

Eating Under the Influence

of our environment

How our environment can cause “impaired eating”.

Goals and Guidance

- 1 To begin the workshop with an interactive discussion that is fairly impersonal, thereby creating a less-threatening atmosphere to promote the sharing of observations and experiences.
- 2 To increase participants' awareness of the challenges of healthy eating in our society.
- 3 To have participants recognize their own expertise and wisdom regarding environmental factors that influence their eating.

A number of researchers have studied the influence of the external environment on eating behaviours. Some studies focus on very specific factors such as food descriptors, packaging and portions while others look at contextual factors such as product location or food availability. The evidence suggests that the impact of these often undetectable elements can be considerable. An increased awareness of some of these environmental factors can be an important component when changing eating habits.

As this discussion does not focus on 'the individual' per se, it promotes a less-threatening, more comfortable setting for a lively, informal session. Within moments of opening up the discussion you will get input from the group – guaranteed!

It is most effective to let this discussion flow freely. Ten environmental factors that often prompt problematic eating are outlined in the Facilitator's Notes. These can be highlighted in any order in the discussion. Participants may also identify other environmental prompts that are not listed.

This session can promote group cohesion which will increase the effectiveness of future workshop activities.

The Facilitator's Notes include:

- Questions that you can ask to stimulate ideas if there is a lull in the discussion.
- Short observations and comments that you may use to expand on a point that is raised by a participant.
- Brief scenarios similar to those reported in external eating stimuli studies. Read out the scenario to the group and ask them to consider the predicted response to these environmental prompts. (Summaries are in shaded boxes of text. Note that there is more information about studies on external factors related to eating in the online Certified Facilitator Resource Library.)

2. Guide the discussion so that the group identifies most of the ten environmental influences or prompts described below, in any order. Allow approximately 15 minutes for the discussion.

Our hectic lifestyle demands convenience → “We live in fast forward”

An increasing level of stress → “We expect a lot from ourselves”

Food is readily available → “Food is everywhere!”

Persuasive marketing and advertising → “Food is big business”

Packaging and food storage → “We think big”

Increasing variety → “Too many choices”

Food pricing → “We love a deal”

Easy access to food → “Food is always within reach”

Serving sizes have increased → “XX-large portions”

Bigger serving dishes and utensils → “Optical illusions”

It would take too much time to include all the Facilitator's Notes below in one workshop. Pick and choose the questions, comments, scenarios and study summaries that you feel would add to the ideas suggested by the participants, or help prompt the group to reflect on the discussion questions.

We live in fast forward

We are a society on the go. Life has become very hectic.

We often combine eating with other activities.

How many of you . . .

- Eat at your desk at work?
- Enjoy dashboard dining, in other words eating while in your vehicle?
- Eat while watching TV or reading?
- Nibble on food while you're cooking or cleaning up after a meal?
- Eat while you're shopping or going for a walk?

A poll of over 1500 people revealed that 91% typically watch TV when eating meals at home and 62% were sometimes, or often, too busy to sit down and eat. If we're eating while focusing on something else, how can we even tell when we are feeling full?

The colours used to decorate stores or restaurants, the music that is played, and the layout of the eating area or aisles are carefully chosen. Baking and cooking foods in the store will arouse our sense of smell tempting us to buy certain foods.

Advertising on television, on the internet and in magazines influences our eating behaviour. Food advertising continues to be very common on television, especially during children's programs. The “advertised” diet is not the same as the recommended, healthy diet.

Food companies employ psychologists to develop advertising that can affect how we feel, therefore persuading us to buy a product because we're convinced it will make us feel better or prevent us from having negative feelings. For example, a woman may be hopeful that she will be more relaxed and satisfied with life if she eats a certain brand of yogurt. A teenager may be persuaded to buy a brand of soft drink because the teens shown on the ad drinking the product appear very popular and happy.

We think big

How would you manage if your kitchen was equipped with a fridge and cupboards the size of those in a travel trailer? These are the dimensions found in kitchens in many parts of the world. Societies that are used to large capacity fridges and freezers, and walk-in pantries can store a large amount of food in their homes at one time.

Part of this is the difference in food shopping habits. In North America, people tend to shop for food once a week as opposed to Europe where they often shop every day, buying only the food they will prepare for their meals that day. It's more convenient to shop less often, but it means that you have more food in your house.

We also tend to buy in bulk. How many of you have a membership to a warehouse store? The big, bulk-size packages may be cheaper than buying smaller packages, however it has been proven that the more we buy, the more we consume.

The results from several scientific studies have provided evidence for this connection. When we eat from large packages or are served large portions, we eat more compared to small packages or portions. This makes sense, right? It's the law of human nature, 'the more we buy, the more we consume'. And, it's probably true for most things whether it's popcorn, cookies, cereal, spaghetti or shampoo.

Too many choices

Have you ever counted how many different food choices we have now?

Consider . . .

- Breakfast cereals
- Pizza topping combinations
- Flavours of fruit beverages
- Snack foods – crackers, soda pop, granola bars
- Baby food and pet food

The number of different food choices we have has increased incredibly just in the last 20 years. So, does greater variety affect our eating behaviour? You bet it does! It turns out that we eat more when we have more variety. We like to try the different choices.

Imagine that your friend takes you out for your birthday. A dessert buffet is included with your meal. The buffet is a beautiful display of every dessert you can think of from an assortment of fruit pies, dipped strawberries, creamy puddings and an amazing triple layer chocolate mousse cake. How many servings of dessert do you think you would choose and put on your plate? Now, imagine that you and your friend are at the same restaurant but this time when you go to the dessert buffet, all they have is the triple layer chocolate mousse cake. There are several of them on display and they still look amazing, but they're all the same. In this case, how many servings of dessert would you choose?

Isn't this what happens when we go to a buffet? With the great variety of choices, we typically eat much more than if we order a meal off a menu.

We love a deal

Most of us have grown up learning to spend our money wisely. We feel very satisfied if we get a good deal when we buy something, whether it's a new vehicle or outfit, or a quick lunch meal. Money has become a real motivator and the food industry prices food to make us feel we have received real value for our hard-earned money.

Simply putting a number on a pricing sign will persuade us to buy more. For example, buy 2 get one free, save 15%, 3 for \$10, limit of 4.

Imagine picking up pizza for lunch. You can buy one large slice of pizza for \$2.99, or two slices for \$4.99. Even though one slice of pizza is plenty to fill you up, it is very tempting to buy two slices because it gives you more value for your money. If you give in to this pricing tactic, you end up spending more money and overeating, but will feel good because you got a deal.

The “all-you-can-eat” buffets are another example of how getting value for your money influences how much you eat.

Food is always within reach

- Do you keep dishes of candy or nuts out on your coffee table?
- Do you have a stash of snacks in your desk drawer or vehicle?
- Do you do your hobbies or household paper work at the kitchen table?
- Are there always snacks sitting out in your staff break room?

If food is handy we are more likely to eat it if we're hungry or not. Most of us aren't craving a chocolate bar when we pull our cart up to the grocery store check-out counter, yet while standing in line for our turn the candies are an easy impulse purchase due to sheer accessibility.

Food manufacturers have made it very easy to access food. Even our homes are designed so that it is only a few steps from our couch in the family room to the kitchen cupboard or fridge. Vending machines, mobile lunch trucks and snack carts at work practically bring the food to us.

Convenience stores are conveniently located near schools. Compare this to our parents' generation when children often didn't have extra money to spend on treats, and didn't even have access to the fridge or pantry in their own home for snacks.

How about doing your own study? Test how your eating behaviour, and maybe that of your family, is influenced by the accessibility and convenience of food. Here are the instructions:

Week One

Leave an assortment of fresh fruit in the crisper drawer in the refrigerator.

Week Two

Put the same assortment of fruit on the kitchen counter in a bowl or basket.

Week Three

Peel and cut up the same assortment of fruit and arrange it on a plate with several forks. Take the plate out of the refrigerator and put it out on the kitchen counter each morning.

At the end of each week, estimate how many pieces of fruit you and your family ate. Then compare the amount for each week. What do you think your study results will reveal??

XX-large portions

The change has been gradual, but our food portions have been getting larger and larger.

- Muffins have turned into mini-cakes.
- Sandwiches have expanded into foot-long subs.
- Restaurant portions can sometimes feed a whole family instead of one person.
- Theatre popcorn containers have grown in size from two cup boxes in the 1950's to buckets that contain 21 cups of the salty treat. And not only that, if you buy the jumbo bucket you can get free refills!
- Our beverage portions have become so large, auto manufacturers have had to make bigger cup holders.

A study comparing fast food portions in an American city with those in Paris found that the American portions were 25% larger on average. A comparison of single-serving size foods sold in supermarkets revealed that 14 of the 17 items studied were larger in the US. The following foods were larger by: candy bar – 41%, soft drink – 52%, hot dog – 63%, yogurt – 82%.

Studies have shown that the portion size of food cues how much we eat. And it doesn't matter what the circumstances are – whether we're hungry or not, whether the food tastes good or not.

How do you get children to eat more fruit and vegetables? What about giving them larger portions? Researchers tested this theory at an elementary school cafeteria. First, they measured the amount of fruit and vegetables that each child ate on a day where the cafeteria procedures were not changed. Then the researchers increased the portion size of three of the four fruit and vegetables by approximately 50% for two days. They measured the amount of fruit and vegetables eaten by each child who chose these foods on the test days. The result? The children ate more fruit and vegetables when they had larger portions.

Optical illusions

Our eyes can play tricks on us. The shape and size of our serving dishes, utensils and glasses influences how much we eat.

If you were asked to pour the same amount of a beverage into two glasses where one glass was tall and skinny, and one glass was short and wide, what would happen? The short, wide glass gives the impression of having a larger volume and so you would probably end up pouring more of the beverage into this glass. In fact, even experts at measuring liquids such as bartenders will typically pour 25 to 30% more liquor into the shorter, wider glass if given this same test.

Food is everywhere! —→ Reduce exposure to temptations

Pay at the pump when you fuel your vehicle so you don't have to go into the convenience store to pay.

Pick up coffee at the drive-thru window instead of going inside where you may be tempted by the baked goods.

Food is big business —→ Resist marketing and advertising strategies

Order groceries on-line and have them delivered to your home to avoid being tempted by marketing in the grocery stores.

Tape TV shows or watch programs and movies online to avoid having them tempt you to eat or fast forward through advertisements that may tempt you to eat. This may also decrease the likelihood of going to the kitchen for snacks if there aren't any breaks in what you're watching.

You are not alone. . .

A definite problematic eating trigger for me is watching TV. Not only do the food commercials get me thinking about having a snack, but the ads also give me just enough time to root around in the kitchen for something to eat. Now I tape the programs I want to watch and fast-forward through the commercials. It's really made it easier to cut back on the snacks, plus I get through the shows faster and can get to bed earlier.

We think big —→ Buy less, eat less

Divide large packages of food into smaller packages. Put them in the freezer or the back of the pantry.

Remember, the more we buy the more we consume.

Too many choices —→ Beware of the effect of variety

paraphrase

Remember the example of the dessert buffet from our first session? We agreed that we would likely eat many more servings of dessert if there was a large selection to choose from compared to only the decadent chocolate cake.

Use your understanding of our human nature to your advantage.

Avoid eating at buffets if you overeat.

Keep a very limited variety of less healthy snacks on hand and increase the variety of healthy snacks.

Have more than one type of vegetable, cooked or raw, at your big meal to encourage you to eat more vegetables and less of the other higher calorie foods.

We love a deal —→ Question the real value of a deal

Decide if you really want a particular food or portion size, or if you're tempted to purchase it only because you are getting a deal. Remember you will likely be spending more money than you had originally intended in the first place.

Food is always within reach —→ Remember, out of sight, out of mind

Imagine that you have a supply of your favourite treat (chocolate, candy, nuts) that you keep in the area where you do your work, at home or at the office. Let's say that for one week you keep your treat in a clear dish on your desk or table. Another week, you keep the same treat in the same clear dish but the dish is sitting six feet away from your work area. Do you think that you would eat fewer treats during the first or second week?

Based on this example, why not leave serving dishes of meat and starchy food in the kitchen, only bringing salad and vegetables to the table. Drive home by a different route to avoid easy access to fast food outlets. The more convenient and easy it is to obtain and eat food, the more we eat.

Some people think that if they put treats away and out of sight, this will increase the craving and temptation to eat them. On the other hand, others believe that "out of sight, out of mind" applies to where they stash their treats. Research suggests that generally, "out of sight, out of mind" is the more effective solution to decrease consumption. What do you think is true for you?

Keep less healthy snack foods out of sight in a cupboard; store them in the basement, garage or less convenient location.

Use opaque or non-see through containers to store food in the fridge or cupboard.

Make it more difficult to overeat. Most of us eat less with chopsticks, because it takes more effort. We'll eat fewer nuts if we have to shell them ourselves.

You are not alone. . .

I used to really overeat at dinnertime. Then I started leaving the pots with the meat and starchy foods like rice and potatoes in the kitchen and only brought the vegetables and salad to the table. Now if I want second helpings of food it is more effort to go to the kitchen to get more meat and potatoes, so I usually just eat more of the vegetables. Just doing this has helped me eat less at dinner, plus I can take the leftovers for lunch the next day.

XX-large portions → Resize servings to petite or medium

When eating out, ask to be served one bun and not have the basket of buns brought to the table.

Order a half serving or senior's portion; ask for a take away box for part of your meal.

Cook only enough for one serving of food for each person at a meal to avoid second helpings and leftovers.

Portion a serving of snack food for yourself in a small bowl or re-sealable plastic bag instead of eating from the box, bag or serving bowl.

Buy snacks in the 100-calorie sized packages.

Optical illusions → Trick your eyes with smaller shapes and sizes

Did anyone try putting the same amount of food on different-sized plates? Or, pour a beverage into different shaped glasses?

Eat meals off dessert plates rather than large dinner plates.

Use smaller bowls and serving utensils.

Use tall, skinny glasses rather than short, wide glasses for beverages.

paraphrase

Let's take a moment to read the "you are not alone" stories on page 44 and to go over the handout on page 45 of your workbook. (Note - There is also a worksheet on the USB Wafer entitled, "Renovation Ideas for my Environment" that you could copy and give to participants for homework.)