

‘WHAT? I’m supposed to LEAVE some of my MUFFIN?’



When Deputy Editor Nicola Down visited a new holistic retreat that claimed could change her attitude to food for life, she discovered weight loss was all in the mind

Losing weight should be the simplest thing on earth, right? Cut calories, exercise more and the weight drops off... But anyone who’s ever been on a diet knows it’s not always that easy. Me? Although I’m an experienced health journalist who knows all about what I should and shouldn’t be doing, I’m human, too. I’ve used food as therapy, as comfort, as punishment. I’ve forced down pounds of raw vegetables and gone low fat, low calorie, low sugar, low everything. At other times I’ve done nothing but lust after food, consuming it excessively, unthinkingly, mindlessly, with zero regard to where all those calories will go. On practically a yearly basis, I’ll swing from a voluptuous size 16 to a more slender 12, then back again. Oh, how I’m bored of it all.

And so I find myself sitting around a grand dining table with seven other diet-fatigued people at a luxury holistic weight-loss retreat

in Devon. We’re all waiting for the same thing – to hear about the new way of eating that will mean we *never* need diet again.

Follow ‘mindful eating’ principles and you’ll change your attitude to food and naturally eat less, enabling you to lose weight for life,’ explains Victoria Wills, founder of NuBeginnings. ‘You know how it is at most mealtimes: we sit down and start eating, keeping a non-stop train of food going from our plates to our mouths and barely pausing to enjoy one spoonful before having another. Work on being more mindful and conscious of your eating habits, and you’ll consume less, which will help you lose excess pounds effortlessly, without having to ban the food you love – or go on a diet.’

And focusing on more conscious eating was exactly what I was asked to do during my week-long stay. Read on and discover the four surprisingly simple tricks that I soon discovered really do work:

THE RULES OF ‘MINDFUL EATING’

1. Listen to your body and stop when you’re full

I know what you’re thinking – easier said than done. For me, too. Put it this way: as long as there are still a few milk-soaked Corn Flakes in the bottom of my cereal bowl, there is still work to be done, in my book! It doesn’t matter if those flakes are soggy and I’m full to the brim – I keep going, regardless.

‘Changing well-established behaviour patterns can be challenging, especially when it comes to our routines about eating,’ reassures Wills. ‘What you need to do is bring all your power of attention to what you’re doing at mealtimes, and learn to be more aware of what your body is saying. That little voice that tells you when you’re full has somewhere along the line become buried by a louder, subconscious one, which is driving you

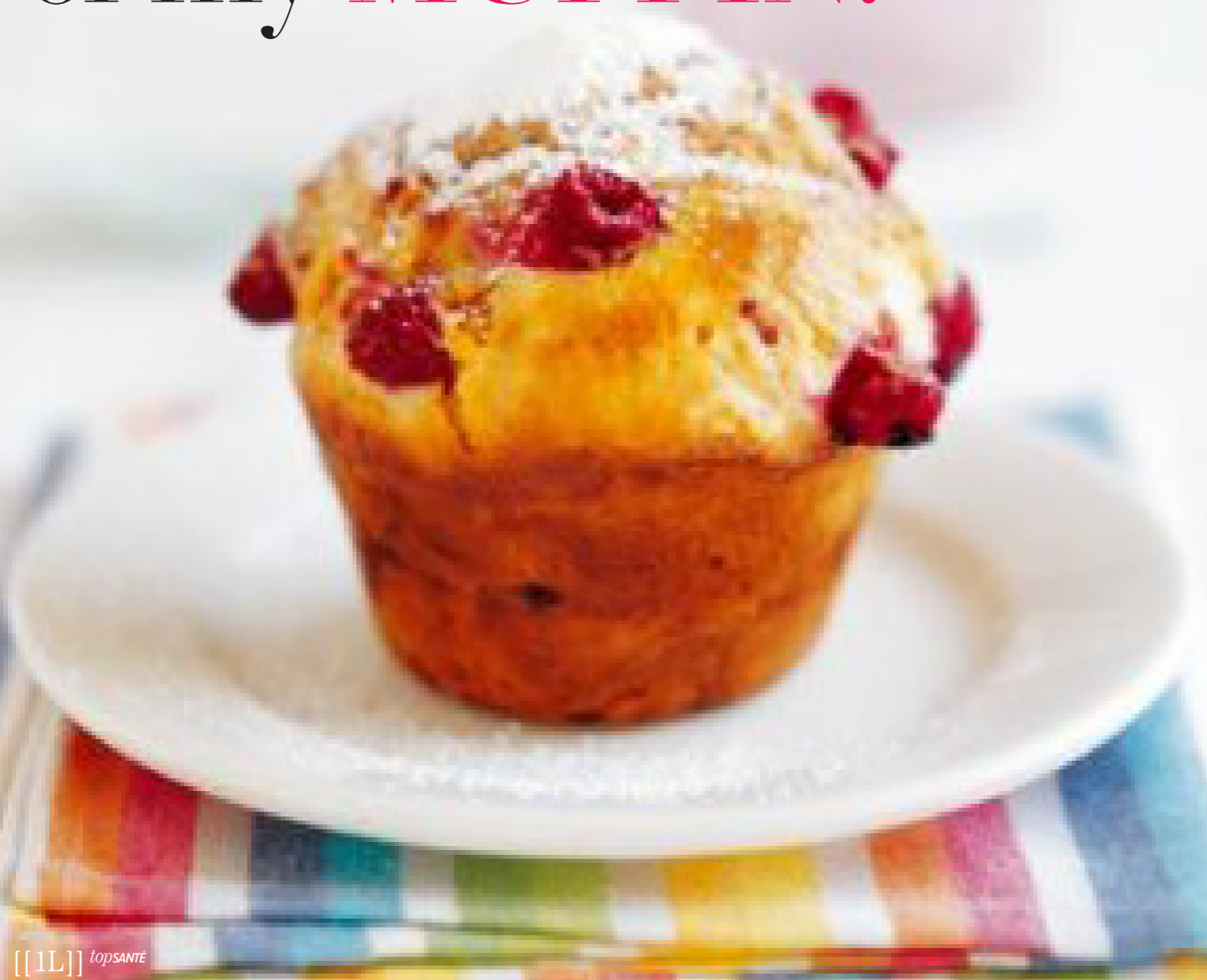
to clean your plate. But it *is* still there – you’ve just got to listen out for it.’ And she was right: the voice is there. But, as I discovered, it’s likely to need some fine tuning to get it to a volume you will actually pay attention to.

On the first couple of days of my stay at NuBeginnings, the ‘I want more’ part of my brain that had led me to overeat for years was all I could detect. So much so, that I wondered if I even had this

‘The little voice that tells you when you’re full has become buried’

‘fullness signal’ that everyone was talking about. But, by day three, I could recognise its humble murmurings, and by day five, it was booming loud and clear. What had I discovered? When your body wonders, ‘Am I full?’ It is! So don’t question yourself and just stop eating. Right at that moment. Soon, you’ll be able to hear your fullness signal more clearly and always know when you’ve had enough.

And perhaps the best thing that I uncovered through listening to my body more was my very own built-in diet coach. One who genuinely wanted me to stop comfort eating and stay slim – all I had to do was stop ignoring it. **TRY THIS:** Give each meal or snack your full attention. Switch off the TV; put aside that newspaper or book. It is vital to carve out a calm, quiet time for eating, where you are sitting down at a table and concentrating only on your food. >



2. Chew your food slowly

As elementary as this rule may seem, it's astounding how many of us – myself included – don't. 'Most people only chew once or twice and then gulp it down hurriedly,' confirms Wills. 'You don't need to be obsessive about how many times you chew, but paying attention like this will make each bite a choice rather than a reflex or a habit – helping you to make smarter food choices.'

This is one 'mindful eating' rule that I immediately knew I'd need to work on: when I'm out to dinner with friends, I've finished before they've so much as picked up their cutlery. Further thinking about the reason behind this is pretty revealing, too – I'm at my speediest when I'm having something 'naughty'. It's almost as if the faster I can get it down, the less guilty I need to feel about it. Sure, I felt like a cow chewing the cud when I first started focusing on this 'mindful eating' technique but, as the week wore on, it did become more natural. Plus, I soon discovered that concentrating on this simple act helped me address both the speed and the guilt

'Pay attention to chewing your food so that it becomes a choice, not a reflex'



while I managed to get the hang of putting the cutlery on the table after each bite, physically letting it out of my grasp every time was another struggle all together.

Is it really worth the bother of doing it after every mouthful, I ask. 'Definitely,' Wills quickly answers. 'Again, it makes you more aware of your eating and brings your attention to your food, slowing you right down. Plus, it's much easier to take smaller portions when you're more conscious of what your knife and fork are doing.' So persist I did, and she's right – it certainly puts the breaks on your eating. Admittedly, it feels a bit forced and contrived at first (and, yes, you will initially worry about your food going cold), but by registering the physical process of eating, you'll find it easier to say no to that last roast potato.

TRY THIS: Ask your partner, or whoever else you're dining

with, to keep reminding you to put your cutlery down (and let go), so it quickly becomes second nature. Soon, you'll do it without even thinking.

4. Always leave something on your plate

Yes, even if it's delicious, even if it's expensive, even if your partner spent ages cooking it. 'From a young age, we were told to eat everything in front of us. There were consequences if we didn't and praise when we did,' says Wills. 'All these threats, promises and rewards still cause us to overeat in adulthood, but by consciously making a point of leaving something on your plate, you can break that.' As someone who adores food, this rule is tough. In practice, it caused lots of mental struggles as I tried to overcome my desire to eat every last morsel on my plate – and then go back for seconds.

'Leaving something at every meal, no matter how delicious, will ultimately help you beat those urges,' reassures Wills. 'As time goes on, it means you're

factor that was often driving my fast and fattening pace. How? Because I realised that when I wasn't rushing, I really tasted what I put in my mouth – appreciated the textures, enjoyed the flavours. This in itself stopped me wanting more food and gave me a new-found respect for it. In short, I've found chewing your food properly results in more pleasure and less guilt. It makes you register what you're taking into your body and the thought processes and emotions that led you to it in the first place. All these benefits just from eating more slowly!

TRY THIS: When dining out, be the last to start eating and the last to finish. Still need help? Sit next to someone who you know will be the slowest at the table and use them as a pacemaker – it's bound to slow you down.

3. Put your cutlery down (and let go!) between every single mouthful

Sounds simple. It isn't. I'm ashamed to say that my fellow NuBeginnings diners had to bark 'Fork!' constantly to get me to follow this 'mindful eating' rule. And

What are you really hungry for?

Mindful eating doesn't ban you from specific foods, but it does want you to think about what led you to eat in the first place. Do you really want a bar of chocolate, or do you just need a hug?

EMOTIONAL HUNGER	PHYSICAL HUNGER
Develops suddenly	Builds gradually
In the mind (a "craving" for crisps)	In the body (a growling stomach)
Unrelated to time	Occurs several hours after a meal
Persists, despite fullness	Goes away when full
Eating leads to feelings of guilt and shame	Eating leads to feelings of satisfaction

'It's better to put something in the bin than treat your body like one'

more able to let go of the unnecessary, imposed obligation to eat when you're not really hungry anymore.' So did I manage to leave any of the delicious food that the NuBeginnings chef had lovingly prepared for me, including a chunk of perhaps the best breakfast muffin I've ever tasted? I certainly did, and since I left the retreat, I've managed to do the same with a piece of banoffee pie and a slice of a colleague's truly legendary chocolate cake. And do you know what? On both occasions it felt incredibly empowering. So the next time you're struggling *not* to clear your plate, remember that in the end it's far better to put something in the bin than to treat your body like one.

TRY THIS: When you feel an urge coming – like polishing off that last forkful of fish pie – observe it building, peaking and passing. And then remind yourself: 'It's just an urge. I don't need to act on it.'

My verdict

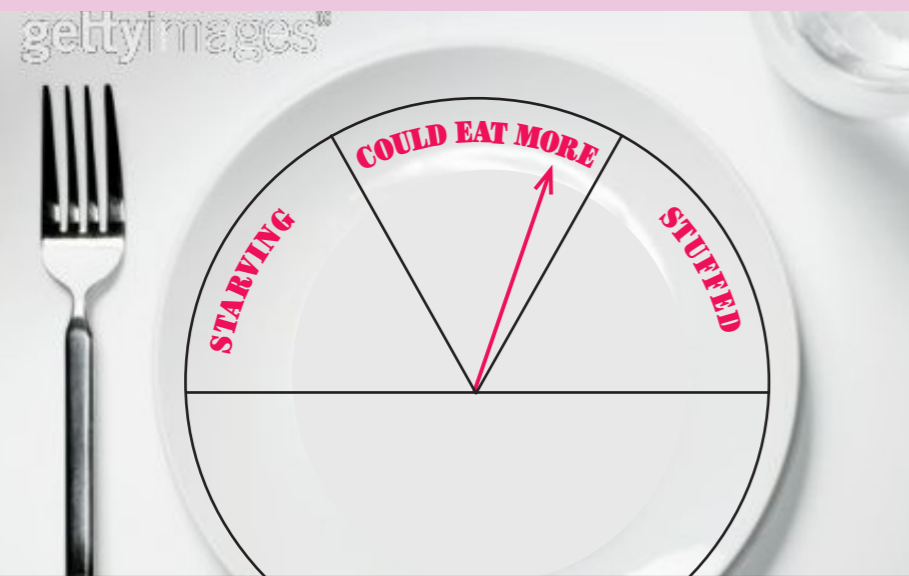
'Mindful eating' delivers exactly what it promises. Three weeks after learning its concept at NuBeginnings, I've kept off the 5lbs I lost during my stay, plus shed a few more without micro-managing calories or feeling that I'm depriving myself. The other members of my group had the same success – between eight of us we lost a remarkable 6st during our stay and, most importantly, know how to keep it off. But, best of all, I do feel I've learned how to get out of a rut with my bad eating habits and, for once, I can't see myself slipping back into my old ways.

Of course it's probably far easier to eat mindfully in a luxury five-star weight-loss retreat than in your hectic everyday life, but whether I'm able to leave that bit of muffin on my plate in the future depends on my diligence. 'Mindful eating' is the diet that's all in your mind, but I for one don't intend to let myself forget it. □

● For more details on NuBeginnings in Ilfracombe, Devon, visit www.nubeginnings.co.uk or call 01271 862732. A week's stay at the retreat starts at £1,895, and includes chef-cooked meals, diet coaching, a fitness programme, massages and mindful therapies, such as hypnotherapy, acupuncture and NLP.

WHEN TO STOP

Countless studies have shown that the body has three main hunger settings. Obviously there are grey areas, but what you need to focus on is the 'I'm full, but I could eat more' zone. This is the level that will prevent you from putting on weight, but still leave you feeling satisfied after a meal.



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