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HOW TO BOOST YOUR MOOD THROUGH FOOD.

by Gemma Hurditch

Whilst boosting mood implies a quick fix to a short-term problem, long periods of low mood signal depression. Moods of hyper-agitation and restlessness can be indicative of anxiety. In this article, we will look at some of the ways we can boost positive moods and help curb negative ones.

One of the major predictors of depressive disease is... **poor diet!** Whilst other risk factors for mental health issues such as early childhood trauma and social disadvantage are less easy to target, we do eat every day. Therefore, the choices we make can be helpful and supportive, or they can worsen mood and create more of a burden. Not enough good food is one side of this problem; too much of the wrong food is the other side.

So what is a poor diet? On the 'too much' spectrum of things we have the problems of too much of the following:

Sugar: Sugar, particularly highly refined sugar such as high fructose corn syrup or white cane sugar, which we find in soft drinks, lollies, cakes, chocolate and other sugary treats, can cause blood sugar

spikes which are quite destabilising to the body. Sugar uses up valuable nutrients for its digestion and metabolism, which is why sugar such as the carbohydrates in whole fruit, vegetables and whole grains is easier on the body. It comes packaged with the vitamins and minerals needed to process it, and the fibre to slow down its effect on blood sugar levels.

When sugar comes without any additional nutrition, it depletes the body, raising the blood sugar – which the body then needs to package away safely into cells. The digestion and packing away into cells happens quickly, causing the body to soon feel hungry again. This yo-yo effect of hunger and high sugar – particularly when coupled with poor intake of vitamins and minerals – can lead to hypoglycaemia, symptoms of which include irritability, moodiness, anxiety and shakiness.

Saturated fat: Insulin is the main hormone that helps the body to package away the large glucose molecules which can be damaging to our small blood vessels, and thus the eyes, kidneys, nervous system, etc. Saturated fats, particularly

from factory farmed meat, may make it more difficult for insulin to do its job, so the body gets pushed to make even more insulin. Excessive consumption of such saturated fats is linked to an increased risk of Type 2 diabetes and anxiodepressive behaviour. Palm oil in processed foods and fatty cuts of meat is particularly prudent to avoid.

“The choices we make can be helpful and supportive.”

Trans fats are bad for your brain. Numerous studies have shown that diets high in trans fats interfere with proper cell communication and are linked to depression and reduced serotonin (a feel-good brain chemical). Check nutrition labels for trans fats, and check ingredient lists which include hydrogenated vegetable oil or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. Avoid processed and fried foods.

Processed foods, as we noted above, are more likely to contain trans fats,

refined sugars and other chemicals such as artificial colours and preservatives, which can have adverse effects on our mood. Additionally, processed foods are frequently stripped of nutrients, so they provide nothing more than empty calories instead of true nutrition.

Foods we are sensitive or allergic to: Sometimes mood issues are tied up with food sensitivities or allergies. The gut-brain axis link, whereby alterations in the gut such as infection, microbiome alterations and even diseases such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome are linked with mental states such as anxiety and depression, is well known. If you feel down or jittery after a particular food it is a good idea to avoid it - common culprits include gluten, pasteurised dairy, soya and eggs.

Caffeine: Caffeine content is particularly high in beverages such as coffee, energy drinks and black tea. Caffeine interferes with oestrogen levels and people who suffer with nervous agitation often find relief from ditching coffee and eliminating the adrenaline kick which can leave vulnerable people nervous with free-floating anxiety.

Alcohol can be added to the list of

junk foods as it provides very little in the way of beneficial compounds, and is a drain on the mind and body.

So what should we be eating instead?

A Mediterranean-style diet rich in legumes (beans and lentils), extra virgin olive oil, nuts, seeds, oily fish and plenty of fruit and vegetables is shown to reduce risk of mental health issues and inflammation (which is linked to depression) and boost longevity. Wholegrain and traditionally prepared foods are encouraged; this limits the nutrient depletion from over-processing.

Probiotic foods such as kefir, natural yoghurt, kombucha and kimchi have shown promise in restoring a harmonious gut and mood. The microbiome of sufferers of mental health and mood disorders differs from that of controls, and those with psychiatric illness and ASD have signature microbiome elements. Encourage gut health by incorporating non-pasteurised fermented foods, so long as they don't disagree with you.

Phytonutrients – beneficial plant chemicals appear to be key. Aim to eat 8-9 cups of a rainbow-coloured assortment of fruit and vegetables, raw or lightly steamed to maintain maximum benefits. Green tea and berries are also important sources of phytonutrients with diverse roles such as enhanced cellular communication, immune and nervous support and inflammation reduction.

Omega 3 oils – quality fish oils, oily fish such as sardines, mackerel, anchovies and herring or flaxseeds, walnuts and chia, if preferred. Omega 3 has shown mixed results as a therapeutic aid for depression, but research is promising and ongoing.

Hydrate – Hydration is really important to keep your body and brain functioning optimally. Make 8 daily glasses of filtered water a priority.

Of course, it's important to seek expert support if your low moods do not appear to improve.

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