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Food affects our mood, and planning ahead can help

By Andrea Cook 22 hrs ago

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What should I eat?” Many of us ponder this question, wondering how to feed ourselves in a way that makes us feel good, both in body and mind, yet still satisfies our appetite for tasty foods.

It is easy to get busy and to lose sight of the powerful effect of food on our mood and sense of well-being. Often, we feel bad, both physically and emotionally, but don't know where to begin to make changes in our life.

Usually we hit a breaking point, and then become eager to make wholesale change; out with the old, in with the new healthy me. And for a week or two, we can do great. Go to the gym every day and eat nothing but salads. Then we have a slip, which leads to giving up.

With relief, we chuck all of these hard, new healthy habits and go back to what is easy, which feels good at first, and then can lead to hopelessness and depression. So, Step 1 to changing our relationship with food is always to take it slow, and to recognize that this is a lifestyle change not a short-term diet, which means it will take longer to see the results, but we will be able to maintain the new habits for years to come.

A good starting point is to focus on managing blood sugar. When we get low on fuel, our blood sugar drops and our body takes several steps to motivate us to feed ourselves, one of which is a shot of adrenaline. This can make us feel shaky, anxious, unable to focus, or “hangry.” In a panic, we reach for whatever food we can quickly get our hands on. By the time our brain has fully registered what we have eaten, we feel over-full and lethargic.

The roller coaster ride from anxious and wired to lethargic can be exhausting. A little planning ahead can reduce these ups and downs, and help you feel more stable and calm. The goal is to never get so hungry that you trigger an adrenaline surge. For many, that means not skipping meals and eating healthy snacks, so that you can stay composed and make better food decisions. For me, that means always bringing snacks wherever I go.

Also important is to eat some whole foods at each meal that will keep you full longer, especially high-fiber foods, such as vegetables, fruits and whole grains, as well as some protein and fat. Foods that are high in simple carbohydrates like sugar, soda and bread products cause our blood

sugar to quickly spike and then to drop, leaving us hungry, craving, and short-tempered an hour later.

The idea is to feed your internal fire with high-quality fuel to keep a steady blaze, rather than occasionally pouring on some lighter fluid. That doesn't mean every meal has to be perfect, it just means that when you eat, try to add a little something that will give you some long-term fuel in order to keep your mood positive and your thinking clear.

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