How the pandemic has changed our eating habits (and what to do about it)

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SALT LAKE CITY — We have all felt the mental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our lives were suddenly altered in ways we haven't experienced before and stress levels have spiked. Many have had to adapt to new regulations and situations including working from home, attending virtual meetings, and participating in online schooling.

The changes brought on by the pandemic have also altered how we eat and where we eat — in both positive and negative ways.

More people are cooking at home

While stay-at-home orders were in place, 41% of people surveyed said they were cooking at home more. Cooking at home can have many benefits. It can be less expensive than eating out on a regular basis and it can also be more nutritious if people are incorporating more fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Thirty-six percent of people surveyed in The Hartman Group/FMI U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends report said they were also eating healthier.

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More family meals and kids cooking

With families spending more time at home and eating at home more, parents are bringing their kids into the kitchen. There are <u>many benefits for children who help cook</u>. These include being more adventurous with the food they will eat, applying basic math concepts in real life, family bonding and confidence building.

A rise in stress eating?

<u>Sixty-one percent</u> of people surveyed said they engaged in stress-eating during the early COVID-19 closures earlier in 2020. Stress eating can be a normal coping mechanism for a stressful day but can also become a problem when it is used too frequently by an individual, or as the only coping mechanism to manage the stress and anxiety of daily life.

For nearly a year now, life has been stressful and difficult for many people. The unique situation of the past year has led many people — myself included — to create some new, healthier habits as well as some less healthy habits. We do not need to shame ourselves for the negative habits we may have fallen into; we simply need to take inventory of both the positive changes we have made and the negative ones, and then create a game plan to help get us back on track.

If you are struggling with stress eating, consider reaching out for help and looking for different, more positive coping mechanisms. Some examples include:

- **Mindful eating:** Be present while you are eating. Turn off distractions, put your phone away, and use meal times as a time to relax.
- **Think before you eat:** Take a minute before eating to determine why you want to eat. Are you hungry? Bored? Sad? Happy? Then decide if eating is the best option to deal with that feeling.
- **New coping methods:** Try to practice new coping methods like meditation and nature walks, start a new hobby, or practice good self-care
- **Avoid temptation:** If you are having a hard time with using stress eating too much, remove the temptation. If you regularly stress eat ice cream, don't buy it for a while and try to focus on developing a different coping method.

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