

Mental Health and Nutrition

Now more than ever, our mental health has been tested by the elevated stress we're feeling from our new normal. Not only is there an increased concern for our physical health during this time but a heightened focus on our mental health as well. The most common ways to cope are by utilizing relaxation exercises, socially connecting with others, getting enough physical activity and well-rested sleep. However, many of us may not be aware of the role nutrition plays on our mental wellbeing because. Research is being conducted to examine the link between our food choices and the impact it has on our mental state. From improvement in mood to a reduction in symptoms caused by mental illness, all aspects of mental health can benefit from nutritionally rich food.

When under periods of mental stress, most people tend to eat too much or too little causing changes in eating behaviors. The same goes for mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety. During difficult times, food can become a way of coping, easily forgotten about, or just simply disinteresting. When drastic changes in eating occur, it affects our mood and energy levels. This is mainly due to changes in metabolism from perceived stress by the body, low blood sugar from not eating or fluctuations from consuming more sugar than normal. Hypoglycemia is known to cause feelings of fatigue, irritability, and even anxiety. Another contributor to mood changes is thought to be a eating pattern that is connected to brain inflammation which has several links to causing anxiety and depression. Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) has revealed great concern over our nation's overconsumption of saturated fats, sodium and added sugars.

We must be mindful of our own eating habits to create sustainable changes in our physical and mental health. This can be done by creating goals surrounding more consumption of nutrient-dense foods, including lean proteins, whole grains, healthy fats, fiber-rich fruits, and vegetables. This way of eating will keep you fuller for longer since it will not be so readily absorbed, like refined carbohydrates or sugar. Also, the Mediterranean diet has been shown to have protective effects on mental health due to its anti-inflammatory properties. This diet is high in omega-3s and vitamin D which are two nutrients commonly recognized for boosting mood and lessening symptoms of mild to moderate depression.

Another way to keep mood and energy levels in check is to stick to a mealtime schedule to eat at regular intervals throughout the day. It may help to prepare food ahead of time to reduce stress, refrain from making unhealthy food choices, or make it easy to skip meals and snacks. Also, try getting creative with a new recipe to design a wholesome meal that will be appealing. You can even make it a social activity by involving family or friends. This way you can enjoy a nutritious, brain-boosting meal and further enhance your mood by connecting with others! Remember, taking small steps to include those healthy foods: including lean proteins, whole grains, healthy fats, fiber-rich fruits, and vegetables will help your physical and mental health.

Reference: U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025. 9th Edition