



Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.
The Gravity of Weight

Why Out of Sight Really Is Out of Mind

Research supports an underrated path to achieving your goals.



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At the mad tea party in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the Hatter says indignantly to Alice, "You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see.'"

Clearly the Hatter has not read Brian Wansink's astute observations on human behavior. Wansink is the John Dyson Professor of Consumer Behavior at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, and director of its Food and Brand Lab. For many years, he and his colleagues have designed

ingenious studies exploring the connection between human nature and our eating environment. He is best known for his 2006 best-selling book *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*.

Wansink's team has discovered that people will eat fewer chicken wings if the plates of half-eaten wings are left piled on the table rather than removed by a waitress. He also designed the "bottomless soup bowl" experiment, in which he found that people seem to keep eating, regardless of how full they may be or how much they have actually eaten, if the soup bowl, for example, never empties. In other words, many people still take quite literally the "clean your plate" dictum from childhood. Wansink has seen that people will eat



Source: photo by Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D.

more M and M candies if they are labeled “fat-free,” even though there really is no such product, and they will eat *fewer* candies if the pieces are placed farther away, preferably out of sight in a drawer (and even covered by opaque foil wrapping or a lid.) We do very clearly tend to eat what is conveniently available—and what we can see. Further, because portions tend to be so much larger today than in the past—even the recent edition of *The Joy of Cooking* supersized its portion sizes—we all tend to suffer from “portion distortion” and lose track of what are called “consumption norms,” i.e., what is an appropriate serving size.

Wansink has now written the intelligent and eminently practical manual, *Slim by Design: Mindless Eating Solutions for Everyday Life*. Wansink’s thesis is that *everyone* is capable of so-called “mindless eating,” given the right environment. Since we may make hundreds of food choices every day, including whether to finish a particular dish, take soup or salad, or have dessert, he believes we need to work *with* human nature, not *against* it.



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“Becoming slim by design,” he writes, “works better than trying to become slim by willpower.” In other words, “It’s easier to change your eating environment than to change your mind.” Systematically, Wansink focuses on the many often subliminal eating decisions we all confront—in our own kitchens, at work, at restaurants and at supermarkets—plus the schools that our children attend. Wansink has been called the “Sherlock Holmes of food.” He and his colleagues, often doing their detective work under cover, keenly observe how people behave in their natural habitats and, particularly, how slim people behave differently from those who are not.

For example, Wansink found that slim people approach an “all you can eat” buffet by “scouting out” what is available—“getting the lay of the land,” as it were—before they grab their plates and pile on food. They are also more like to sit facing away from, and to choose a table farther away from a buffet; more likely to

choose small plates; and, if eating Chinese food, eat with chopsticks. "None of these behaviors has anything to do with counting calories or choosing bean sprouts over Peking Duck," he writes.

Wansink has been a consultant to numerous companies, organizations—even the Pentagon—and restaurants nationwide, and notes that supermarkets, grocery stores, and restaurants don't have the goal of making us fat—they have the goal of making money. He offers many practical suggestions, such as how healthy items (rather than candy and chips) can be placed on a check-out line to avoid impulsive junk food purchases or can be enticingly described on a menu (e.g. crisp summer salad with shrimp, pineapple and avocado) that not only get us to choose more wholesome options but leads to increased revenue for these businesses. Further, he suggests that we write to our favorite haunts to get them to change their practices to make it easier to choose healthier alternatives by default. He also offers recommendations for reorganizing our own kitchens—he found that the size of our plates, the color of both our plates and our walls, and even what foods we have set out on our counters can all have an impact on our weight.

Bottom line: Unfortunately, most of us have difficulty in exerting our willpower consistently, particularly when confronted with the sight of hundreds of appealing food items, whether at home, at work, in school, or at restaurants or supermarkets. Rather than changing human nature, we have a better chance of succeeding at controlling what we eat by modifying our food *environments*. Wansink's *Slim by Design* offers up hundreds of empirical strategies to alter our behavior.

Source: photo by Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D.

About the Author



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In Print: *The Gravity of Weight: A Clinical Guide to Weight Loss and Maintenance*

Online: my own website

