



## Linda Ciotola: Mindful Eating

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Linda Ciotola is a Certified TEP: trainer-educator-practitioner of psychodrama, group psychotherapy, and sociometry; and an accredited Certified Trainer in the Therapeutic Spiral Model™ of psychodrama used specifically for working with trauma survivors. She is Co-Leader and Developer of the Therapeutic Spiral Bodyworkshop specifically designed for healing body-based trauma issues and a Certified Health Education Specialist (Ret.) with 45 years experience in education, group facilitation, and lifestyle counseling. Linda holds ACE (American Council on Exercise) certifications as a Personal Trainer, Fitness and Yoga Instructor, Health Coach and MINDBODY Specialist. She was honored in 2008 with the Zerka Moreno Award for outstanding contributions to the field of Psychodrama. She is co-author with Karen Carnabucci of *Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods - Beyond the Silence and the Fury*. She presents widely at regional, national and international conferences.

*Serge Prengel is the editor of Active Pause® project.*

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: *Hi, Linda.*

Linda: Hi, Serge.

Serge: *We're going to be talking about applying mindfulness to eating.*

Linda: Yes, and I'm very grateful to have this opportunity to speak about that. You probably know that my colleague Karen Carnabucci and I wrote a book a few years ago called *Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods*. In the process of writing that book, we really took a look at many, many different elements, as you can imagine. We were observing in our process of collaboration the great number of, I guess you would say media bombardment about dieting and the process of dieting and diet foods and diet programs and all of that. It's one of the things that we took a look at in our process.

We came to the conclusion in our work with clients as well as just in our overview as we prepared to write the book that mindfulness is really the key piece. We know, we have all of this data that tell us that diets don't work, that people often will try to lose weight and then they'll gain it back and more, or they will develop a very distorted body image, or they'll develop a negative kind of feeling toward their body, almost like an adversarial relationship to the body. We noticed that there are all of these negative consequences to that and that bringing mindfulness to the process of eating doesn't have anything to do with dieting or any of that. It has to

do with bringing oneself fully present into the moment and into the process of choosing food, eating food, enjoying food, and being really nourished by food.

Serge: *So there is a relational element you're pointing out that traditionally in our culture, the relationship we have to eating, eating too much, problems with eating, is to turn it into an adversarial relationship either vis-à-vis food or vis-à-vis points of ourselves or a sense of who we are and struggle and fight. Here, in contrast to that, it is actually being very present with what we're doing.*

Linda: Exactly right. Again, that mindfulness. The mindfulness role, as we say in the field of psychodrama, has no judgment and has compassion and simply observes and accurately labels, and so that automatically takes that adversarial component right out of the relationship.

Serge: *I like also a very strong connotation that it has for me when you describe it as saying that mindfulness role is ... By describing it as a role, it's also not everything. Usually, when you talk to somebody who is very self-critical, for instance, about bad habits, it's hard for people to be compassionate because they feel that what they're doing is hurting them, so they want to be very critical of it, as if otherwise, they were just basically enabling the bad part.*

Linda: Exactly.

Serge: *When you're talking about this being a role, it probably is easier to talk about exploring the compassionate role as opposed to just having blind ... The fear of people is that they're encouraged to totally not control something that they're afraid of.*

Linda: Exactly right. Yes. I loved, by the way, the short piece that you had with Dr. Richard Schwartz on internal family systems, and he talked about looking at the fear that way. If we looked at the fear as a part of ourselves that really needed to be understood and to be cared for the way a parent would care for a child, this has a similar flavor, if you will, since we're talking about eating. It has a similar flavor of bringing that kind of compassion to the process.

If it's okay, I'd like to describe-

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: ... an exercise that I did with a good friend and colleague of mine who's a social worker and also a psychodramatist up in Maine. I went up and joined her once for a few days at a wellness workshop of which mindful eating was a large component. We reserved a place at a local restaurant, and they were kind enough to put one of those beautiful screens up and give us privacy. There were about 10 people in the workshop. I just would like to sort of say step by step the process that we used to guide the participants in the process of applying mindfulness to eating.

The first thing when we arrived is, of course, everyone took their seats. I just asked

everyone to put all four corners of both feet on the floor and take a big, deep breath and feel the support of the chair under them and the back of the chair behind them and to take another deep breath and to just let themselves take in the visual surroundings, to have them notice what was around them, the beautiful screen that the restaurant folks had put up for us, the color of the tablecloth, whether there was sunlight coming in the window or not, any colors they noticed in the room, any smells, because, of course, that's very connected to our sense of taste, is our sense of smell, and what did they smell and what they notice about that.

Then I asked them to just take their time looking at the menu, and as they were doing so, I asked them to notice what their body signals were telling them about their level of hunger, and I-

Serge: *I want to just interrupt for a moment. What feels very nice about what you said and the way you said it is you could have summarized it and saying help people to be present or ask people to be present.*

Linda: Yes.

Serge: *But you listed all kinds of specifics, including the feet on the floor and feeling all four corners of the feet and looking around and paying attention to smells and so on and so forth. What you're highlighting and what I'm emphasizing is that sense that being present is a process, that you cannot just have the shortcut of saying, "Okay, so I'm going to be present," and just assume that by simply saying, "Okay, I'm going to be present," you're going to be present.*

Linda: Right.

Serge: *It takes a little effort.*

Linda: Exactly, that's a very good point. That's a very, very good point. I think also there is some misconception about I should just be able to kind of blink my eyes or close my eyes and automatically be present, or I should just be able to take a deep breath and automatically be present, when I think it really, for most of us anyway, is a process that we lead ourselves into that state of being, and that's really what I was trying to illustrate. Thank you for summarizing it and labeling it so accurately.

Serge: *Yeah. Yeah, no, it was very beautiful because I had the sense as you're describing it that it's a process, it's a transition. You cannot abruptly change from one state to another. Just in a way to stay with the restaurant analogy, in winter in the Northeast they have these vestibules at the entrance of restaurants. You have an extra door to make a transition between the very cold air outside and the warm air inside, and so we need that transition.*

Linda: Exactly right. Yes, that's a really good analogy. Thank you for that. The next step is about noticing hunger, and hunger is a physical sensation. It's the body saying basically do I need to be fed or do I not need to be fed? Do I need food now or not? I compare it to the gauge on a gas tank. Basically, if your hunger level is saying

something like zero on the gas tank, meaning there's nothing in there, you're on empty, or as I like to say playfully, "Feed me now or die. I'm ravenous, totally ravenous," and 10 is, "You'd better stop feeding me now because the gas tank is overflowing," so to kind of notice on that scale of one to 10 how hungry are you.

I suggest to folks that they not let themselves get hungrier than three and a half or four and try to notice when they get just nicely satisfied but not overly full, which might be something like seven or seven and a half, and that's okay. I've got plenty, and I can always get more when I'm hungry again. I ask them at the beginning, before they've even ordered their food to check in and notice and say where their hunger level is. Then I ask them to notice what looks appealing to them on the menu and what about it appeals to them and what is it appealing to.

For example, if they read on the menu the description of a dish that sounds warm and creamy and sort of semi-soft, how is that different from another dish that might be chewy and spicy, or another dish like a salad, for example, that might be cold and crunchy, or another dish that might be more liquid and steamy, like soup or stew, for example, and what is it about the particular dish that is appealing to them.

Is it appealing to what their taste buds are wanting in terms of a particular flavor like sweet or salty or pungent or spicy or bitter? Is it appealing to something that they think might look beautiful? Is it appealing to their sense of temperature, like is it a hot day out in the summer and maybe a cup of cold gazpacho soup sounds really nice because they're feeling so warm? Or the opposite, maybe it's that cold winter day, and maybe something very warm and something that may have a little weight to it sounds nice in the wintertime.

I ask them to just notice what is it about the thing that's calling them, so to speak, from the menu. What is it about that particular dish that is appealing to them and how is it? Is it appealing to what part of them, what scent? Then as the meal progresses and they're very-

Serge: *Let me just comment a little bit.*

Linda: Sure.

Serge: *What I'm hearing is, again, introducing something that breaks the automatic pilot at a couple of different levels. One is to actually, before the automatic pilot of it's time to eat, so I eat whatever, is thinking about how hungry am I and installing the capacity to observe, including observe when I'm too full.*

Linda: Right.

Serge: *Also the capacity to pay a little bit more attention to specifically that sense of what is attractive and what is it that it's satisfying.*

Linda: Exactly.

Serge: *Really the question of dialogue that's going on here.*

Linda: Exactly right. Yes, exactly right. When the food is delivered, I ask them to make a practice of putting their fork down between bites and to, in that process of putting the fork down between bites, to chew each bite at least 10-times before they swallow and to notice as they are chewing the taste, the texture, the flavors, the temperature, the things that we recently spoke of, and to just observe those just with sort of that sense of curiosity that the witness has. Maybe they might notice something like, oh, I wasn't expecting a salty flavor in this dish, but there it is, or, hmm, I wasn't expecting something crunchy, but I notice there is a little something crunchy in this dish, or whatever it is that they notice, just noticing it as they go through and then checking in.

I would ask them to check in about a third of the way through the meal in terms of their hunger and fullness level and again at about two-thirds through and ask them then if ... Sometimes people at two-thirds through are already at 70% full, but they may not have noticed that before, and so they may decide ... Of course, it's always their choice. They can decide to keep eating or they can decide, oh, I think I really have had enough. As the meal finished, I asked people to check in for a final time and then to reveal, if they wouldn't mind sharing, what the process was like for them, and to speak-

Serge: *Let me just again comment on what you describe. Again, very beautifully described. It's not just a question of telling people being present or pay attention or be curious. You show that, for instance, during the meal there is moments of one-third, two-third, where you're asking pay attention to how full you are. Unless there is a moment that's made for that, it won't happen.*

Linda: Right.

Serge: *And, you know-*

Linda: Goes on automatic pilot.

Serge: *It's going to go on automatic pilot, and any of us who've tried to do something mindfully like this know how actually difficult it is to break the automatic pilot in these moments that are so automatic, because we do them several times a day and we've done them all our life. Especially when you describe that sense of paying attention to the texture, the flavor of food, if you just said that. You also say chew at least 10 times. Put your fork down. There is a sense of the intentionality of interrupting the non-stop, automatic continuing in order to create the pause where it will become possible to notice something.*

Linda: Exactly. Again, it's that beautiful phrase you created, "Active Pause": the action of putting the fork down or using one's napkin or taking a little sip of water, taking a deep breath. All of those are actions that create a pause in the automatic process. That's just crucial to being able to bring mindfulness to the process of eating. Then the process needs to continue following the meal, because I would then ask people

during the course of the workshop when we were back in our regular workshop space if they noticed anything about their energy level.

In other words, did people notice a sense of heaviness or sleepiness in the hour following lunch, or did they feel restoration and renewal of their energy in the hour following lunch. Did they notice that they were still comfortably feeling satisfied an hour after lunch, and then checking in again at two hours or three hours after lunch to see what effect their choices had on the energy system of the body? Did they notice that they were thinking clearly, or did they feel foggy-headed, did they notice that they really wanted to lay down and take a nap.

Then I would do some education around exploring what the food choices were or how far into their hunger and fullness scale they may have eaten. Was there a connection between that and feeling sleepy or sluggish, or the reverse, a connection between what they may have chosen and feeling very clear and very full of energy, because we know, for example, that some of us have different responses to different food groups than others. Some people, for example, may have a sensitivity to carbohydrates, and it may make them sleepy, but they might not be aware of that. They may not know that until they actually bring mindfulness to it.

I had this experience myself many years ago. I was teaching a college course in communication, and so my class was three ... I had one class three hours in the morning and the other class three hours in the afternoon, and I had an hour break in the middle for lunch. At that time, I would bring my lunch and I would have tuna and maybe some whole grain crackers and some raw vegetables and maybe a piece of fruit and some water or some tea. I noticed that in my afternoon class, I was so sleepy that when I listened to my students presenting their communication assignment, whatever that was, I was actually, literally trying to hold my eyelids open because I felt like I had been drugged.

I realized that it was the combination of the tuna and the starches in my lunch were making me really, really sleepy. I think I got a big infusion of serotonin and not much of the wakeup brain chemistry from my lunch. When I changed my lunch and made it more like protein and some watery, more watery vegetables than starchy ones, I was perfectly full but I was very clear and wasn't sleepy at all. Until I brought mindfulness and curiosity to the process, I was sort of stuck with forcing myself to stay awake for my afternoon students, which certainly wasn't fair to them. I was very relieved when I was able to bring the process of mindfulness and curiosity, like what is it about my lunch that's making me so sleepy. I've learned to experiment with different food combinations to find what worked for me in terms of giving me energy and mental clarity.

That's really what I was trying to help my workshop participants do over the course of that wellness weekend by noticing their energy level and their feeling of aliveness in the afternoon or their need to take a nap, and could it possibly have a connection to the food choices that they made and to just curious about that and then bring that mindfulness into all of their meal selection. I like to call it becoming your own detective, that the mindful witness helps you to be your own detective, being that

observer and noticing and putting together the pieces of the puzzle, so to speak. That way, people learn to be very tuned into their body and their energy system and to make choices that are based on how is my body responding and how can I make choices that make me feel good in my body.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah. That mindful eating doesn't stop when the meal is over.*

Linda: Right.

Serge: *There is that sense of paying attention to what happens afterwards and making the connections.*

Linda: Exactly right, and getting curious. I know now that there are certain food combinations that give me very long-term, sustained energy, both mentally and physically, and I can depend on them. Food combinations that I know may make me a little bit sleepy, I save those for nights when I don't have to be anything but sleepy.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah.*

Linda: I can be mindful about my choices, and also it takes all of the, as we said earlier, that adversarial relationship out of our food choices because we become mindful of what it is the body really needs, what does the body need, what does the brain need to feel good. Then when we make choices that help the body and the brain feel good, we feel good about ourselves because we do have this kind of then intuitive, what becomes an almost intuitive awareness of what choices are going to be most in concert with what our body needs.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, yeah. This seems like a good place to end, or do you want to add something else to this?*

Linda: I think it feels like a good place to end. Just I loved your point that mindful eating doesn't stop with the meal, that it's really bringing that mindfulness into noticing the effect of the meal and bringing it into our energy level and mental clarity, our physical stamina, and just bringing that mindful curiosity and observation and accurate labeling into our lives beyond the meal.

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