Eating Alone Around the World

Problem or Pleasure? | Level B2 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Where and when do you usually eat alone? Where do you usually eat with other people?
2. What do you notice about people eating alone in cafes or restaurants near you?
3. How might attitudes to eating alone differ by country, age, or type of meal?

Reading: Eating Alone Around the World

A host in a busy restaurant asks, "Just one?" For many people, this simple question is uncomfortable. They sit down at a small table and feel **self-conscious**. They worry that everyone is looking at them. Many pick up their phones just to keep their hands busy.

In many cultures, eating alone in public has long carried a **stigma**. But this is changing. OpenTable, a booking platform, says **reservations** for one in the United States rose about 23 percent in the year to June 2026. More people also live alone. Single-person households were about 38 percent of homes in Japan in 2020. In South Korea, they were about 36 percent in 2024.

Some places make solo dining feel ordinary. In Japan, the ramen chain Ichiran seats diners in narrow booths with **partitions** on both sides. In South Korea, eating alone has its own word, honbap. Many restaurants there now **cater to** solo customers with single seats and smaller servings. In 2013, a **pop-up** restaurant in Amsterdam offered only tables for one. Not everyone agrees, though. In 2025, a noodle restaurant in South Korea asked people not to come alone, and many people reacted with **outrage**.

Is eating alone bad for us? The World Happiness Report 2025 found that people who share more meals tend to be more satisfied with their lives. Sharing meals was a better **indicator** of well-being than having a job. But people who are already lonely may simply have fewer people to eat with. Research also suggests that people avoid doing fun things alone because they fear what strangers think. A **bias** called the spotlight effect may explain this. We **overestimate** how much others notice us.

People who eat out alone often say they enjoy ordering what they want and eating at their own **pace**. For some, a meal alone is a small **ritual**, a way to **unwind** after a long day. Beginners can start small. They can choose a quiet time, bring a book, or decide to leave the phone in a pocket. Then they can **savor** the food and **linger** over a coffee.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

linger	**pace**	**ritual**	**cater to**	**self-conscious**	**indicator**	**outrage**	**reservations**	**unwind**
partitions	**bias**	**savor**	**overestimate**	**stigma**				

1. I always feel _____ when I have to sing in front of other people.
2. There is still a _____ around asking for help with money problems.
3. The hotel was full, so we called to check our _____ for two nights.
4. The open office was divided by glass _____ so people could work quietly.
5. This gym tries to _____ older members with gentle classes in the morning.
6. The decision to close the park caused public _____ in the town.
7. Unemployment is one important _____ of how the economy is doing.
8. A good judge must decide the case without any _____ toward either side.
9. Many students _____ how much they can study in one night before an exam.
10. The course lets you study online at your own _____.
11. Making tea every evening at nine has become a calming _____ for my grandmother.
12. After a busy week, I like to _____ with a long bath and a good book.
13. Take your time and _____ the cake. It took me all morning to bake.
14. The guests liked to _____ in the garden long after dinner was over.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. feel	_____	**a.** indicator
2. remove the	_____	**b.** outrage
3. make a dinner	_____	**c.** self-conscious about your accent
4. cater to the needs	_____	**d.** stigma of asking for help
5. cause public	_____	**e.** of older customers
6. a key economic	_____	**f.** a cup of coffee
7. work at your own	_____	**g.** reservation
8. linger over	_____	**h.** pace

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. In the past, people who ate alone were often _____ as lonely or strange. (*stigma*)
2. She spoke _____ at first, but she relaxed as the evening went on. (*self-conscious*)
3. The film is about the _____ of an old house into three small flats. (*partitions*)
4. Many people were _____ by the sudden price rise. (*outrage*)
5. Early results _____ that the new menu is popular with solo diners. (*indicator*)
6. The report was _____ because it only described one side of the story. (*bias*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. How does the person in the opening scene feel, and what do they do with their phone?

2. What change in solo restaurant bookings does the reading describe, and where?
3. What share of households were single-person households in Japan and in South Korea?
4. How do some restaurants in Japan and South Korea make solo dining easier?
5. What did the noodle restaurant in South Korea ask, and how did people react?
6. What did the World Happiness Report 2025 find about sharing meals?
7. Why should we be careful about saying that eating alone causes unhappiness?
8. What is the spotlight effect, and how does it relate to eating alone?
9. Which of the reasons people give for enjoying solo meals do you find most convincing? Why?
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The ramen chain Ichiran was founded in Tokyo."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes the evidence proves that eating alone makes people unhappy."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the reading begin with a host asking "Just one?" Is it (a) to describe a moment many readers know and may find uncomfortable, (b) to criticize restaurant hosts for being rude, or (c) to explain how online booking works?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. The person in the restaurant picks up their phone to keep their hands busy. **T / F**
2. Solo reservations on OpenTable in the United States fell in the year to June 2026. **T / F**
3. In 2020, about 38 percent of households in Japan were single-person households. **T / F**
4. Ichiran's booths have partitions on both sides. **T / F**
5. The pop-up restaurant in Amsterdam offered only large tables for groups. **T / F**
6. Most people welcomed the South Korean restaurant's request not to come alone. **T / F**
7. The World Happiness Report 2025 found that sharing meals was a better indicator of well-being than having a job. **T / F**
8. The reading says that eating alone has been proved to cause unhappiness. **T / F**
9. According to the spotlight effect, we underestimate how much others notice us. **T / F**
10. People who eat out alone often say they enjoy eating at their own pace. **T / F**

Language Focus: Verbs Followed by Gerunds or Infinitives

Some verbs are followed by a **gerund** (-ing form), others by an **infinitive** (to + base verb).
+ gerund: *avoid*, *enjoy*, *finish*, *mind*, *keep*, *suggest*, *can't stand*. *I avoid eating late.*
+ infinitive: *want*, *decide*, *would like*, *hope*, *plan*, *refuse*, *need*. *I decided to cook at home.*
From the reading:
"Research also suggests that people **avoid doing** fun things alone because they fear what strangers think."
"People who eat out alone often say they **enjoy ordering** what they want and eating at their own pace."
Tip: After a preposition, always use a gerund: *I'm nervous about eating alone*, not *about to eat alone*.

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you. Use the correct form of the next verb.

Verb + gerund (-ing)

1. When I have a free evening, I enjoy _____
2. I try to avoid _____
3. I don't mind _____

Verb + infinitive (to + verb)

4. This year, I have decided _____
5. One day, I would like _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to answer using a verb followed by a gerund or an infinitive. Then ask a partner.

6. What do you enjoy doing after a long day?
7. What kind of food do you avoid eating, and why?
8. Where would you like to eat next weekend?
9. What have you decided to change about your daily routine?
10. What do you hope to do after you finish your studies or your current job?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. When did you last eat a meal alone? Where were you, and how did it feel?
2. Would you go to a nice restaurant alone for dinner? Why or why not?
3. Which do you prefer for a quick lunch: eating with classmates or coworkers, or eating alone? Why?
4. What do you usually do while you eat alone: use your phone, read, watch videos, or just eat?
5. Would you like to try a ramen booth with partitions on both sides? What would you enjoy or dislike about it?
6. Have you ever felt that other people were watching you in public? Do you think they really were?
7. Is it fair for a restaurant to limit solo diners at busy times? How would you feel if it happened to you?
8. Your country may have its own word or saying about eating alone. What is it, and is it positive or negative?
9. Why do you think eating together is so important in many cultures?
10. Besides eating, which activities do people often avoid doing alone? Why might that be?
11. How should we interpret the link between sharing meals and happiness? What else could explain it?
12. More people now live alone in many countries. What other changes might this bring to cities and businesses?
13. Should schools, workplaces, or local governments encourage people to eat together? How?
14. Is a society where more people eat alone necessarily a lonelier society? Why or why not?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/eating-alone** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.