

Food and Mood



“Diets, like clothes, should be tailored to you”

Joan Rivers

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.”

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

“Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food”

Hippocrates

It is estimated that at any given time at least one in four of us is on a diet to lose weight. We are surrounded by abundant advice about dieting for weight loss and pressure to have perfect bodies yet less has been said about eating for our mental wellbeing. Scientific attention is turning to the relationship between food and mood and although there is still much to learn some clear links have been demonstrated. With increased knowledge many people are finding that changes in their diets can help them to manage low feelings, anxiety and stabilise mood swings.

According to Mind, the mental health charity, there are reports that changes in diet have helped with food cravings, depression and postnatal depression. Others have found changes have boosted concentration, reduced mood swings, panic attacks, anxiety, irritable and aggressive feelings. In some cases memory has improved and obsessive-compulsive feelings, premenstrual syndrome, psychotic episodes have abated. Insomnia, eating disorders, behavioural and learning disorders and seasonal affective disorder have also been positively influenced by diet. This is good news for those who wish to take a more holistic approach to managing their mental health as it widens the options available. Diet becomes another tool alongside, or sometimes instead of medication, talking therapies, self help literature and exercise.

The Psychology of Eating

In Great Britain today we have more food choices than ever before. Our media reflects this by producing a whole host of celebrity chefs with cook books to boot. The way we eat fulfils many needs beyond merely physiological ones. It also fulfils a psychological role. For instance chocolate is often associated with pleasure and reward whilst bland foods are associated with

restricted diets and discipline. Food and drink become an integral part of certain rituals; the Sunday dinner with loved ones or a comforting cup of tea when upset. Caffeine is probably the most popular behaviour modifying substance of all. Getting just the right amount is crucial, too much and it can lead to heightened anxiety, irritability or interfere with our sleep patterns.

The science of food and mood

The Basics

In order to achieve a balanced diet and positively manage moods it is helpful to look at the science behind why and how consumption influences us:

- What we eat affects brain chemicals and neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. These influence how we feel, think and behave.
- Food and drink cause fluctuations in blood sugar levels and these are associated with changes in mood and energy.
- A lack of vitamins, minerals and fatty acids can affect mental health. For instance there is evidence that deficiencies in vitamin D can cause fatigue and sluggishness, deficiencies in omega 3 oils can contribute to depression, and links have been demonstrated between deficiencies in certain B vitamins and schizophrenia.
- Some people have strong reactions to artificial chemicals in food such as food colourings and flavours.
- We can become hypersensitive to foods and this can cause delayed or hidden food allergies or sensitivities.
- Some people are deficient in enzymes needed to digest certain foods, for instance many people are lactose (milk sugar) intolerant, and this can lead to milk intolerance.

Feeling Good

The neurotransmitter dopamine is often referred to as the 'feel good' messenger. When levels of dopamine are high we feel drive, pleasure and enthusiasm. When they are low we experience sadness, boredom or irritation. We can increase our dopamine levels with sugary and fatty foods but the levels tend to drop off sharply. In order to sustain levels of dopamine it is recommended that we eat slow release protein-rich foods.

Our brain also requires precursors, molecules that are used to manufacture dopamine. One of these precursors is known as phenylalanine and is found in soybeans, almonds, meat, eggs, beets and grains.

Serotonin is another neurotransmitter that produces relaxing, contented feelings and makes us less sensitive to pain. It is therefore helpful in combating anxiety. Levels can be increased with carbohydrates and this is possibly why many people binge on them when feeling anxious or depressed. The down side is that they can also make you sleepy so it is better to consume a steady supply. Our brain requires tryptophan in order to manufacture serotonin and this can be found in eggs and meat.

Improve Concentration

Our brain cells need oxygen to send messages to each other and this comes from blood sugar, therefore maintaining a steady calorie intake throughout the day will help. Our nerve fibres, which act like electric wires, need to be insulated so that messages will flow. For this a fatty

substance called myelin is required. We can help to build up levels up myelin with Omega-3 oils. These are primarily found in oily fish but also in pumpkin and flax seeds and walnuts.

Boosting Memory

Our memory depends on our brain's ability to make new connections. For this we need a messenger called acetylcholine which excites our brain cells. Drugs that mimic the effect of this have been shown to improve memory in Alzheimer's sufferers. Good foods to eat to support this function are eggs, liver and soybeans, as well as cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli.

Controlling cravings

At times when we feel stressed or anxious our

brain tries to find ways of relieving those feelings. One way of doing this is through eating sugary and fatty foods. In the short term this lowers the stress hormones, glucocorticoids, and helps us to relax but in the long term it leads to weight gain and other health issues. Over a prolonged period of increased sugar intake our brain's responses change and it begins to crave more and more sugar in order to feel pleasure. This then turns into an addiction.

The only way to beat the cravings is to avoid the substances that create them and to find alternatives to relieve stressed and anxious feelings.

Understanding your diet

Understanding how certain foods affect us as individuals is the first step to managing our moods. In order to find out what might be hindering your mental health it is helpful to keep a food diary for a week. Use this to write down everything you consume and any noticeable changes in mood. It often works best if you write down what you eat or drink at the time rather than trying to remember later. The purpose of this exercise is to increase your awareness so the more information you include the more useful it will be. Note the amounts you consume, times of day and how you felt. You may be surprised at what you learn.

When you look back over your diary identify any foods that you eat in large quantities regularly.

Are there certain times of the day when you feel especially low or lacking in energy? Is there a connection between certain events and what you consume, perhaps eating something comforting when something goes wrong at work or after a disagreement?

Certain foods and drink tend to be more problematic than others. These include alcohol, caffeine, sugar, wheat (found in bread, pasta, biscuits and cakes), chocolate, dairy products (including cheese), hydrogenated fats and some artificial additives or E numbers. Other foods that can be upsetting are soya, eggs, tomatoes, yeast, oranges and corn. Pay particular attention to the effects of any of these foods or drinks.

Taking control

Once you have identified any food or drink that might be having a detrimental effect on your mental and emotional health you can then take steps toward reducing, or eliminating it from your diet.

It is better to make small manageable changes

than to radically overhaul your diet in one go. The goal is to make lasting, sustainable changes. For instance if you have identified adverse reactions to caffeine it might be easier to gradually reduce the number of cups of coffee you have, or drink weaker coffee rather than cut them all out at once. This gives your body time to

adjust. It is well known that caffeine withdrawal can result in irritability, headaches and low moods if done abruptly. If you have identified whole wheat as a trigger you could swap to rye bread and wheat free pastas. Where chocolate is the culprit you could swap a regular chocolate bar for a few squares of good quality dark chocolate instead and see if it helps. Think of your diet as a work in progress and take the time to find a balance that suits you.

Make things easier for yourself by avoiding temptation as much as possible. Keep your cupboards full of quick healthy snacks so that you are not tempted to binge on biscuits, crisps and junk food, especially at those times when you are eating emotionally. If there are social situations that increase the likelihood of you eating or drinking in an unhelpful way then you may prefer to avoid them until your diet feels more established.

Principles of good eating

Keep your diet balanced. You don't need to cram every vitamin and nutrient into the course of a day, but try to ensure you are factoring them in over the course of a week.

Make it colourful – if you eat fruit and vegetables of many colours you will increase the range of vitamins and minerals you are taking in.

5 a day – remember to eat at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables per day.

Drink water – even minor dehydration can sap your energy and cause headaches. If you are feeling thirsty then you are already dehydrated. Remember to drink water before you are thirsty.

Always have breakfast. Harvard medical researchers believe it may have a role in stabilising blood sugar levels.

The 80/20 rule. Your diet doesn't have to be 100% perfect, it is far more sustainable to allow yourself the odd treat rather than deny anything vaguely unhealthy. If 80% of your diet is healthy

there is room to enjoy some of the more indulgent delights.

Eat regularly. We need a regular supply of blood sugars to the brain to aid concentration and balance our moods.

Eat more plant based foods. Studies indicate that those on either vegetarian or vegan diets have improved moods and lower incidence of alzheimers as well as less heart disease, lower rates of cancer, diabetes, stroke and kidney disease. If you eat meat try to eat it less often.

Limit alcohol intake – alcohol acts as a depressant and whilst a few drinks might give us an uplifting buzz it can be bad news for those who suffer from depression. It can also interfere with sleep patterns.

Vitamin D – try to spend at least 20 minutes outside each day to replenish stores of vitamin D. If you think you may have a deficiency consider asking your GP for a blood test or taking a supplement. People with darker skin in particular tend to have lower levels of vitamin D

Exercise – any good diet needs to be complemented by regular exercise. Exercise releases endorphins which make us feel exhilarated and happy. Regular exercise can have a positive effect on serotonin levels, and this helps to reduce anxiety and stress.

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations
www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline,
providing emotional and practical support.

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)

