



ACUMEN

WHY YOUR NEXT DINNER DATE SHOULD BE WITH A MIRROR



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because you can eat solo and still reap the benefits of eating with others.

By Melissa Pandika

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Any Instagram foodie will attest that color, lighting and texture can all influence food's appeal. Who you eat with matters too. Studies show that people perceive food as tastier — and eat more — when they dine with others than when they dine alone, a phenomenon scientists call the social facilitation of eating. But what if your bestie already has dinner plans?

Be your own bestie, obvi. According to a June *Physiology & Behavior* study:

WATCHING YOURSELF EAT IN FRONT OF A MIRROR MAY LET YOU ENJOY YOUR FOOD AS MUCH AS BEING WITH FRIENDS.

No mirror? A photo of yourself eating could do the trick. The findings suggest ways to enhance the taste of food and quality of life for **seniors** and others who often find themselves eating solo, Nobuyuki Kawai of Nagoya University, the study's corresponding author, wrote OZY in an email.

Kawai and lead author Ryuzaburo Nakata wondered whether they could replicate the social facilitation of eating — but in the absence of others. In other words, could the mere *appearance* that others are present produce the same effect? The researchers focused on seniors, since 1 in 4 Japanese is older than 65, and many eat alone due to impaired mobility, the deaths of those in their social circle and other reasons. Studies have linked frequent solo dining in seniors to loss of appetite, which may lead to undernourishment as well as **depression**.

IT'S AN IMPORTANT REMINDER TO ALL OF US TO BE WITH OTHER PEOPLE.

LAURA BROWN, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Kawai and Nakata asked 16 elderly adults to nosh on popcorn in two settings: in front of a mirror and in front of a monitor displaying an image of a wall. After each tasting, they answered survey questions such as “How much do you like this popcorn?” and “How do you feel about the quality of this popcorn?” on a 6-point scale, from “not at all” to “extremely.” Sure enough, they rated the popcorn as tastier and finished more of it when they ate in front of the mirror. The researchers saw similar results when they repeated the experiment with 20- to 23-year-olds, suggesting that the findings apply to youngsters too.



A still image also works. When 12 elderly adults ate popcorn in front of a photo taken of themselves eating, they thought the popcorn tasted better and ate more than in front of the monitor.

To be sure, it's a small study, and it's not clear how well the findings would translate to real-life eating situations, says Laura Brown of the University of Manchester. (For instance, participants might have eaten more popcorn to be more confident about their taste ratings.) Jenny Fisher of Manchester Metropolitan University wonders whether the findings would hold up with more day-to-day foods such as apples or **white bread**, whereas popcorn is “more of a treat food,” she says.

While Brown doesn't encourage hanging mirrors in your dining room just yet — the study “does raise the possibility that there may be ways [to promote the social facilitation of eating] other than getting people in a room together,” she says. If you can't join family or friends for dinner, maybe set up a Skype date. And if you can eat with them, do it. “I think it's an important reminder to all of us to be with other people,” she says. Your mental and physical well-being depend on it.

STAY INTERESTING.

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