms, offering the possibility of true nourishment.

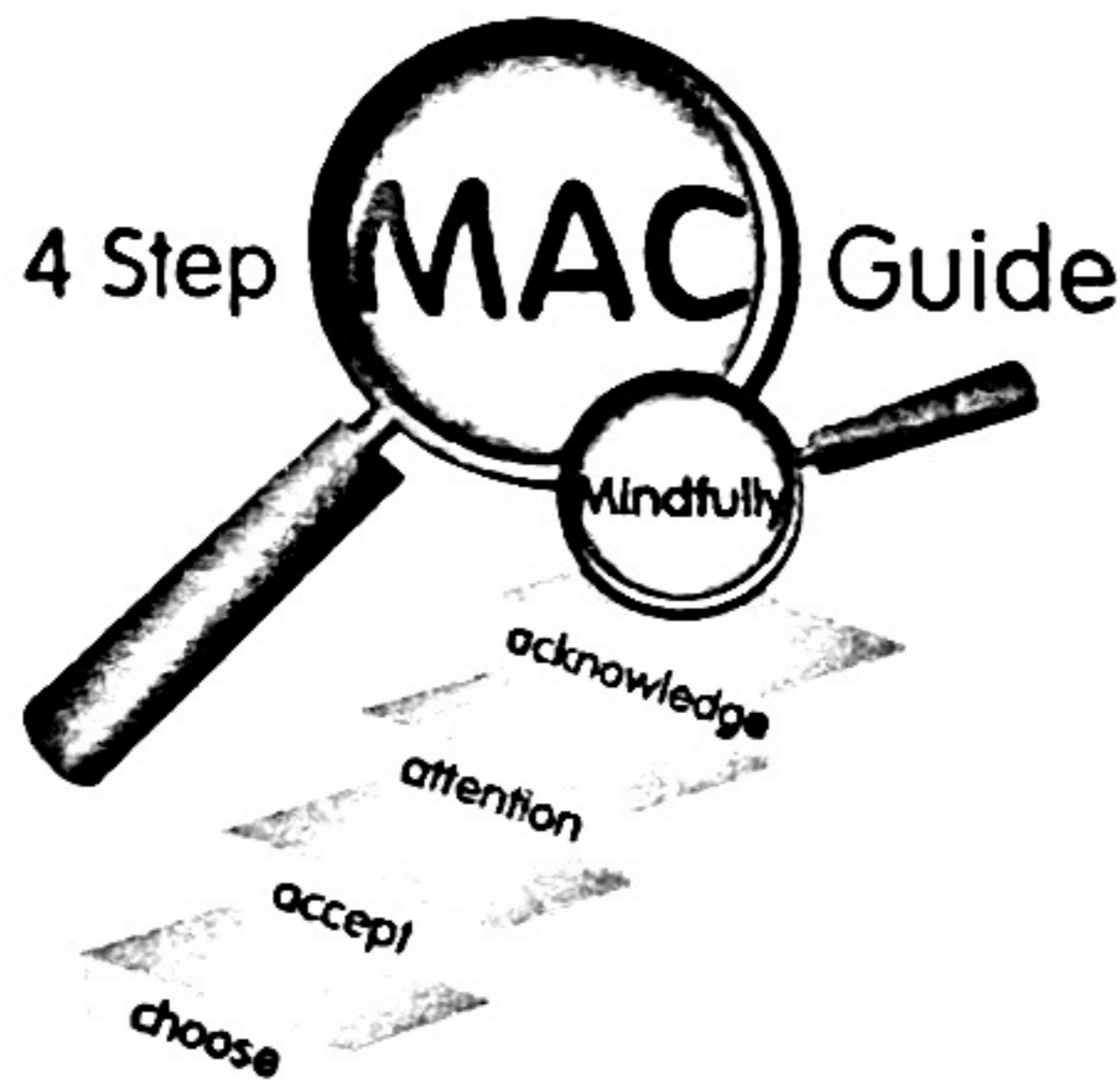
Are you paying attention? Mindful eating allows us to become aware of the nurturing and positive opportunities that are available through food selection and preparation. When we eat mindfully, we become present to the entire experience of eating, including planning, shopping, cooking, and eating. We use all of our senses to choose food that is both satisfying and nourishing to the body. Our present moment awareness allows us to move beyond habitual and heuristic ways of eating that are driven from old patterns that often lead to overeating, shame, and guilt. Food becomes nourishment for both the body and soul. The

act of eating can be a spiritual practice, and as we tune in to what is right in front of us we cherish every taste, every bite. Mindful eaters eat without judgment, and acknowledge that there is no right or wrong way to eat. Knowing that we can make a choice to eat bite by bite, we are invited to experience the interconnections of earth and all living beings, which elevates the act of eating and connects us to the environment, our communities, our families, and ourselves.

## Experiential Exercise in Mindful Eating: Let's Try Our Own Mindful Eating Experience. . . .



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Let's do an exercise to explore the experience of mindful eating using the MAC Guide. You can read this script into your smart phone, and then play your own voice guiding yourself. Imagine using all of your senses by following the prompts that begin each section of the practice.

### Create the space

Choose a place where you can focus on your eating experience without interruption.

### Choose the food

Decide upon a food.

### Acknowledge your eating experience

Regardless of how the food tastes, smells, or sensations that arise acknowledge them just as they are right now.

### Pay attention to your eating experience

Notice all the aspects of your experience that are engaged during your eating . . . thoughts, emotions, body sensations as the food enters your mouth, chewing, swallowing, tastes.

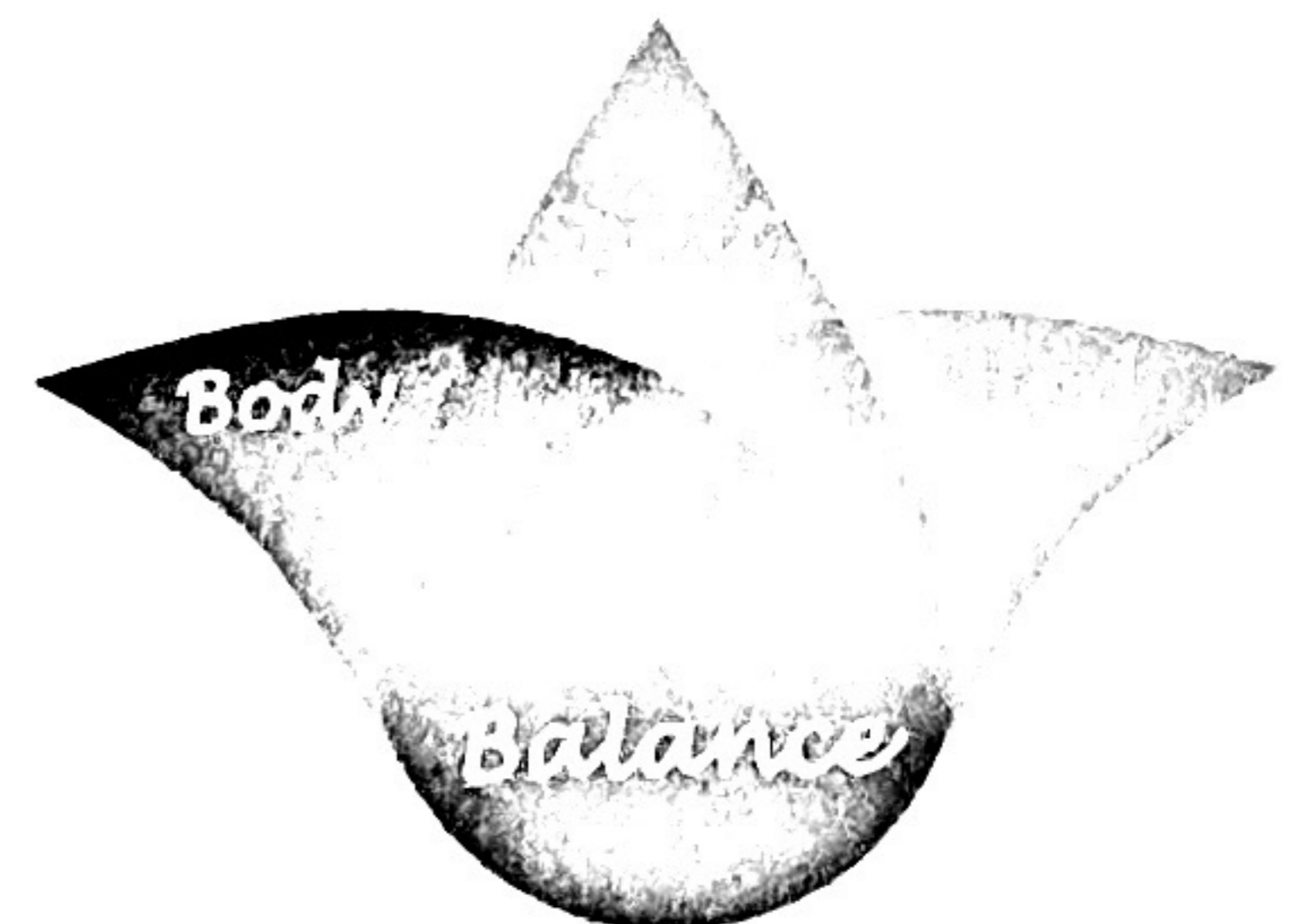
### Accept your eating experience without judgment

Embrace the entire mindful eating experience.

### Make a choice

Decide how this experience stands out for you and what you can do to bring mindful eating into your daily life.

**Activity:** What was this exercise like? Take a few moments and journal about your experiences. Did you notice anything different? Were you surprised by your experience? How if anything was this experience today different from your usual eating experience? Reflect, and measure your level of hunger and satisfaction. What



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all day to avoid that feeling. There may be other feelings underneath, as well, including loneliness, boredom, sadness, or isolation. We become trapped as we sit captive by the desire for the mouth and stomach to feel full.

For others, they might answer, Yes, I like feeling empty. For those people, the feeling of emptiness is pleasant and pleasurable. The feeling of fullness may be not pleasant. After eating those who prefer empty may vomit, purge, or over exercise to empty the body of the feeling of fullness. They become trapped, rejecting with harshness the feeling of being full.

Other people would answer: I don't know. They are unaware of whether their stomach or body is signaling hunger. They eat by the clock or they eat when and how much others around them eat. They are trapped; paralyzed by not knowing.

So what is this experience we call Mindful Eating? Mindful eating encourages awareness through the entire experience of eating, including selecting and preparing food. When eating mindfully, food is chosen that is both pleasing and nourishing to the body. Using all of the senses to taste, savor, and enjoy food, eating is pleasurable. This process of deliberately paying attention without judgment allows freedom from reactive, habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting, which often include harsh and unkind statements toward ourselves.

Mindfulness is "deliberately paying attention, being fully aware of what is happening both inside and outside yourself—in your body, heart and mind—and outside yourself, in your environment. **Mindfulness is awareness without criticism or judgment.**

[Emphasis added]

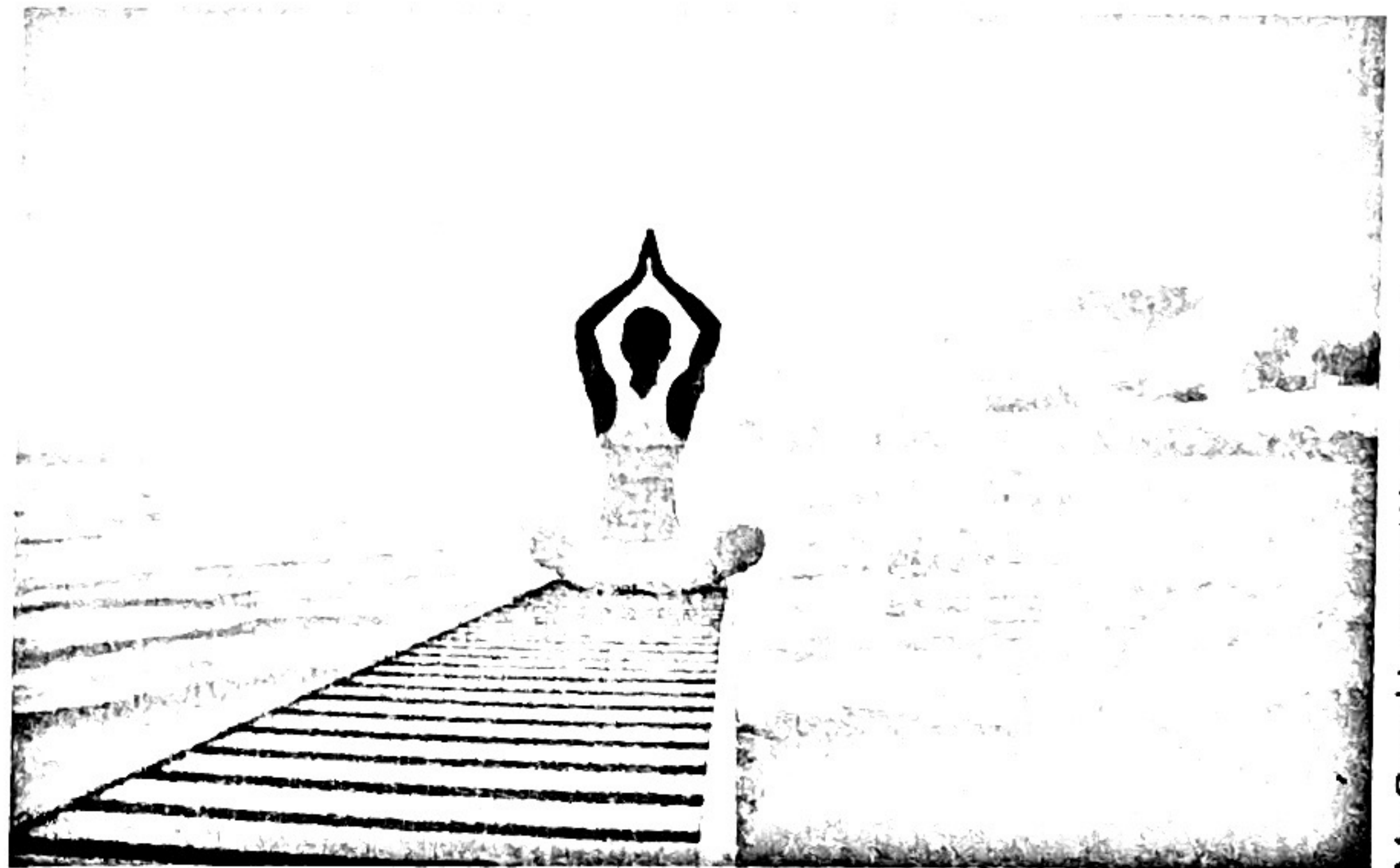
The last sentence is very important. In mindful eating we are not comparing ourselves to anyone else. We are not judging ourselves or others. We are simply witnessing the many sensations and thoughts that come up as we eat. The recipe for mindful eating calls for the warming effect of kindness and the spice of curiosity" (23).

Mindful eating is about making peace with food, and eating according to body needs. When we eat mindfully, we eat to support the body's naturally healthy state, inviting balance, choice, wisdom, and acceptance. Being in the moment and paying attention while we eat allows us to slow down, chew well, taste thoroughly, and enjoy eating. Different than a "diet", mindful eating does not rely on weighting or measuring food, restricting or avoiding certain foods, labeling some foods "good" and others "bad", or counting fat grams or calories. Eating mindfully and encouraging self-acceptance allows us to be free from worrying about body size or "ideal" body weight. Instead, the practice of Mindful Eating encourages the following principles (24):

- **Eat when hungry.** Watch for the body's hunger cues as a signal that it is time to eat. Eat enough to feel satisfied and comfortably full, not stuffed. For most of us, practicing mindful eating means having several small meals throughout the day and one or two planned snacks. Whole foods, mostly plant-based meals including fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and lean protein, promotes satiety and mealtime satisfaction.
- **Eat in a distraction free zone.** Pay attention to how food tastes, and what feelings arise while eating. Take five or six slow deep breaths when sitting down to eat. Many people benefit from saying silent grace or what



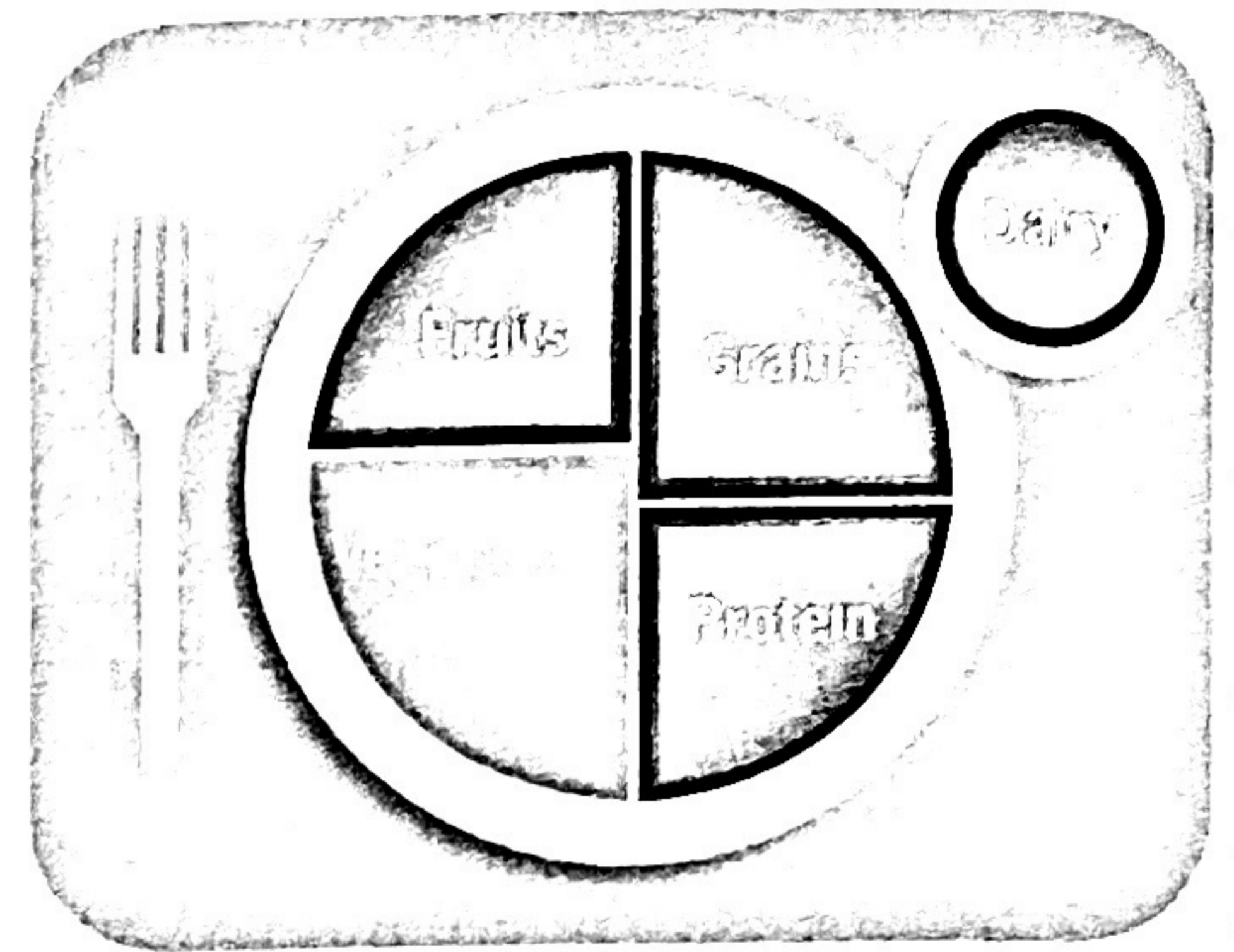
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mindful practitioners call a food blessing before beginning meals. No matter which approach is chosen, taking the time to slow down and savor food begins the practice of Mindfulness where the possibility of change begins.

- **Eat what is desired.** Overeating out of deprivation often happens when eating what “should” be eaten instead of what is desired. Labeling certain foods “bad” and restricting food may also lead to searching for food whether hungry or not. Eat rich, satisfying foods in smaller amounts, savoring every bite.
- **Eat until satisfied, not uncomfortable.** It takes about 20 minutes for the brain to register fullness while eating. Slow down, pay attention, and stop before feeling stuffed. Practice putting down the fork in between bites, and take a breath or two to keep relaxed and aware while eating. Wait a bit, and if still hungry, have more. Consistently eating until stuffed means not listening to the bodies’ signal of fullness. Occasionally overeating is normal. To change habitual overeating, paying attention allows the possibility of change. Noticing patterns provides the opportunity to choose a different outcome.
- **Use the healthy eating plate model as a guide.** This tool helps develop trust for cues of satisfaction and fullness. Using the Healthy Plate provides freedom from weighting, measuring, or counting calories. Fill  $\frac{1}{2}$  the plate with vegetables,  $\frac{1}{4}$  with lean protein, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  with whole grains such as rice, potatoes, pasta, or fresh fruit. This eating approach helps reduce anxiety of how much food is enough or too much. Building mealtime servings with delicious foods in appropriate portions allows healthful eating in exactly the right amounts and the right choices.



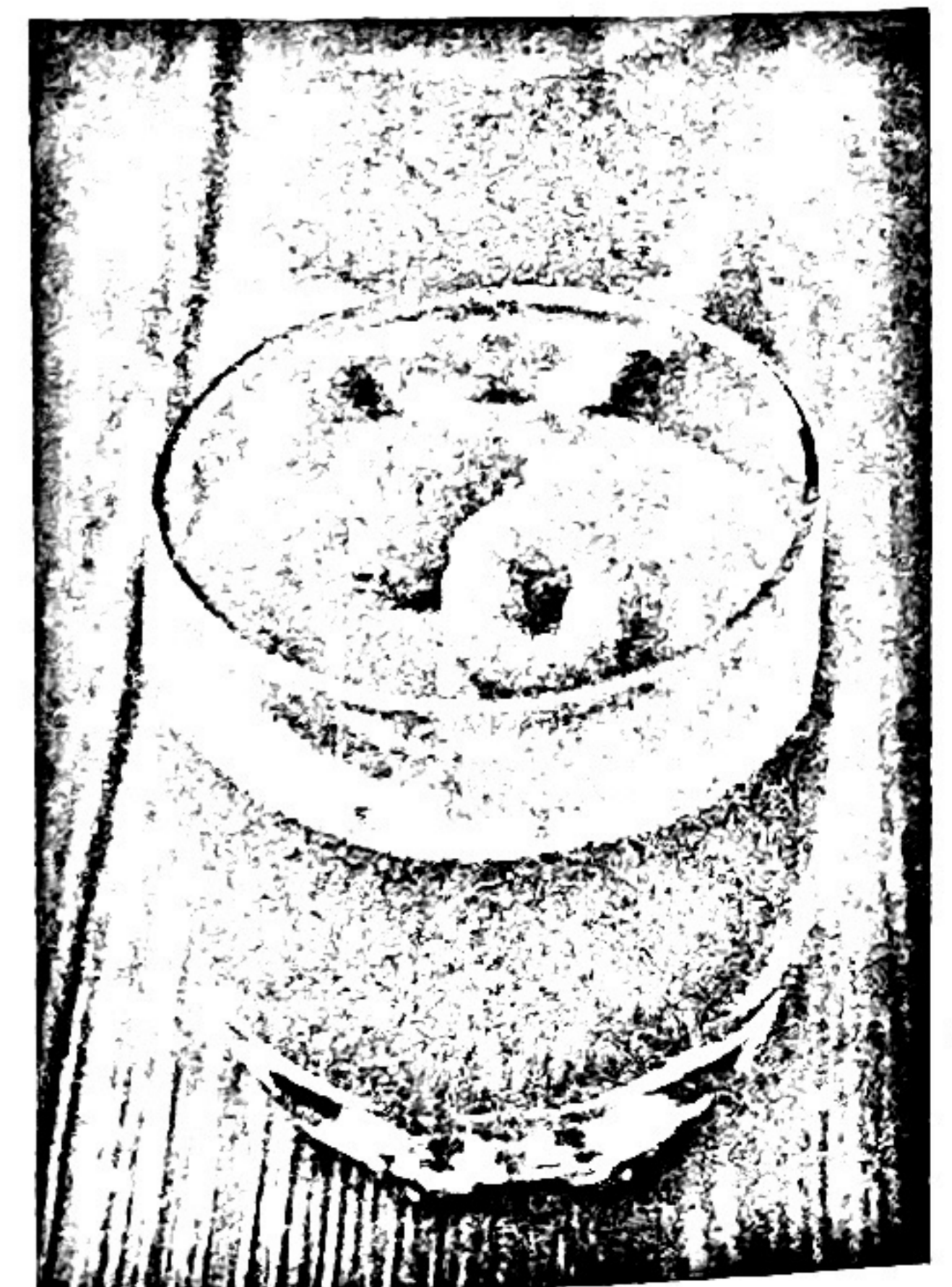
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Remember that food is pleasure and should be enjoyed. Using sight, smell, and taste while eating allows all of the senses to participate in the enjoyment of a delicious and nourishing meal. This mindful approach incorporating sensory stimuli encourages eating satisfaction and effortless weight management. Be patient—remember it is called a “practice”—not “perfection”—since it takes time and attention to create a different outcome. The body moves to the weight it is supposed to be, supported through the practice of mindfulness (24).

It’s been said that self-observation without judgment is the highest practice of mindfulness (25). It’s a challenging task in mindfulness practice, and it can be even more challenging at the dinner table. Each of us has habitual patterns that relate to food and what we eat. Allowing yourself to begin to observe your patterns, and to become mindful and truly focus on the food you eat can feel uncomfortable at first. It can feel unfamiliar to remove the “shoulds” and the guilt. Practicing mindful eating is a sustainable way to improve the experience of eating, and move away from endless dieting and punishing regimens that promote suffering.

It can be challenging to eat mindfully when we experience strong desire for a certain food. Chocolate falls into this category! Here’s a recipe that’s designed to please your palate and nourish your body. Savor every bite of its delicious goodness. Made with heart healthy avocados, the texture is amazing and creamy. Avocados are a great source of lutein, a type of antioxidant called a carotenoid which works to protect against eye disease. They also contain other carotenoids zeaxanthin, alpha-carotene, and beta-carotene, as well as tocopherol (vitamin E).

Avocados aren’t just a rich source of carotenoids by themselves—they also help you get more of these nutrients from other foods. Carotenoids are lipophilic (soluble in fat, not water), so eating carotenoid-packed foods such as fruits and vegetables along with monounsaturated-fat-rich avocados helps your body absorb the carotenoids. An easy way to do this by enjoying this delicious dessert at the end of a meal that features vegetables.



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