

## Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think

By Brian Wansink

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Do you think you are the one who controls why, when and how much you eat on a daily basis? Brian Wansink, an American professor and director of a food psychology lab, shows that many of the 200 food-related decisions we make every day are made without much conscious thought. In his book *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*, research and experiments offer disconcerting illustrations of the decision-making processes involved in our eating behaviour. Rather than follow the familiar pattern of dieting books with calorie counting and exercise plans, this book pays more attention to the psychology behind eating, and overeating, and displays an in-depth analysis of our subconscious decision-making processes. Wansink explores the invisible influences of factors like size of plates, names of the dishes, presence of other people, environmental settings, decorations and use of colours.

Field experiments show that subconscious factors have a dominant impact on decision-making. Wansink not only exposes our many blind spots, but ends every chapter with some useful and practical recommendations on how to counteract or get rid of bad habits, increasing awareness and promoting healthier eating.

An interesting survey showed the relationship between food and mood, going further than the traditional thinking that comfort food brings happiness to people. According to Wansink's findings, men and women prefer different comfort foods. Women prefer hassle-free foods that do not need to be cleaned up, such as sweets, biscuits or ice cream. On the other hand, men prefer pizza, pasta or cakes which require more time to prepare and clean up. These types of food make men feel spoiled, pampered and taken care of.

Wansink also introduces the concept of the "mindless margin" as the amount we can overeat or undereat each day without

noticing. The margin is set at 100 calories above or below your daily caloric requirement. On an annual basis that would mean the difference between gaining or losing 4.5 kg.

The book raises a potential dilemma for the hospitality industry: Should a restaurant promote healthy eating to their customers or should they try to sell an extra starter or that lavish desert? Do they suggest the healthy menu item or the one with the better profit margin? Wansink points out that the choice is not that simple. Even restaurants that actively support a healthy choice for their customers might not succeed if the guests do not bother to process or act on the information provided.

A psychological way to have customers pay more in a restaurant is to use exotic names for a product or a dish. Wansink's studies showed that a cake named "Belgian Black Forest Double Chocolate Cake" had a 27 per cent higher order rate than the one simply named "Chocolate Cake".

Generally, the book is very well written, entertaining and easy to relate to, since food consumption is one of the essential activities that we all experience in our daily lives. In addition, in each chapter, Wansink offers helpful and practical tips to control our diets. For example, reducing 100 calories a day does not make people depressed or lose motivation, but makes a huge difference on the weight scale. As the author mentions, reengineering strategies can help people improve their eating. "The best diet is the one you don't know you're on" (p. 219).

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