



Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think, by Brian Wansink, 2006, 224 pages, hardcover, \$25.00. Bantam Books, New York, NY.

As readers of the Journal know better than most, the mechanisms influencing (“regulating” is too strong a term) dietary intake are many and complexly interrelated. Whereas some of us have investigated cognitive influences on dietary intake, about which most of us are aware, Brian Wansink has investigated environmental influences that are beyond our conscious awareness. For example, he (along with MM Cheney) did the “stale movie-popcorn study,” which showed that moviegoers ate more popcorn—even stale popcorn—from a larger tub than from a smaller tub (1). Wansink (along with CR Payne) also did the “Super Bowl chicken bone study,” which showed that leaving the chicken wing residue on the table (during the Super Bowl) acted as negative feedback, so that those with residue on the table ate fewer chicken wings than did those without residue on the table (2). He has done other, similar studies showing the influence of factors beyond our awareness.

In fact, the title of this book, *Mindless Eating*, is a play on words that emphasizes the unconscious nature of the influences Wansink has studied. In this book, he has made the dry academic reports of his and of his colleagues’ research more readily available to the nonscientist in fun, irreverent (nonacademic) language and by using clever drawings; in addition, he partially packaged the book as a self-help tome. If you are not aware of Wansink’s work, this is an enjoyable, painless way to become acquainted with interesting research that should be taken into account in weight-maintenance studies. If you have tried to lose weight through more traditional diets, and have not succeeded, you may want to try some of the many “mindless” suggestions made in this book.

It is perhaps surprising that Wansink’s proposed solution for mindless overeating is not mindful eating, but, rather, mindless undereating. (It seems odd for a psychologically oriented marketer to advocate for “mindlessness.”) A key precept to mindless undereating is the “mindless margin”—that is, the fact that we are generally not aware of overeating or of undereating by 100 calories. Shifting mindless 100-calorie overeating to mindless 100-calorie undereating is the proposed key to the success he proffers.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a somewhat different aspect of mindless influences on eating and on what may be done about that aspect. Chapter 2 focuses on perceptions of amounts of food and on engineering eating situations to more directly provide visual feedback on the amount being eaten. Chapter 3 focuses on visual illusions—eg, the influence on intake of using taller glasses rather than shorter, wider glasses that contain the same volume—and on sensory-specific satiety rather than variety, suggesting readers turn the illusions to their own benefit. Chapter 4 deals with the pervasive influence of the size of the container, convenience, and social norms. Chapter 5 is concerned with the scripts or expectations that we have in regard to our behavior and with aspects of the environment in

restaurants. Chapter 6 is concerned with the way that the expectations people bring to an eating event override sensual information and ways to influence those expectations with select descriptive terms. Chapter 7 extends the idea of expectations to sex differences in comfort foods—ie, why men and women have different comfort foods—and the role of mood in influencing food preferences and consumption. Chapter 8 deals with family “nutritional gatekeepers”: their control of the home food environment, the ways they can influence food preferences, and the ways they can unitize the portions served, thereby controlling the amounts eaten. Chapter 9 deals with fast food, the ways in which variety and convenience lead to overconsumption, the futility of providing point-of-purchase nutrition information, and the misimpressions left by the marketing of certain fast food brands. Chapter 10 summarizes the key points in the “mindless margin” approach to controlling one’s own behavior but also includes some mindful methods to overcome the mindless influences.

There is some conceptual overlap across chapters, but it still is fun to read about our human foibles. The author states that food marketers capitalize on the principles outlined in his book, and we, therefore, need to become more informed about how they work.

Some of the lessons learned appear to conflict. Seeing more chicken bones reduces the amount of food we consume, but seeing more food increases it. The author tends to move immediately from reports of individual studies to implications for healthier living without providing a conceptual framework that organizes or explains these mindless influences on consumption. A model would help organize the seemingly disparate results; make the concepts more intelligible to practitioners, interventionists, and researchers alike; and make the concepts and propositions in the book more amenable to testing hypotheses and practical use.

These mindless procedures may not work for everyone, but it would be interesting to see a mindless (in the best sense of that term) randomized clinical trial. The hypotheses coming from the mindless model could be tested as process evaluation or mediating variables. To paraphrase, “Mindless is as mindless does.” Because mindful solutions have not been working, mindless undereating deserves a serious test.

The author had no personal or financial conflict of interest.

Tom Baranowski

Department of Pediatrics
Children’s Nutrition Research Center
Baylor College of Medicine
1100 Bates Street, Room 2038
Houston, TX 77030-2600
E-mail: tbaranow@bcm.tmc.edu

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