



## New neuroscience reveals 4 secrets that will make you lose weight. And why mindfulness is the key

Reading time: 14 minutes

I hope you have had a good start to the new year. It's the time for good resolutions again, and there have already been a few BrainCandies. In issue 49, I presented the then new book by James Clear: Atomic Habits. It later became a bestseller in Germany under the title [The 1% Method](#). It's worth reading it again. Simply reply to this email with #49 and you will receive the BrainCandy by email.

This time I'm focusing on food. The November blog by bestselling author Eric Barker was about [weight loss](#) and the logic was so impressively simple that I'm happy to share the insights with you. Eric's writing is wonderfully exaggerated and he sees an opportunity to make a quick joke out of every fact. I've toned it down a little so that the central message isn't overshadowed too much. Here we go:

Food. It is the basic human need. But we all tend to overdo it, especially around the holidays, when the phrase "bite off more than you can chew" is not a metaphor but a self-inflicted reality.

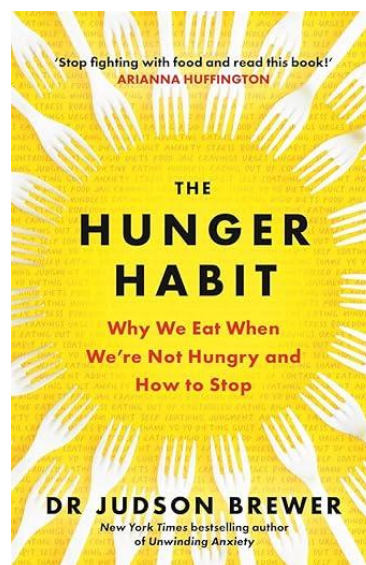
If the weight gain was immediate, we would change our habits. But there's this weird delay. You don't notice it until weeks or months later. The belt becomes less of an accessory and more of a tourniquet. Don't be put off - being overweight is not good. Smoking is still the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, but obesity has waddled into second place.

This brings us back to the diets that no one loves. This is the point where we take something as universally loved as food and make it seem like a master's thesis. "Time to log your dinner!" Journaling my dinner? Yeah, nothing screams "I'm living my best life" like turning dinner into a data entry job.

Isn't there a better way? In fact, yes. Jud Brewer, a professor at Brown University, developed a method to help people quit smoking that was five times more effective than the previous gold standard therapy. And this system had a curious side effect...

The average person who quits smoking gains 10-15 pounds. But the people who used [Jud's method](#) did not. They actually lost weight. The same method that helped his subjects get rid of nicotine also helped them resist overeating. And a follow-up study by Ashley Mason at UCSF showed that this system reduced craving-related eating by a whopping 40 percent.

How does that work? By using mindfulness as a weapon. That trendy, softly glittering therapeutic concept that we use to justify buying expensive scented candles. Mindfulness is the buzzword of the decade that has marketing people rolling their eyes. But it works. Ready to lose a few pounds?





## Are you really hungry?

For most of human existence, hunger was a simple biological signal. The stomach growled, and you ate something that did not come with a toy. But now that food is abundant and cheap, we have lost touch with our bodies. Eating is often no longer about hunger, but about pleasure.

"Feed me!" your stomach demands. But is that really your stomach talking? Jud says we should be skeptical. Focus your awareness on your stomach and ask yourself a simple question: "Am I really hungry?" You'll often find that cravings don't come from a growling stomach. They come from your head. Your stomach doesn't say "hungry", your brain says "delicious".

Would you like proof? Try the "broccoli test". The next time you swear you're hungry, ask yourself, "Would I eat plain broccoli right now?" If you were really hungry, of course you would. But if you turn up your nose at this question, you don't want to be full, you want tasty.



## Willpower is unreliable. Change reward value.

The orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) is the part of the brain that is basically an internal chronicler of life's experiences. It evaluates everything that happens to us and gives it a score. When you need to decide what to do, the OFC checks its database and says, "Broccoli? Thumbs down. 2 out of 10. fries? Hell yeah. 11 out of 10. Go with mayo."

This is why willpower often fails. We are constantly fighting the OFC's bookkeeping and it will use all its instincts and emotions to get us to choose the higher value reward. If you offer the OFC cake or celery sticks, it's like having a choice between hundred euro bills and rocks. "I think I'll take the hundred euro bills, thank you."

Most of the time we run on autopilot, which means we adopt the OFC's scoring without thinking. The only way to change our behavior in the long run? Yes, we need to get in there and change the OFC's little Excel spreadsheet so that the reward is no longer so lucrative.

## How do we do that?

The first step is to get out of autopilot and really **pay attention**. If you are mindful when you eat, you have to face the truth. You're not eating because you're hungry, you're eating because you're bored, stressed or because it's just there. The more we pay attention to our bad habits, the more dissatisfied we become. And the more dissatisfied we become, the easier it is for us to let go of them.

Ask yourself: "Why am I reaching for food right now? Am I hungry - or just bored or sad?" This can help us not to snack when we don't have to.

But maybe you're hungry - and once you've started, you overdo it. Soon it's no longer about satisfying hunger, but just about enjoying ourselves. You start eating something - let's say a cheeseburger. The first bite? Unbelievable. It's fireworks, the reason we invented taste buds. The second bite? Still awesome. Third bite? It's like, okay, I get it. You're a burger. But because most of us aren't paying attention, we keep shoveling. We don't even realize that our taste buds have given up by the fourth bite.

In the meantime, your stomach is sending you polite messages like, "Hey, we're full down here. Maybe we should stop?" But your brain is saying, "IGNORE THIS LOOSER. WE ARE NOT QUITTERS." And before you know it, you've crossed the line?"



from pleasantly full to "Why did I do this to myself?"

If you take things really slowly, you quickly realize that eating is no longer fun. And yet, because you weren't paying attention, you've eaten it all and are now lying on the couch feeling stranded. Take a second to really take note of this result.

Now your OFC won't update its book based on a single meal. It's like your brain is a wily lawyer, always objecting to the negative memories. "Your honor, let the record show that the pizza was delicious and we don't recall any subsequent stomach aches or vows to eat only salad for the rest of the week."

Keep at it. When eating, pay attention to when the reward wears off. Also pay attention to how you feel after eating. You want to extend the period of evaluation. Yes, the first burrito was wonderful. Lying on the couch holding your stomach after the fourth burrito and thinking, "Life is painful," was not wonderful. The problem is that your OFC doesn't seem to capture that part of the experience. Therefore, pay attention. Notice.

This works over time. Jud has studied this with over a thousand people and found that reward values shift when we pay attention. The OFC is updating its spreadsheet. You just have to keep at it. Research shows that after 10 to 15 times of attentive observation and note-taking, reward scores have dropped.

If you're skeptical, keep in mind that you've done this before - just not intentionally. If you've stayed up too late or had too much to drink, at some point your OFC has started to factor the next day's hangover or exhaustion into its assessment. And then you started saying, "Nah. Just one drink. This isn't fun anymore."

So we know the secret, and we know that it works. But there is still a gap. An emptiness. We want something. That's natural. We have to close the gap...

### Making a better offer

Okay, you've reached the point where you know it's not worth eating a whole packet of Prince Rolls. But how do we trick our brains into thinking that a plate of quinoa and steamed broccoli is the culinary equivalent of a deep-fried pizza?

The good news is that you've already done the hard work. Disappointment has reduced the desire to eat further than you need to. But your OFC's default reaction to fruit is probably, "Meh, two stars. Tastes like housecleaning." But you can change that.

What do you need now? More attention. Instead of grumbling when you devour fruit instead of donuts, notice the sweetness of the orange. You have reduced the need for junk food, now increase your appreciation for high-quality calories. And again, pay attention to how you feel after eating fruit. Have you ever eaten a mango and thought: "Wow, I regret that"? No, because that doesn't happen.

### Summary

How to lose weight with mindfulness...

**Are you really hungry?** We've turned our stomachs into emotional dumpsters and amateur therapists. There is now a food to match every mood. We need to distinguish the messages coming from our brain from those coming from our stomach. Ask yourself: "Would you eat broccoli?"

**Willpower is unreliable.** Change reward value: Healthy food? For your orbitofrontal cortex, it's like offering a Metallica fan a ticket to a Helene Fischer concert. You need to change the reward value of food if you want this process to be easy and automatic.



**Watch out:** Eating is not a race, and your plate is not trying to escape. Go slowly. Be mindful. Hold the entire outcome in your mind - not just the taste of the pizza, but the entire experience, including the part where you feel like a python that swallowed a beach ball.

**Make a better offer:** Once you've accepted that junk food isn't what you thought it was, pay attention and realize that good food can taste... can taste pretty good. This isn't culinary Stockholm syndrome, it's recalibrating your OFC by paying attention. Make it a better deal and close the loop on healthy eating.

Jud's solution? Recognizing, allowing and accepting, investigating and noticing.

**Recognize it:** don't let that craving creep into your brain, take up residence and masquerade as a valid idea. "Oh, I'm just a little thought about cake. You can trust me." No, you can't. You have to notice the desire. If you take just a second to consciously recognize it, you take away some of its power.

**Allow and accept:** Don't try to drive the craving out of your head with karate chops, because that will only make it tighter, like a tick with opinions. Acknowledge it and accept it.

**Investigate:** Become curious about your desire. Instead of letting the feeling overwhelm you, study it like a painting in a museum. Notice where the feeling in your body is coming from (probably your head, not your stomach). When you examine it, step out of the drama and take on the role of a detached scientist. "Oh, so you're telling me that I'm craving chocolate because I've had a rough day? Fascinating. But also, no."

**Notice it:** put some mental distance between you and the craving. Don't think: "I'm hungry." Think, "There's a hungry feeling. It's over there trying to persuade me." Abstract it. Observe how it's trying to sway you, like a bad salesman. "Oh, it's telling me I deserve a reward. Nice trick, buddy."

Allow a little time to pass and deal with the craving. Its power will weaken. You will find that you can press the "Mark as read" button on the request as if it were a spam email.

So much for Eric's summary of Jud Brewer's findings. A little tip from my side. Almost everyone should have heard of GLP-1 receptor agonists like Ozempic by now. They are actually very effective. However, there are also side effects such as nausea, which also prevents feelings of hunger but is not exactly a marker for high quality of life. There is a new trend towards microdosing Ozempic. This is supposed to make weight management easier without the side effects. Google it if you are interested.

I wish you more mindfulness now for your good resolutions in 2025. I myself can report with some pride that my good resolution from January 2023 has been kept: I take a cold shower for one minute every morning. It's routine, it would take willpower to take a warm shower.



## Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



#### Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:

[braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com)

The author

**Ralph Ohnemus, CEO.** Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.

Previously a client of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years.

National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions, including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications - most recently as SVP Consumer Sales responsible for marketing, sales and chain stores at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: [r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com)

