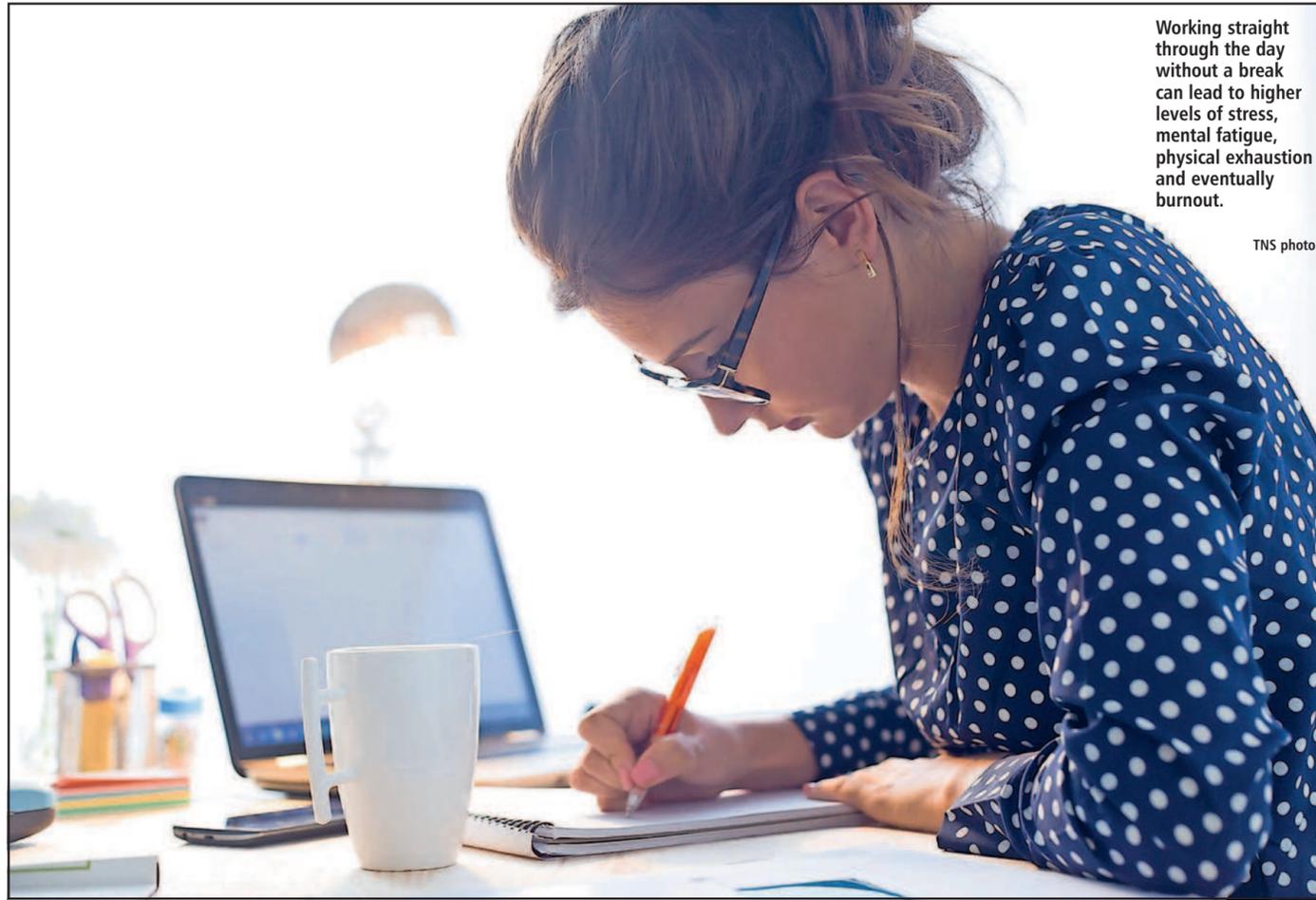


Skipping lunch? Your doctor wants you to think again



Working straight through the day without a break can lead to higher levels of stress, mental fatigue, physical exhaustion and eventually burnout.

TNS photo

By Allie Shah
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

The lunch break at work is becoming a relic of the past — a trend some doctors warn is making us unhealthy. Just one in five Americans steps away from his or her desk to eat lunch, studies show. Working straight through the day without a break can lead to higher levels of stress, mental fatigue, physical exhaustion and eventually burnout.

“It’s really important that people keep in perspective the big picture — that they will really burn out,” said Dr. John Murphy, a family physician with Mayo Clinic Health System. “That lunch break is critically important.”

Middy breaks don’t have to be spent sitting and eating. Getting on a treadmill for a half hour, taking a few minutes to connect with family on social media or socializing in person with co-workers can offer a mental break from tasks, Murphy said. “Stress reduction is so important to overall health,” he said.

Other studies have revealed that connecting with co-workers on a social level is energizing. Taking a few smaller breaks during the day instead of one long break at noon also can protect the body and mind from the unhealthy effects of prolonged hours of sitting in front of a computer.

As for Murphy, he aims to take a break everyday and usually spends it by taking a short walk. He makes time for one other “healthy” activity on his break, he said — checking for the latest news on his beloved football teams.

Professor looks at what may be causing people to eat too much

By Roberto A. Ferdman
The Washington Post

Almost 20 years ago, psychology professor and biologist Paul Rozin tested a theory about food. Many people believed their bodies were good at telling them when to start and stop eating, but he wasn’t so sure.

“A lot of things that control what and how much people eat have nothing to do with the state of nutrition,” Rozin told The New York Times in 1998.

His experiment, published in the journal Psychological Science, was simple, but ingenious. He worked with two severely amnesic patients, whose memory had been damaged by illness and who had difficulty recalling things that happened more than a minute before, and fed them a meal. At least 10 minutes later, he fed them another. And at least 10 minutes after that, he fed them a third. He repeated the experiment on three separate occasions, and each time the same thing happened: they eagerly ate the food that was served to them. One of the participants even announced, after having a third lunch, that he planned to “go for a walk and get a good meal.”

“Without their memory, what they had eaten previously had absolutely no impact on how much they ate a second and even third time,” said David Just, a professor of behavioral economics at Cornell who studies consumer food choices. “It was fascinating; this widely held assumption didn’t really hold up.”

The part of the patients’ brains that triggered satiety and hunger didn’t seem to function without the patients actually remembering having eaten. There was something that could be more important than the physiological effects of

eating — than the activation of taste buds and digestion of calories. Rozin didn’t respond to a request for comment. In the study, he wrote that memory was likely “a substantial contributor to the onset or cessation of eating of a meal.”

Today, despite Rozin’s work and other research that suggests our bodies aren’t the masterful eating compasses we want them to be, the misconception persists — people still like to believe that their stomachs are good at telling them when to eat and when to stop.

“We aren’t rigged like that,” said Just, who believes the misunderstanding plays an important role in the prevalence of overeating.

It’s natural that our eating patterns ebb and flow, depending on circumstance. Some days we eat more than others, and that’s fine so long as we adjust for the stints of gluttony. But adjusting is less a matter of responding to feelings of fullness than it is one of remembering what we had earlier in the day, or week, and our memories aren’t reliable in this way.

We might not eat three meals in close succession like Rozin’s test participants, but the fried chicken we had for lunch isn’t as likely to change what we eat later that day or week as we might think.

“We’re just not very good at remembering what we’ve eaten previously,” Just said. “And even when we are, we’re not very good at compensating for it.”

Memory is just one of the subtle but powerful factors that affect eating habits. Some of these are simple and fairly straight forward, like the size of the plates we use, which have been shown to change how much we eat, or the pres-



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ence of a television, which has been shown to do the same.

“I don’t think people are totally unaware of these sorts of things, but I’m not convinced they realize how much they influence the amount they eat,” said Traci Mann, who teaches psychology at the University of Minnesota and has been studying eating habits, self-control and dieting for more than 20 years. “They definitely add up. If you’re eating 10 or 15 percent more at every meal, that’s going to add up.”

But other influences are far less obvious. A recent peer-reviewed study found that something as innocuous-seeming as the size of a table can affect how people perceive the food that’s placed in front of them — the larger the table, the harder it is for people to discern that they have been served less food, and the more easily they are satiated.

Subtle social cues, meanwhile, are impactful, too. A separate study, published last month, found that diners who were served by overweight waiters tended to “order significantly more items.” Yet another, published in 2014, found the size of the people someone eats with alters the quantity and

quality of the food they choose — when accompanied by an overweight friend, people tend to opt for more and less healthy food.

“The people around us greatly influence how much we eat,” said Just. “We know, for instance, that when people go through a buffet line, they are very reactive to the person in front of them. If the person in front of you takes a lot of food, not only do you feel like you have a license to do the same, you actually feel like it’s expected, like you need to do the same or that you’ll look strange if do something different.”

“Our natural impulse is to fit in, and fitting in often means eating more than we should or would otherwise want to,” he added.

But our natural impulse is also, quite simply, to eat. When we eat, Mann said, it’s not our stomachs that make us stop. That, she explained, happens later, after we’re finished. And it’s part of why convenience can be such a dangerous thing.

“The easier it is to eat, the more you’re going to eat — it’s that simple,” said Mann, author of “Secrets from the Eating Lab,” a look at why diets don’t work. “If you’ve just gone gro-

cery shopping, you’re going to eat more; if you’re at a buffet, you’re going to eat more; if food is sitting within an arm’s reach, you’re going to eat more.”

Just has found much of the same in his own research at the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, which he helps run. “Something as silly as putting food behind a cabinet door instead of on the counter can have a huge impact,” he said.

■ ■ ■

The good news is that there are ways to counteract our tendency to put too much food into our faces. One of the simplest is putting barriers in between ourselves and our food — placing cereal boxes inside cabinets, sweets in less easily accessible places, and snacks at more than an arm’s distance.

But there are others, some of which have been shown to be surprisingly effective. One of the most useful of these, according to Mann, is what is often referred to as mindful eating. “When people start to eat with more focus or attention, they tend to eat less,” she said. “It helps to track not just

every meal, but every bite. When people are mindful of everything they put in their mouth, they’re more in touch with each meal.”

Another approach, unlikely as it sounds, is committing to eat things that taste better. “I know it’s counterintuitive, but when things are more delicious you tend to eat less because you’re satisfied more quickly,” Just explained. “Whereas when something is acceptable but doesn’t taste all that great, you’ll end up eating more to achieve the same level of satisfaction. There is ample evidence for this.”

All of the tricks, maneuvers and annoying adjustments we need to make in order to watch our waistlines, however, are the result of an uncomfortable truth that Rozin helped shed light on almost two decades ago.

“We like to think that we’re rigged to think about and control what we eat and how much we eat,” said Just. “But the truth is that we’re rigged to eat whenever the opportunity rises.”

“In that sense, we’re really no different than dogs,” he added.



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