

The Moment: Avoiding Overeating with Wisdom and Skill



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For people who struggle with food and eating issues, approaching the end of a meal can trigger anxiety. I encourage my patients to approach this moment consciously, with an open mind and a heart full of compassion.

What is "The Moment"?

Imagine you have been enjoying a lovely dinner. You may have had potatoes or rice, perhaps with meat, chicken, fish or lentils; you might also have eaten some delicious veggies or fruit. There might even be a yummy dessert.

As the meal progresses, you notice your plate is becoming increasingly empty. *This is your "Moment."* What will you do with it? Does it provoke stress? If so, will you eat more food? Will you stop and pause?

For many people, The Moment is a difficult one. It can be hard to say goodbye to the food on one's plate and the satisfaction one gets from eating. There's an urge to go back for seconds or thirds, or to eat more later, in order to extend The Moment. Keeping The Moment going can help us avoid negative feelings and unresolved questions, including questions about our relationship to food. These feelings don't necessarily involve deep psychological issues or traumas. In fact, most of our stress results from the day-to-day processing of our work and relationships.

Added to this are the natural and healthy ways that food is psychologically nurturing. Eating is soothing and promotes good feelings in our bodies – through our senses, through our stomachs being fuller, and through the restorative metabolism of food.

Eating is a natural stress-management technique. Nature designed the consumption of food to be an enjoyable sensory experience in order to encourage our ancestors to stay alive, nurture and feed their children, and pass on their genes. We are wired to enjoy food for psychological as well as physical reasons – a meal can and even should provide the opportunity to push away the stresses and anxieties of the day.

That's one reason The Moment can be so difficult: The meal is nearly finished and "overness" is setting in. Now one has to manage one's anxieties, stresses large and small, thoughts, feelings, impulses, plans and questions about oneself and about others. This can be especially trying at dinner, when we're winding down from the day. Many of us don't feel up to the task. How will I deal with my empty plate and the fact that the soothing from food is over until the next meal?

For some of us, it's easier to keep eating. Although seconds and thirds are rarely as pleasurable as firsts, because one is already full, we may continue to eat in order to soothe the soul for a little while longer. It's understandable.

How does one face the challenge of The Moment? Here are some ideas to consider:

- This is a *before* The Moment strategy: Some people take only one plate filled with all the food they intend to eat at a particular meal. When the plate is half finished and they begin to feel full, they consciously begin to work on handling The Moment by using awareness and stress management tools (some of these tools are discussed below).
- As you recognize that The Moment is approaching, tune into your feelings. The more you experience your feelings *without judgment* – whether they are annoyance, anger or longing for food to cover up worries and concerns – the more control you will have over The Moment. Remember, however, that self-compassion and non-judgment are not permission to overeat: They are simply tools for self-understanding. They create a space to think about your choices.
- Some people handle The Moment with active distraction. After finishing their meal, they might take a walk, clean the closet or perform some other task. Whatever the activity, it should provide you with a chance to refocus and redirect your energies. It's not simply distracting yourself from food, though this is a part of it. It's actually allowing your mind and body to unwind and go to a different place. By being aware that you are using this technique to calm yourself rather than because it's on the list of what you "should" do, the activity you choose can feel beneficial rather than constraining.
- Another helpful tool for handling The Moment involves stress management techniques such as yoga, exercise, a warm bath, meditation or prayer. These can help calm the body and mind. So leave the dirty dishes behind and instead begin your stress management

technique. If you are unsure about which technique to use, just pick the first one that comes to mind.

- Another technique is to engage in a thankfulness practice: As the food on your plate decreases, tune in to your sense of gratitude. This can be gratitude for having food to eat, for being able to digest it with ease, for knowing that in all likelihood you will be able to eat another meal tomorrow. You might instead chose to tune into gratitude for family, friends, work, nature, this day. It's like saying grace at the end of the meal instead of or in addition to the beginning.
- For some, simply recognizing that The Moment is occurring is enough to help anxious feelings pass. Others may find comfort by assuring themselves that, if they really want seconds or thirds, they can have them – as long as they wait ten minutes or half an hour – whatever time period feels right. This is a way to delay overeating and give yourself a chance to work on dealing with the feelings that arise after your meal.
- If you're dining with a loving person who is tuned into your issues with food, you can discuss your feelings as you approach The Moment, which can help you move through it in a healthy way.

Whatever methods you choose, bear in mind that working with The Moment requires time. It can take several months or longer to develop practices sufficient to have a major impact on your relationship with food.

Also remember that these practices will only be successful if you are *consuming an adequate amount of calories and nutrients* per day. If you are restricting your food or eating less than your body requires, your ability to incorporate healthful changes will be hampered. It's important, therefore, to evaluate, either by yourself or with a registered dietitian, whether you are getting all the protein, fat, carbohydrates – all the variety and amounts of foods – that your body needs.

The Moment is an opportunity. It can be scary or uncomfortable, but recognizing it provides an opportunity to grow and change, to look at your feelings and thoughts, to work on stress management skills, and, most importantly, to practice self-acceptance.

Here are some of the things my clients have said about working with The Moment:

Emma: "I appreciated this new perspective when I realized at dinner that The Moment had arrived. I was able to take a breath and think about what I wanted to eat and if I really wanted seconds. I had taken your suggestion and created a plate with a lot of good and healthy food – all that I needed. It made it easier for me to tell myself that I had eaten all I needed and was able to move on to the remainder of my evening. I could see that, in a way, I didn't really want to move on.

Continuing to eat would have continued giving me feelings of pleasure and would have “sopped up” my different stresses and anxieties from the day, and from my life in general. However, I'm trying to move away from that in order to find other ways to deal with my feelings. I like active distraction, because sometimes when I'm distracted, I do calm down and then I can deal with my stresses better. Another thing I like to use is painting and drawing. If I go to my desk, I find that I can paint and draw, and my worries seem easier to manage."

Ashleigh: "I used to just buzz right through The Moment – I'd be on to seconds or thirds before I started to feel shame and guilt about eating in this pattern. I was gaining weight and feeling worse and worse. Working with The Moment has been helpful. I can't say I'm perfect, because sometimes I overeat after dinner anyway, but I do feel like I'm getting there – and beginning to be more aware of myself. I think also, in the long run, I'm consuming less calories because I'm paying attention. I'm trying not to criticize myself – I can be really self-critical – but just evaluate the situation and make the best decisions I can at the moment."

Kevin: "I'm a big guy, and I do need seconds in order to feel full. But it's really easy to go back for thirds and fourths, especially if I'm having a beer or wine with my meal. The Moment seems to go by very fast if I'm drinking. I've decided to work with The Moment by having only one beer with my meal, and I really savor that beer. Once I realize that The Moment is coming, I do my best to be aware of it. I also like socializing, so what I do is push my plate away and get into talking with others. Sometimes, I actually feel those feelings of stress come over me. I don't fight them. I'm acknowledging them as something that's a part of life. I also focus on the positive and what I feel grateful for in the day."

Umi: "I hold myself to very high standards. I always have. So when I go back for seconds, I get so angry afterwards that it's easy to just slip into thirds and fourths. Sometimes I will wait until everyone is finished and I'm cleaning the kitchen and then I eat more. The hardest thing about The Moment is dealing with my own self-criticism and anger. I really had to take a hard look at that and it has been pretty difficult to do. Not a quick fix – but The Moment seems to be an important element of my dealing with my food in a better way. I feel I'm making progress, and this gives me hope."