Weight Loss   WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS STORIES

How Mindful Eating Helped Me Lose Weight And Love Food

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PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NIKKI AZUMA

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Nikki Azuma, 33, was a classic emotional eater. But once she learned

to separate stress from hunger, the pounds started melting off.

For as long as I can remember, I've struggled with my weight—and I felt terrible about it. My much-thinner cousins used to make comments about my size, and even as a child, that hurt. I never tried out any special diet plans, but I'd fluctuate between starving myself and binging. It was a vicious cycle, and obviously not a healthy one.

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I told myself that at least I was fit: Although I was overweight, I used to work out all the time, and in my early 20s I had a part-time job as a swim instructor and lifeguard. But then I switched to a better-paying (but not as active) full-time job to make money for college, and I no longer had time to exercise. My weight spiraled upward, and by 2011 I was 189 pounds. That was the heaviest I'd ever been, but I had no clue what to do about it.

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Around that time I was walking near the University of California, San Francisco campus when I saw a flyer for a study about using mindfulness for weight loss. I had no idea what to expect, but I was willing to find out.

Rethinking eating
Participants in the study, led by Jennifer Daubenmier, PhD, now an assistant professor of holistic health at San Francisco State University,
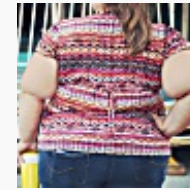
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had to attend a series of classes. Going to school to learn to eat might sound a little silly, since it's something you do from the day you're born. But these classes were really about reshaping your relationship with food.

In the past, I had viewed food as the enemy—something that would make me fat—yet I also overindulged on a regular basis. I used to eat tons of rice and noodles, plus plenty of sugary snacks, and I'd eat until I was beyond full. I'd always clean my plate, and I thought feeling satisfied meant being stuffed.

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The mindfulness training wasn't aimed at getting us to give up specific foods, but rather to think about how various items made us feel so we could alter our behavior accordingly. I soon realized that even though I love a giant bowl of carbs, I feel pretty lousy after; I feel much better when I eat a lot of vegetables and some lean protein.

We also learned how to separate emotional hunger from physical hunger. Before the classes, I'd just shove food in my mouth. Now I was supposed to take a moment to close my eyes and do some deep breathing to check in with myself: Was I really hungry? Or was I just stressed or bored? In the beginning, it wasn't easy to sort it out, because I was so used to eating my feelings. The hardest part was that I was supposed to keep checking in with myself during a meal. They told us to pause every 5 minutes to take a few deep breaths and reassess. Was I still hungry, and how hungry was I on a scale of starving to bursting-at-the-seams?

Initially I had to set a timer so I'd know when 5 minutes had passed; I was so used to inhaling my food. Early on it was pretty boring, so I began to play a game with myself. I'd force myself to think about how I would describe the texture and flavor of the food to someone who had never had it before. I might think, "This reminds me of a chewy, leathery piece of steak," or "This is kind of sweet like watermelon." I'd also consider whether I actually *liked* the meal—and if I didn't, I wouldn't finish it. That would have been unthinkable before.

The art of eating
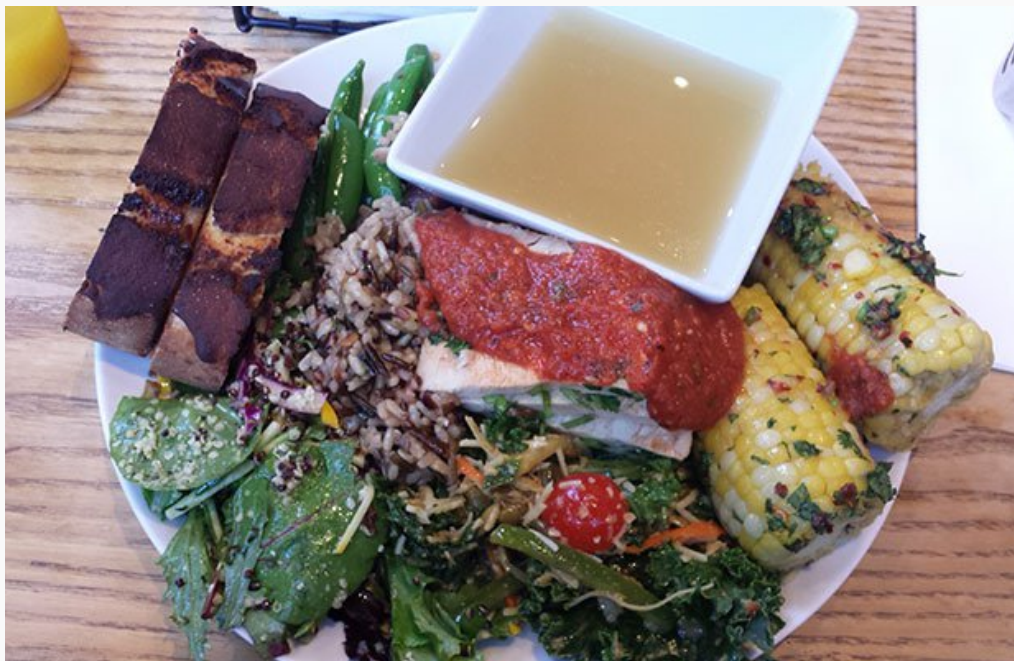
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NIKKI AZUMA

It took some time, but I eventually got the hang of it. I no longer need to set a timer, as I automatically slow down and check in with myself throughout a meal. And when I realize that I'm just stressed rather than actually hungry, I find another way to decompress: I'll sing along

with the radio, crack a joke, or text a friend.

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People are surprised to learn that I now consider myself more of a foodie than ever before. I run a cafe for a startup company, so I'm around food a lot. But I really think about flavors and textures, and I prefer to eat small quantities of richer foods. When I get one small scoop of gelato, I enjoy it much more than if I have a giant fat-free frozen yogurt. I also remind myself that just because something tastes wonderful doesn't mean I have to go overboard: I'll have many more chances to enjoy it again.

I still eat cookies and candy on occasion, but when I do I remind myself that it's just a small bite to keep me going. I can enjoy a piece or two without eating the whole box, and I can move on. I know if I overdo it my body will feel like crap when the sugar high ends.

Most days my eating patterns are pretty consistent. I usually have Bulletproof coffee in the morning because I don't have time for breakfast. I load up on a lot of veggies and a reasonable amount of protein at lunch, and I tend to have more veggies and protein (with little to no carbs) at dinner. If I'm eating out with friends—which I do at most once a week—I feel free to indulge. But if I don't like everything on my plate or I get full, I'll pack up the leftovers and give them to a homeless person.

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Lifelong payoff

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The UCSF study lasted a few months, and by the end of it I had only lost about 5 pounds. But I stuck with the changes, and over the course

of about 3 years I shed a total of 30 pounds—and I've kept it off.

Anyone can learn how to eat mindfully, but like any skill it takes a while to master. For me, the effort has been well worth it. I no longer treat food like the enemy, and I've accepted that I'm going to have good days and bad ones, but I can always get back on track. Having faith and loving yourself is hard, but it's so deeply satisfying when you finally do.

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