**Psychology Behind Food Waste**

**Lesson Time:** 20 minutes with optional extension

**Supplies**: PowerPoint

**Background:**

Our relationship with food has changed quite a bit throughout history. In today’s society, excessive consumption and waste seem to be at the forefront of our food system. The normalization of this comes with an extremely high cost to both people and the planet. According to the EPA, 1/3 of the food we produce and buy gets thrown into the landfill every year.

Food waste is quite a hard problem to solve because of human nature and underlying habits we are taught from an early age. In an article by National Geographic, the author highlights that much of our food waste in the US is often invisibly intertwined into how we shop, cook and entertain. Each person has their own unique biases and quirks and many times, we don’t completely understand our food. Some see pizza crust as “inedible”, while others only eat the white part of a scallion. Everyone seems to have a different idea about what is actually edible.

When it comes to reducing food waste, we need to push past the social norm, dial up our self-awareness and make a big impact through daily shifts. Taking the time to understand society’s and our own relationship with food will help consumers step up, take action and confront food waste head on.

**Resources:**

<https://lovefoodhatewaste.com/it-all-adds-up/>

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/11/17/364172105/to-end-food-waste-change-needs-to-begin-at-home>

<https://foodforthoughtfulaction.com/2019/07/31/a-culture-of-waste-vegas-style/>

<https://furtherwithfood.org/resources/eat-what-you-buy/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/04/people-waste-more-food-than-they-think-psychology/>

<https://www.nclnet.org/foodwaste>

<https://www.fb.org/market-intel/u.s.-food-expenditures-at-home-and-abroad>

**Goal**: By thinking about how they relate to food, both consciously and unconsciously in daily life, students will gain insight into how they value food and their consequent attitude towards food waste. Delving deeper into one’s relationship with food waste allows students to have a better understanding of how to tackle this waste in their own lives and develop a sense of gratitude for the food available to them and their ability to reduce the waste they produce.

**Activity:** PowerPoint with video

**PowerPoint talking points:**

Slide 2 – Food Today (1 minute)

Consumer attitudes toward food have changed quite a bit throughout history, as we have distanced ourselves from food production and the widespread food scarcity that hasn’t been seen for generations. According to Eat Smart, Waste Less, 20% of the food each household buys never gets eaten and two people waste enough food each day to feed another person - 2,400 calories! Our lives today have consisted of an overabundance and readily available source of food, contributing to our lack of value for food and discouraging waste reducing habits.

Slide 3 – The State of Food in America (3 minutes)

In a paper written by the National Consumers League, it is noted that average American consumers spend a meager 6% of their total household expenditures on food; less than any other nation on earth. With low-price options for food, many people over-buy; encouraged by incentives in grocery stores like coupons and “buy-one-get-one” deals, or at restaurants where we find larger sizes being the better purchase. In a blog post on the website “Food for Thoughtful Action”, it is mentioned that “we’ve been conditioned to associate value with quantity.” Thinking about relating this phrase to your own life, how would you act in these scenarios?

*Poll Questions:*

* *If you walk into a coffee shop and any size coffee is $2, what size do you go for? A) Small B) Medium C) Large*
* *If a pizzeria is selling 1 slice for $4 and 2 slices for $5, which would you buy? A) One B) Two*

What influenced your decision (ex: how hungry/thirsty I am, getting a better value, nothing to lose by getting more, etc.)? *Students may be unmuted to answer.*

In an interview with NPR, one reason for food waste was cited as consumers being able to afford that waste. Food has become so cheap that we view it as a constant - we can always go buy more tomorrow. Would you agree with this view of food? Do you consider food as something you waste a significant amount of money on? *Students may be unmuted to asnwer*

Slide 4 – Consumer Demands (3 minutes)

Grocery stores and restaurants are not the only ones to blame when it comes to poor behaviors around food waste, as our food system is often driven by consumer demands.

Imagine the last time you walked into a grocery store or buffet, what did it look like? *Students may type answers in the chat box.* If it didn’t look that way, i.e. it was less stocked or some food items were placed individually, would you feel differently or act differently? Why do you think displays are always full? What do you think are the consequences of that? *Students may be unmuted to answer.*

We find abundant displays appealing and are suspicious of solo food items left behind. Stores end up stocking only the best looking produce or creating over-packed displays that can lead to waste with more fragile food products or prepared foods that need to be discarded at the end of the day.

Slide 5 – A Culture of Waste (2 minutes)

Despite being responsible for a large portion of food waste, many times consumer waste is a byproduct of good intentions.

At restaurants, when servers ask if you would like the rest of your salad in a to-go box, you may say yes out of guilt and even convince yourself you will end up eating it later. Many times we find leftovers pushed to the back of the fridge, not to be seen until they spoil and start to stink – a stage where we find it easier to justify throwing food out. This event has been coined as “delayed disposal” with researchers who study food waste at home at the UC Berkeley. Raise your hand if you have ever been guilty of delayed disposal.

At home, we tend to want to provide the best for our family, by introducing new or healthier foods or cooking more. These aspirations don’t always match with reality and busy schedules don’t always align with when fruits or vegetables fully ripen. In an article by National Geographic, it is noted that fridges are big, casserole dishes are designed for larger family meals and plates are often oversized – not helpful when we are trying to cut down on food waste. For many people, fully stocked fridges or an excess of food represent being prepared. Due to this, asking people to waste less food may take away their sense of comfort in that they are taking care of their families. Raise your hand is a full fridge and pantry make you instantly happy.

Slide 6 – Video (6 minutes)

We are going to watch a video where we will see the above ideas and facts take shape, showing us how food waste may both intentionally and unintentionally enter our homes. We will hear the results from a study completed by Alex Reich and Jonathan Foley in conjunction with The Food Policy Research Center at the University of Minnesota.

*Play* [*video*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5i-dCv7O8o) *(3 minutes)*

Post-video questions (3 minutes): *Students may type in the chat or be unmuted to answer.*

* Did any of the statistics or reasons why food is being disposed of stand out to you?
  + Did any resonate with something you do or have done recently?
* What do you think are some solutions to wasting less food and valuing our food more? (*Use this question as a transition into the next slide - solutions*)

Slide 7 – It starts with You! (5 minutes)

Generations have grown up in a world where food is readily available in both price and quantity and because of this, we do not see our current food consumption as wasteful or unsustainable. To reduce the food that finds itself in the landfill, food companies, grocery stores, restaurants, and consumers will need to take responsibility.

Education is key! Learning helpful tools will assist in making the changes you want to see in your everyday life.

* We can start by breaking our fixation with quantity. For dinner parties or home cooked meals, embrace quality over abundance (you can always come back for more).
* Shop with meals in mind. Make a list before you go shopping and be realistic about what you will actually eat in a week. Take in to account those nights you won’t want to cook and buy only what you need.
* Prep food now and eat later. Use those family sized casserole dishes to make extras for lunches throughout the week or easy to reheat dinner meals.
* Keep food fresh and eat what you buy. Learn how to store food correctly (savethefood.com) and take note of what is often getting wasted because you can’t get to it fast enough. Move these foods to the forefront of your fridge or designate meals for certain nights of the week.
* Finally, value your food. Food is often tied to human connection- mealtimes with family and friends help us get creative and get together with the people we love. Use this time to learn how to cook, learn recipes that have been in the family for ages or create new recipes to add to the family cook book. Take care with your extra food- take a moment to check to see if it can be donated and if not, consider composting what is left.

As we realize that food brings us together and that it is a necessity for all, we can begin to acknowledge our gratitude for the food available to us. Saving food does a lot more than just save money – every single slice of bread, potato and chicken breast saved makes a difference. It's good for our communities, our country and our planet!

**Optional Pre or Post-Extension Activity: Quiz Results Analysis and Discussion (5 minutes)**

*Have students take the Food Waste Quiz on ivaluefood.com at home and come to class with their results and a few of the suggested solutions provided at the end of the quiz. Let students know they should also be prepared to discuss the following questions in class.* Link to quiz: <https://ivaluefood.com/quiz.php>

* If comfortable sharing, what were your results for the amount of food you waste at home? Small, medium or large?
  + Do you think this is accurate? Are you surprised?
* What were some of the solutions provided for you at the end of the quiz?
  + Do you feel you may be able to input some of these changes in to your daily life? What would be some challenges you’ll have to overcome?