The Siren Call of Snacking

Recognize hidden eating cues to stave off stealthy weight gain

BY JESSICA RIDENOUR

The best diet, we'd all agree, is the one we don't know we're on.

According to Brian Wansink, PhD, director of the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab, we make over 200 mostly-unconscious food-related decisions each day — some good, some not so good. From which cereal box we crack open in the morning, to what size plate holds our dinner, each meal and every snack is rife with subtle choices about what, when and how much to consume.

In his new book, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think We Do* (Bantam, 2006), Wansink explores the many hidden persuaders that incite us to nibble even when we're not hungry — only to wonder why we "suddenly" weigh 10 pounds more than last year.

Wansink's research shows there's nothing sudden about it. Calories creep up on us in what he calls "the mindless margin" — that zone in which we moderately overeat without our bodies really noticing, on average, about 200 calories a day. Environmental, visual and social cues such as promotional sales ("Buy 12, get one free!"), the size of packaging (family econo-size) or whom we eat with (say, a family member who inhales his meal with the fervor of a starving wolf) all influence how much we put into our mouths. And — mystery solved — those extra 200 calories a day add up to 10 pounds a year.

The good news is, once these surreptitious triggers are identified, they can be dealt with accordingly. In *Mindless Eating* — part diet book, part scientific journal — the food psychology professor shares the results of his experiments and offers strategies to painlessly alter disastrous dietary habits. The first step is, of course, recognizing mindless eating behavior. While his work may not be the answer to the country's obesity epidemic, it does shine a light on why Americans eat the way they do.

"People will swear they aren't influenced by the size of a package or how much variety there is on a buffet or the fancy name on a can of beans, but they are," Wansink told the *New York Times* in October. "Every time." The Stanford University-educated researcher has conducted hundreds of food experiments on subjects who invariably think they won't fall for pretty labels, mood lighting or social scripts. But in the end, they all prove to be excellent guinea pigs in his food behavior studies.

For example, consider Wasink's popcorn experiment. The researcher invited a group of graduate students to a post-lunch matinee, giving each moviegoer either a medium or large bucket of five-day-old popcorn. After the show, his team measured what remained in each tub and found that the students with the large buckets of popcorn — stale as it was — ate an average of 53 percent more than those with the medium buckets. Why? Because of what Wansink calls "eating scripts": the Pavlonian response to being in a movie theatre, the sound of others munching in the dark and the distraction of the movie itself. People also tend to eat more from bigger batches because big packages (or big portions) suggest a consumption norm. Rather than let their stomachs tell them when to stop eating, the students mindlessly allowed external cues to govern their eating habits.

In another experiment, students were welcomed to a sports bar to watch a game and enjoy a free chicken wings buffet. One half of the room had their tables bussed of the bony chicken remains, while the other half's tables piled high with discarded carcasses. Who ate more? The half whose tables were cleared, because without evidence, the sports-watching buffet grazers couldn't tell how many wings they'd devoured. "Unless we can actually see what we're eating, we can very easily overeat," concludes Wansink.

Visual cues affect our eating habits in other ways as well. As harmless as it may seem, tableware plays a part in our mindless eating. Oversized plates and large utensils equal big servings, while a visual illusion tricks us into overfilling short and fat glasses. The antidote? Use smaller plates and tall skinny glasses.

What Wansink calls "see food" is also a problem. In another study, office assistants

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were given a candy-filled dish with either a clear lid or an opaque lid. Not surprisingly, the office assistants with the clear-lidded candy dishes snacked 71 percent more often than their counterparts. Out of sight, out of mind is the best cure for "see food" affliction.

None of Wansink's ideas for breaking the mindless eating trap involve out-and-out denial of favorite foods. The self-described french fry aficionado focuses instead on making small changes that still allow for an occasional fast food hamburger for those so inclined. "Our body and mind fight against deprivation diets," says Wansink. Instead he suggests a 100 to 200 reduction in calories each day, which is barely noticeable by the body. "It doesn't ring the starvation bell in our body's metabolism."

"We can trim these calories out of our day relatively easily. The key is to do it unknowingly. To *mindlessly* eat better. The best diet is the one you don't know you're on."

Writer Jessica Ridenour wishes knowing why she mindlessly eats were enough to stop her from doing it.