




WHY WE EAT MORE  
THAN WE THINK

Mindless  
**EATING**

"Brian Wansink's discoveries might very well  
change your life."—O, *The Oprah Magazine*

BRIAN WANSINK, PH.D.



# Mindless Eating

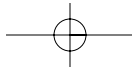
Why We Eat More  
Than We Think



Brian Wansink, Ph.D.

BANTAM BOOKS

New York Toronto London Sydney Auckland



MINDLESS EATING  
A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Bantam hardcover edition published October 2006

Bantam trade paperback edition / September 2007

Published by  
Bantam Dell

A Division of Random House, Inc.  
New York, New York

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2006 by Brian Wansink

Postscript copyright © 2007 by Brian Wansink

Illustrations by Mary Lynn Blasutta

Cover photo © Copperphoto/Corbis

Cover design by Tom McKeveny

Book design by Ellen Cipriano

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006047532

Bantam Books and the rooster colophon are registered trademarks of  
Random House, Inc.

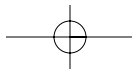
ISBN 978-0-553-38448-2

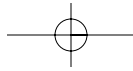
Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada

[www.bantamdell.com](http://www.bantamdell.com)

BVG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

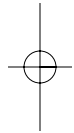




# *Contents*

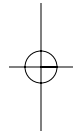


## **Introduction: The Science of Snacking 1**



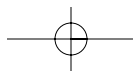
### **1. The Mindless Margin 15**

Stale Popcorn and Frail Willpower  
As Fine as North Dakota Wine  
The Dieter's Dilemma  
The Mindless Margin



### **2. The Forgotten Food 36**

The Prison Pounds Mystery  
We Believe Our Eyes, Not Our Stomach  
Eye It, Dish It, Eat It  
The Bottomless Soup Bowl  
People-Size or Meal-Size?



### 3. Surveying the Tablescape 57

King-Size Packages and the Power of Norms

Drinking Glass Illusions

Big Plates, Big Spoons, Big Servings

The Super Bowl Intelligentsia

The Temptation of Variety

### 4. The Hidden Persuaders Around Us 77

The “See-Food” Trap

Convenience: Would You Walk a Mile for a Caramel?

The Curse of the Warehouse Club

### 5. Mindless Eating Scripts 94

Family, Friends, and Fat

Eating Scripts of the Manly Man

All-You-Can-Eat Television

Slow Italian and Fast Chinese

Follow Your Nose

Check the Weather Forecast

### 6. The Name Game 118

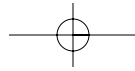
Eating in the Dark

They Call the Jell-O Yellow

Menu Magic

Brand-Name Psychosis

Do Sweetbreads Taste Like Coffee Cake?



**7. In the Mood for Comfort Food 139**

Comfort Foods and Comfort Moods

The Conditioning of Comfort

Fifty Years from the Front

Do You Save the Best for Last?

**8. Nutritional Gatekeepers 162**

The Nutritional Gatekeeper and the Good Cook Next Door

Food Inheritance: Like Mother, Like Daughter

Food Conditioning and the Popeye Project

Setting Serving-Size Habits for Life

**9. Fast-Food Fever 180**

The Variety and Convenience of Having It Our Way

The McSubway Study and Information Illusions

Do Low-Fat Labels Make Us Fat?

Health Halos and Nutrition Labels

What Serving Size?

De-Marketing Obesity and De-Supersizing

21st Century Marketing

**10. Mindlessly Eating Better 208**

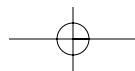
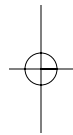
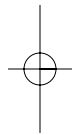
The Modest Goal of Better Eating

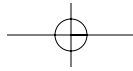
Reengineering Your Mindless Margin

The Power of Three

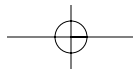
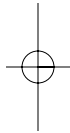
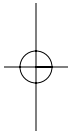
The Tyranny of the Moment

The First Step Toward Home





Appendix A: Comparing Popular Diets	221
Appendix B: Defusing Your Diet Danger Zones	225
Paperback Postscript: Frequently Asked Questions	235
Notes	251
Acknowledgments	282
Index	285






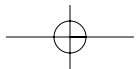
# 1

## The Mindless Margin

**D**ID YOU EVER EAT the last piece of crusty, dried-out chocolate cake even though it tasted like chocolate-scented cardboard? Ever finish eating a bag of french fries even though they were cold, limp, and soggy? It hurts to answer questions like these.

Why do we overeat food that doesn't even taste good?

We overeat because there are signals and cues around us that tell us to eat. It's simply not in our nature to pause after every bite and contemplate whether we're full. As we eat, we unknowingly—mindlessly—look for signals or cues that we've had enough. For instance, if there's nothing remaining on the table, that's a cue that it's time to stop. If everyone else has left the table, turned off the lights, and we're sitting alone in the dark, that's another cue. For many of us, as long as there are still a few milk-soaked Froot Loops left in the bottom of the cereal bowl, there is still work to be done. It doesn't matter if we're full, and it doesn't matter if we don't even really like Froot Loops. We eat as if it is our mission to finish them.<sup>1</sup>





### Stale Popcorn and Frail Willpower

Take movie popcorn, for instance. There is no “right” amount of popcorn to eat during a movie. There are no rules of thumb or FDA guidelines. People eat however much they want depending on how hungry they are and how good it tastes. At least that’s what they say.

My graduate students and I think different. We think that the cues around us—like the size of a popcorn bucket—can provide subtle but powerful suggestions about how much one should eat. These cues can short-circuit a person’s hunger and taste signals, leading them to eat even if they’re not hungry and even if the food doesn’t taste very good.

If you were living in Chicago a few years back, you might have been our guest at a suburban theater matinee. If you lined up to see the 1:05 P.M. Saturday showing of Mel Gibson’s new action movie, *Payback*, you would have had a surprise waiting for you: a free bucket of popcorn.

Every person who bought a ticket—even though many of them had just eaten lunch—was given a soft drink and either a medium-size bucket of popcorn or a large-size, bigger-than-your-head bucket. They were told that the popcorn and soft drinks were free and that we hoped they would be willing to answer a few concession stand-related questions after the movie.

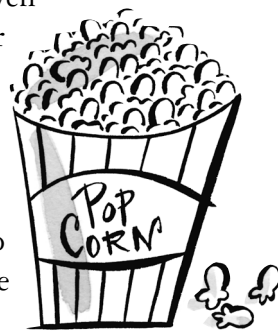
There was only one catch. This wasn’t fresh popcorn. Unknown to the moviegoers and even to my graduate students, this popcorn had been popped five days earlier and stored in sterile conditions until it was stale enough to squeak when it was eaten.

To make sure it was kept separate from the rest of the theater popcorn, it was transported to the theater in bright yellow garbage bags—the color yellow that screams “Biohazard.” The popcorn was safe to eat, but it was stale enough one moviegoer said it was like eating Styrofoam packing peanuts. Two others, forgetting they had been given it for free, asked for their money back. During the movie, people would eat a couple bites, put the bucket down, pick it up again a few minutes later and have a couple more bites, put it back down, and continue. It might not have been good enough to eat all at once, but they couldn’t leave it alone.

Both popcorn containers—medium and large—had been selected to be big enough that nobody could finish all the popcorn. And each person was given his or her own individual bucket so there would be no sharing.

As soon as the movie ended and the credits began to roll, we asked everyone to take their popcorn with them. We gave them a half-page survey (on bright biohazard-yellow paper) that asked whether they agreed to statements like “I ate too much popcorn,” by circling a number from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). As they did this, we weighed their remaining popcorn.

When the people who had been given the large buckets handed their leftover popcorn to us, we said, “Some people tonight were given medium-size buckets of popcorn, and others, like yourself, were given these large-size buckets. We have found that the average person who is given a large-size container eats more than if they are given a medium-



size container. Do you think you ate more because you had the large size?” Most disagreed. Many smugly said, “That wouldn’t happen to me,” “Things like that don’t trick me,” or “I’m pretty good at knowing when I’m full.”

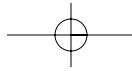
That may be what they believed, but it is not what happened.

Weighing the buckets told us that the big-bucket group ate an average of 173 more calories of popcorn. That is roughly the equivalent of 21 more dips into the bucket. Clearly the quality of food is not what led them to eat. Once these moviegoers started in on their bucket, the taste of the popcorn didn’t matter.<sup>2</sup> Even though some of them had just had lunch, people who were given the big buckets ate an average of 53 percent more than those given medium-size buckets. Give them a lot, and they eat a lot.

*And this was five-day-old, stale popcorn!*

We’ve run other popcorn studies, and the results were always the same, however we tweaked the details. It didn’t matter if our moviegoers were in Pennsylvania, Illinois, or Iowa, and it didn’t matter what kind of movie was showing; all of our popcorn studies led to the same conclusion. People eat more when you give them a bigger container. Period. It doesn’t matter whether the popcorn is fresh or fourteen days old, or whether they were hungry or full when they sat down for the movie.

Did people eat because they liked the popcorn? No. Did they eat because they were hungry? No. They ate because of all the cues around them—not only the size of the popcorn bucket, but also other factors I’ll discuss later, such as the distracting movie, the sound of people eating popcorn around them, and the eating scripts we take to movie theaters



with us. All of these were cues that signaled it was okay to keep on eating and eating.

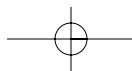
Does this mean we can avoid mindless eating simply by replacing large bowls with smaller bowls? That's one piece of the puzzle, but there are a lot more cues that can be engineered out of our lives. As you will see, these hidden persuaders can even take the form of a tasty description on a menu or a classy name on a wine bottle. Simply *thinking* that a meal will taste good can lead you to eat more. You won't even know it happened.

### As Fine as North Dakota Wine

The restaurant is open only 24 nights a year and serves an inclusive prix-fixe theme dinner each night. A nice meal will cost you less than \$25, but to get it you will have to phone for reservations and be seated at either 5:30 or 7:00 sharp. Despite these drawbacks, there is often a waiting list.

Welcome to the Spice Box.<sup>3</sup> The Spice Box looks like a restaurant; it sounds like a restaurant; and it smells like a restaurant. To the people eating there, it *is* a restaurant. To the people working there, it's a fine dining lab sponsored by the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The Spice Box is a lab where culinary hopefuls learn whether a new recipe will fly or go down in flames. It's a lab where waitstaff discover whether a new approach will sizzle or fizzle. It's also a lab where consumer psychologists have figured out what makes a person nibble a little or inhale it all.

There is a secret and imaginary line down the middle of



the dining room in the Spice Box. On one Thursday, diners on the left side of the room might be getting a different version of the shrimp coconut jambalaya entrée than those on the right. On the next Thursday, diners on the left side will be given a menu with basic English names for the food, while those on the right will be given a menu with French-sounding names. On the Thursday after that, diners on the left side will hear each entrée described by a waiter, while those on the right will read the same descriptions off the menu. At the end of the meal, sometimes we ask the diners some short survey questions, but other times we carefully weigh how much food our guests have left on their plates. That way we don't have to rely on what they say, we can rely on what they do—which version of shrimp coconut jambalaya they polished off.

But on one dark Thursday night in the first week of February 2004, something a little more mischievous was planned for diners who braved the snow to keep their reservations. They were getting a full glass of Cabernet Sauvignon before their meal. Totally free. Compliments of the house.

This cabernet was not a fine vintage. In fact, it was a \$2 bottle sold under the brand name Charles Shaw—popularly known as Two Buck Chuck. But our diners didn't know this. In fact, all the Charles Shaw labels had been soaked off the bottles and replaced with professionally designed labels that were 100 percent fake.

Those on the left side of the room were being offered wine from the fictional Noah's Winery, a new California label. The winery's classic, italicized logo was enveloped by a simple graphic of grapes and vines. Below this, the wine

proudly announced that it was “NEW from California.” After the diners arrived and were seated, the waiter or waitress said, “Good evening and welcome to the Spice Box. As you’re deciding what you want to eat this evening, we’re offering you a complimentary glass of Cabernet Sauvignon. It’s from a new California winery called Noah’s Winery.” Each person was then poured a standard 3.8-ounce glass of wine.<sup>4</sup>

About an hour later, after they had finished their meal and were paying for it, we weighed the amount of wine left in each glass and the amount of the entrée left on each plate. We also had a record of when each diner had started eating and when they paid their bill and left.

Diners on the right side of the room had exactly the same dining experience—with one exception. The waiter or waitress’s carefully scripted welcome introduced a cabernet “from a new *North Dakota* winery called Noah’s Winery.” The label was identical to that on the first bottle, except for the words “NEW from North Dakota.”

There is no Bordeaux region in North Dakota, nor is there a Burgundy region, nor a Champagne region. There is, however, a Fargo region, a Bismarck region, and a Minot region. It’s just that there are no wine grapes grown in any of them. California equals wine. North Dakota equals snow or buffalo.

People who were given “North Dakota wine” believed it *was* North Dakota wine. But since it was the same wine we poured for those who thought they were getting California wine, that shouldn’t influence their taste. Should it?

It did. We knew from an earlier lab study that people



who thought they were drinking North Dakota wine had such low expectations, they rated the wine as tasting bad *and* their food as less tasty. If a California wine label can give a glowing halo to an entire meal, a North Dakota wine label casts a shadow onto everything it touches.

But our focus that particular night was whether these labels would influence *how much* our diners ate.

After the meals were over, the first thing we discovered was that both groups of people drank about the same amount of wine—all of it. This was not so surprising. It was only one glass of wine and it was a cold night. Where they differed was in how much food they ate and how long they lingered at their table.

Compared to those unlucky diners given wine with North Dakota labels, people who thought they had been given a free glass of California wine ate 11 percent more of their food—19 of the 24 even cleaned their plates. They also lingered an average of 10 minutes longer at their table (64 minutes). They stayed pretty much until the waitstaff starting dropping hints that the next seating would be starting soon.

The night was not quite as magical for those given wine with the North Dakota label. Not only did they leave more food on their plates, this probably wasn't much of a meal to remember, because it went by so fast. North Dakota wine drinkers sat down, drank, ate, paid, and were out in 55 minutes—less than an hour. For them, this was clearly not a special meal, it was just food.

Exact same meals, exact same wine. Different labels, different reactions.

Now, to a cold-eyed skeptic, there should have been no difference between the two groups. They should have eaten the same amount and enjoyed it the same.

They didn't. *They mindlessly ate.* That is, once they were given a free glass of "California" wine, they said to themselves: "This is going to be good." Once they concluded it was going to be good, their experience lined up to confirm their expectations. They no longer had to stop and think about whether the food and wine were really as good as they thought. They had already decided.

Of course, the same thing happened to the diners who were given the "North Dakota" wine. Once they saw the label, they set themselves up for disappointment. There was no halo; there was a shadow. And not only was the wine bad, the entire meal fell short.

After our studies are over, we "debrief" people—often by e-mail—and tell them what the study was about and what results we expect. For instance, with our different wine studies, we might say, "We think the average person drinking what they believe is North Dakota wine will like their meal less than those given the 'California' wine." We then ask the kicker: "Do you think you were influenced by the state's name you saw on the label?" Almost all will give the exact same answer: "No, I wasn't."

In the thousands of debriefings we've done for hundreds of studies, nearly every person who was "tricked" by the words on a label, the size of a package, the lighting in a room, or the size of a plate said, "I wasn't influenced by that."

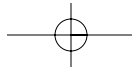


They might acknowledge that others could be “fooled,” but they don’t think *they* were. That is what gives mindless eating so much power over us—we’re not aware it’s happening.

Even when we *do* pay close attention we are suggestible—and even when it comes to cold, hard numbers. Take the concept of anchoring. If you ask people if there are more or less than 50 calories in an apple, most will say more. When you ask them how many, the average person will say, “66.” If you had instead asked if there were more or less than 150 calories in an apple, most would say less. When you ask them how many, the average person would say, “114.” People unknowingly anchor or focus on the number they first hear and let that bias them.

A while back, I teamed up with two professor friends of mine—Steve Hoch and Bob Kent—to see if anchoring influences how much food we buy in grocery stores. We believed that grocery shoppers who saw numerical signs such as “Limit 12 Per Person” would buy much more than those who saw signs such as “No Limit Per Person.” To nail down the psychology behind this, we repeated this study in different forms, using different numbers, different promotions (like “2 for \$2” versus “1 for \$1”), and in different supermarkets and convenience stores. By the time we finished, we knew that almost *any* sign with a number promotion leads us to buy 30 to 100 percent more than we normally would.<sup>5</sup>

After the research was completed and published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, another friend and I were in the checkout line at a grocery store, where I saw a sign advertising gum, “10 packs for \$2.” I was eagerly counting out 10 packs onto the conveyer belt, when my friend commented, “Didn’t you just publish a big research paper on that?”



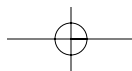
We're *all* tricked by our environment. Even if we “know it” in our head, most of the time we have way too much on our mind to remember it and act on it. That’s why it’s easier to change our environment than our mind.

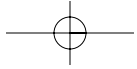
### The Dieter’s Dilemma

We’ve all heard of somebody’s cousin’s sister who went on a huge diet before her high school reunion, lost tons of weight, kept it off, won the lottery, and lived happily ever after. Yet we also know about 95 times as many people who started a diet and gave up in discouragement, or who started a diet, lost weight, gained more weight, and *then* gave up in discouragement.<sup>6</sup> After that, they started a different diet and repeated the same depriving, discouraging, demoralizing process. Indeed, it’s estimated that over 95 percent of all people who lose weight on a diet gain it back.<sup>7</sup>

Most diets are deprivation diets. We deprive ourselves or deny ourselves of something—carbohydrates, fat, red meat, snacks, pizza, breakfast, chocolate, and so forth. Unfortunately, deprivation diets don’t work for three reasons: 1) Our body fights against them; 2) our brain fights against them; and 3) our day-to-day environment fights against them.

Millions of years of evolution have made our body too smart to fall for our little “I’m only eating salad” trick. Our body’s metabolism is efficient. When it has plenty of food to burn, it turns up the furnace and burns our fat reserves faster. When it has less food to burn, it turns down the furnace and burns it more slowly and efficiently. This efficiency helped our ancestors survive famines and barren winters.



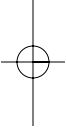
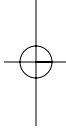


---

## Deprivation Diets and the Academy Awards: Pounds That Are Here, Gone, and Back Again Next Week

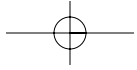
You know how it is. One day you're mindlessly eating ice cream in front of an open freezer door and—*bam*—all of a sudden you remember you have to be at the Academy Awards ceremony in three days.

How do the movie stars lose those last-minute pounds before walking the runway at the Oscars? An article in *People* showed that what they usually do is drastic, painful—and temporary.<sup>8</sup>

- EMMA THOMPSON: I try not to eat sugar, and I don't eat bread and biscuits. Actually, to be frank, I really don't eat any of the things I love, which is unfortunate. But I will get back to ice cream soon, which is my favorite food.
  - TARA REID: I won't eat that morning and that week I will only eat protein—egg whites and chicken. It makes a big difference. You look hot for a week, but you gain it all back the next. I also drink way more water.
  - VIVICA A. FOX: I pop herbal laxatives and drink as much coffee as I can to flush everything out.
  - MELISSA RIVERS: I limit my calorie intake and work out like crazy. I try to eat really clean the week prior. I always substitute one meal for just a salad with dressing on the side, and I dip my fork in the dressing.
  - BILL MURRAY: I did 200,000 crunches.
- 
- 

Drastic? Yes. Successful? As you can see from their answers, these deprivation diets worked only as long as was absolutely necessary. Five minutes after the Academy Awards ceremony is over, it's back to the normal routine, and the 10 pounds that were lost begin to find their way home again. Unless you're not yet finished with your 200,000 crunches.

---



But it doesn't help today's deprived dieter. If you eat too little, the body goes into conservation mode and makes it even tougher to burn off the pounds.

This type of weight loss is not mindless. It's like pushing a boulder uphill every second of every day.

How much weight loss triggers the conservation switch? It seems that we can lose half a pound a week without triggering a metabolism slowdown.<sup>9</sup> Some people may be able to lose more, but everyone can lose at least half a pound a week and still be in full-burn mode. The only problem is that this is too slow for many of us. We think weight loss has to be all or nothing. This is why so many impatient people try to lose it all and end up losing nothing.

Now for our brains. If we consciously deny ourselves something again and again, we're likely to end up craving it more and more.<sup>10</sup>

It doesn't matter whether you're deprived of affection, vacation, television, or your favorite foods. Being deprived is not a great way to enjoy life. Nevertheless, the first thing many dieters do is cut out their comfort foods. This becomes a recipe for dieting disaster, because any diet that is based on denying yourself the foods you really like is going to be really temporary. The foods we don't bite can come back to bite us. When the diet ends—either because of frustration or because of temporary success—you're back wolfing down your comfort foods with a hungry vengeance. With all that sacrificing you've been doing, there's a lot of catching up to do.

When it comes to losing weight, we can't rely only on our brain, or our "cognitive control," a.k.a. willpower. If we're making more than 200 food-related decisions each day,

### The Bigger the Deprivation, the Bigger the Fall

“. . . a nationally known psychologist and expert on eating disorders was arrested in a West Hartford, Conn., convenience store after, according to police, passing out from inhaling the aerosol from three cans of whipped cream.”

—“*News of the Weird*,” October 2005<sup>11</sup>

as our research has shown, it’s almost impossible to have them all be diet-book perfect. We have millions of years of evolution and instinct telling us to eat as often as we can and to eat as much as we can. Most of us simply do not have the mental fortitude to stare at a plate of warm cookies on the table and say, “I’m not going to eat a cookie, I’m not going to eat a cookie,” and then not eat the cookie. It’s only so long before our “No, no, maybe, maybe” turns into a “Yes.”

Our bodies fight against deprivation, and our brains fight against deprivation.<sup>12</sup> And to make matters worse, our day-to-day environment is set up to booby-trap any half-hearted effort we can muster. There are great smells on every fast-food corner. There are warm, comfort-food feelings we get from television commercials. There are better-than-homemade-tasting 85¢ snacks in every vending machine and gas station. We have billions of dollars’ worth of marketing

giving us the perfect foods that our big hearts and big tummies desire.

Yet before we blame those evil marketers, let's look at the traps we set for ourselves. We make an extra "family-size" portion of pasta so no one goes hungry at dinner. We lovingly leave latchkey snacks on the table for our children (and ourselves). We use the nice, platter-size dinner plates that we can pile with food. We heat up a piece of apple pie in the microwave while the lonely apple shivers in the crisper. Best intentions aside, we're Public Enemy #1 when it comes to booby-trapping the diets and willpower of both ourselves and our family.

The good news is that the same levers that almost invisibly lead you to slowly gain weight can also be pushed in the other direction to just as invisibly lead you to slowly lose weight—*unknowingly*. If we don't realize we're eating a little less than we need, we don't feel deprived. If we don't feel deprived, we're less likely to backslide and find ourselves overeating to compensate for everything we've forgone. The key lies in the *mindless margin*.

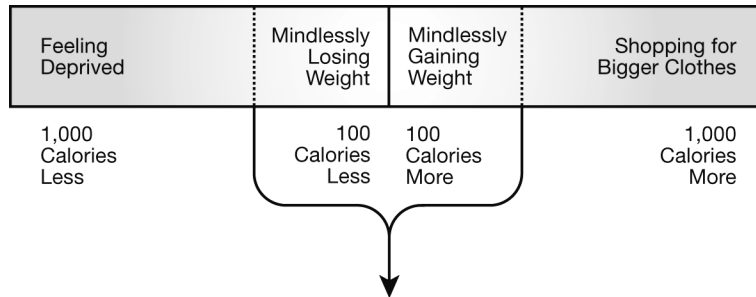
### The Mindless Margin

No one goes to bed skinny and wakes up fat. Most people gain (or lose) weight so gradually they can't really figure out how it happened. They don't remember changing their eating or exercise patterns.<sup>13</sup> All they remember is once being able to fit into their favorite pants without having to hold their breath and hope they can get the zipper to budge.

Sure, there are exceptions. If we gorge ourselves at the all-you-can-eat pizza buffet, then clean out the chip bowl at the Super Bowl party, then stop by the Baskin-Robbins drive-through for a belly-buster sundae on the way home, we realize we've gone too far over the top. But on most days we have very little idea whether we've eaten 50 calories too much or 50 calories too little. In fact, most of us wouldn't know if we ate 200 or 300 calories more or less than the day before.

This is the mindless margin. It's the margin or zone in which we can either slightly overeat or slightly undereat without being aware of it. Suppose you can eat 2,000 calories a day without either gaining or losing weight.<sup>14</sup> If one day, however, you only ate 1,000 calories, you would know it. You'd feel weak, light-headed, cranky, and you'd snap at the dog. On the other hand, you'd also know it if you ate 3,000 calories. You'd feel a little heavier, slower, and more like flopping on the couch and petting the cat.

If we eat way too little, we know it. If we eat way too much, we know it. But there is a calorie range—a *mindless margin*—where we feel fine and are unaware of small differences. That is, the difference between 1,900 calories and 2,000 calories is one we cannot detect, nor can we detect the difference between 2,000 and 2,100 calories. But over the course of a year, this mindless margin would either cause us to lose ten pounds or to gain ten pounds. It takes 3,500 extra calories to equal one pound. It doesn't matter if we eat these extra 3,500 calories in one week or gradually over the entire year. They'll add up to one pound.



### The Mindless Margin

This is the danger of creeping calories. Just 10 extra calories a day—one stick of Doublemint gum or three small Jelly Belly jelly beans—will make you a pound more portly one year from today.<sup>15</sup> Only three Jelly Bellies a day.

Fortunately, the same thing happens in the opposite direction.

One colleague of mine, Cindy, had lost around 20 pounds during her first two years at a new job. When I asked how she lost the weight, she couldn't really answer. After some persistent questioning, it seemed that the only deliberate change she'd made two years earlier was to give up caffeine. She switched from coffee to herbal tea. That didn't seem to explain anything.

"Oh yeah," she said, "and because I gave up caffeine, I also stopped drinking Coke." She had been drinking about six cans a week—far from a serious habit—but the 139 calories in each Coke translated into 12 pounds a year. She wasn't even aware of why she'd lost weight. In her mind all she'd done was cut out caffeine.

In a classic article in *Science*, Drs. James O. Hill and John C. Peters suggested that cutting only 100 calories a



### How Much Will I Lose in a Year?

If you make a change, there's an easy way to estimate how much weight you'll lose in a year. You simply divide the calories by 10. That's roughly the number of pounds you'll lose if you're otherwise in energy balance.

One less 270 calorie candy bar each day = 27 fewer pounds a year  
One less 140 calorie soft drink each day = 14 fewer pounds a year  
One less 420 calorie bagel or donut each day = 42 fewer pounds a year

The same thing works with burning calories: walking one extra mile a day is 100 calories and 10 pounds a year. Exercise is good, but for most people it's a lot easier to give up a candy bar than to walk 2.7 miles to a vending machine.

day from our diets would prevent weight gain in most of the U.S. population.<sup>16</sup> If the majority of people gain only a pound or two each year, anything a person does to make this 100-calorie difference will lead most of us to *lose* weight. We can do it by walking an extra 2,000 steps each day (about one mile), or we can do it by eating 100 calories less than we otherwise would.

The best way to trim 100 or 200 calories a day is to do it in a way that doesn't make you feel deprived. It's easy to rearrange your kitchen and change a few eating habits so you don't have to think about eating less or differently. And the silver lining is that the same things that lead us to mindlessly gain weight can also help us mindlessly lose weight.

How much weight? Unlike what you hear in 3:00 A.M. infomercials, it would not be 10 pounds in 10 hours, or 10 pounds in 10 days. It's not even going to be 10 pounds in 10 weeks. You would notice that, and you would feel deprived. Instead, suppose you stay within the mindless margin for losing weight and trim 100–200 calories a day. You probably won't feel deprived, and in 10 months you'll be in the neighborhood of 10 pounds lighter. It won't put you in this year's *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, but it might put you back in some of your "signal" clothes, and it'll make you feel better without costing you bread, pasta, and your comfort foods.

Cutting out our favorite foods is a bad idea. Cutting down on *how much* of them we eat is mindlessly do-able. Many fad diets focus more on the *types* of foods we can eat rather than *how much* we should eat. But the problem isn't that we order beef instead of a low-fat chicken breast. The problem is that the beef is often twice the size. A low-fat chicken breast that we resent having to eat may be no better for our long-term diet than a tastier but slightly smaller piece of beef.

If we're looking at only a 100- or 200-calorie difference a day, these are not calories we'll miss. We can trim them out of our day relatively easily—and unknowingly. Herein lies the secret of the mindless margin.



**“I’m Not Hungry but  
I’m Going to Eat This Anyway.”**

Over coffee, a new friend commented that he’d lost 30 pounds within the past year. When I asked him how, he explained he didn’t stop eating potato chips, pizza, or ice cream. He ate anything he wanted, but if he had a craving when he wasn’t hungry he’d say—out loud—“I’m not hungry but I’m going to eat this anyway.”

Having to make that declaration—out loud—would often be enough to prevent him from mindlessly indulging. Other times, he would take a nibble but be much more mindful of what he was doing.

***Reengineering Strategy #1:***

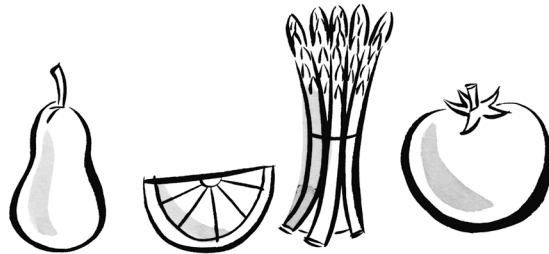
***Think 20 Percent—More or Less***

While most Americans stop eating when they’re full, those in leaner cultures stop eating when they’re no longer hungry. There’s a significant calorie gap between the point where an Okinawan says, “I’m no longer hungry,” and where an American says, “I’m full.” The Okinawans even have an expression for when to stop eating. They call the concept *hara hachi bu*—eating until you’re just 80 percent full.<sup>17</sup>

- **Think 20 percent less.** Dish out 20 percent less than you think you might want before you start to eat. You probably won’t miss it. In most of our studies, people can eat 20 percent less without noticing

it. If they eat 30 percent less they realize it, but 20 percent is still under the radar screen.

- **For fruits and vegetables, think 20 percent more.** If you cut down how much pasta you dish out by 20 percent, increase the veggies by 20 percent.



in our studies, we don't eliminate these people's contact information. At their request, we keep them "in the loop" about new studies and by sending them newsletters as to what we are learning and how they can apply this in their lives.

### 1. *The Mindless Margin*

1. See Brian Wansink, "Environmental Factors that Increase the Food Intake and Consumption Volume of Unknowing Consumers," *Annual Review of Nutrition* 24 (2004): 455–79.
2. On average, those given the medium-size bucket ate 61.1 grams, while those given the large bucket ate 93.5 grams. Nobody finished all of their popcorn, which had been popped in partially hydrogenated (meaning "bad" trans fats) canola oil. This study was filmed for the ABC News' *Morning Edition*. It can be viewed at [www.MindlessEating.org](http://www.MindlessEating.org). See Brian Wansink and SeaBum Park, "At the Movies: How External Cues and Perceived Taste Impact Consumption Volume," *Food Quality and Preference*, 12:1(January 2001): 69–74.
3. The Spice Box can be found in Bevier Hall on the campus of the University of Illinois in Urbana. It's open January through April, and reservations can be made by calling 1-217-333-6520. It now serves dinner on Tuesdays and Fridays. The article described here is: Brian Wansink, Collin Payne, and Jill North, "Fine as North Dakota Wine: Sensory Experiences and the Intake of Companion Foods," *Physiology and Behavior* 90:5 (2007), 712–16.
4. Special mega-cudos to Jill North, co-author and manager of the Fine Dining Program. After we designed the study, designed the labels, purchased the wine, and set up the experimental protocol, I was called out of the country. Instead of postponing the study, she managed to pull it off in one long evening with the help of the rest of our team.
5. See Brian Wansink, Robert J. Kent, and Stephen J. Hoch, "An

- Anchoring and Adjustment Model of Purchase Quantity Decisions," *Journal of Marketing Research* 35:1 (February 1998): 71–81.
6. The speed at which you gain weight after going off a diet is almost always directly related to the speed you lost the weight to begin with. If you miraculously lose 10 pounds in two days with the new Celebrity Fad Diet, you're likely to miraculously gain it back almost as fast.
  7. See Maureen T. McGuire, Rena R. Wing, Mary L. Klem, and James O. Hill, "What Predicts Weight Regain in a Group of Successful Weight Losers?" *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 67:2 (1999): 177–85.
  8. Quotations were adapted from "Last-Minute Diet Secrets," *People* (March 16, 2004): 122–25.
  9. This conclusion is from a series of studies alluded to in David A. Levitsky, "The Non-Regulation of Food Intake in Humans: Hope for Reversing the Epidemic of Obesity," *Physiology & Behavior* 86:5 (December 2005): 623–32.
  10. Much of the best work on restrained eaters has been conducted by Janet Polivy and C. Peter Herman. A typical example of this is Janet Polivy, J. Coleman, and C. Peter Herman, "The Effect of Deprivation on Food Cravings and Eating Behavior in Restrained and Unrestrained Eaters," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 38:4 (December 2005): 301–09.
  11. This syndicated column was widely reprinted with the name of the nationally known psychologist. It was taken from "News of the Weird," *Funny Times* (October 2005): 25.
  12. The best current thinking on this is being done by Roy Baumeister. See Roy F. Baumeister, "Yielding to Temptation: Self-Control Failure, Impulsive Purchasing, and Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research* 28:4 (2002): 670–76. Other research includes that by Erica M. Okada, "Justification Effects on Consumer Choice of Hedonic and Utilitarian Goods," *Journal of Marketing Research* 42:1 (2005): 43–53; and by Baba Shiv and Alexander Fedorikhin, "Heart and Mind in

Conflict: The Interplay of Affect and Cognition in Consumer Decision Making,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 26 (December 1999): 278–92.

13. N. E. Sherwood, Robert W. Jeffrey, Simone French, et al., “Predictors of Weight Gain in the Pound of Prevention Study,” *International Journal of Obesity* 24:4 (April 2000): 395–403.
14. If you burn off the same number of calories each day as you eat, you are “in energy balance.” The exact number of calories you need to be in energy balance varies depending on your weight and how much you move during the day. Smaller adults burn fewer calories a day than larger adults; active people more than inactive people.
15. A pound is roughly equivalent to 3,500 calories. Eating three Jelly Belly jelly beans a day (12 calories) would lead to 4,380 calories over the year. Similarly, drinking one can of Coca-Cola (139 calories) each day would amount to 101,470 calories—29 pounds—over a two-year period.
16. See James O. Hill and John C. Peters, “Environmental Contributions to the Obesity Epidemic,” *Science*, 280 (5368): 1371–74.
17. See Bradley J. Willcox, M.D., D. Craig Willcox, Ph.D., and Makoto Suzuki, M.D., *The Okinawa Program* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2001).

## 2. *The Forgotten Food*

1. People generally thought they ate about 28 percent less than they actually did. See Brian Wansink and Lawrence W. Linder, “Interactions Between Forms of Fat Consumption and Restaurant Bread Consumption,” *International Journal of Obesity* 27:7 (2003): 866–68.
2. Two excellent research projects addressing this are David A. Booth and Richard P. J. Freeman, “Are Calories Attributed or

