

Healthy Eating For Depression and Anxiety

The human brain, which is widely regarded as the most complex object in the known universe, evolved only 200,000 years ago (whereas the Earth is approximately 4,500,000,000 years old). It evolved because of a particular combination of factors; and recent scientific research indicates that one particularly important factor was the diet our ancestors consumed. The typical Western diet is radically different from the one we evolved to eat. There is mounting evidence that this is a crucial factor in triggering anxiety and depression, the incidence of which continues to increase so that mood disorders are now a matter of national and international concern.

As long ago as the 1970s, Professor Michael Crawford, a distinguished chemical nutritionist, warned that the explosion in the prevalence of heart disease that occurred throughout the West in the twentieth century would soon be followed by a similar increase in mental ill health. At the time there was great resistance to the idea that poor diet contributed even to the high rates of coronary heart disease. Almost 40 years on, there is an increasing consensus on what constitutes a healthy diet for the brain and mind. Interestingly it is the same diet that helps prevent and treat heart disease, obesity, diabetes and many types of cancer. Here we outline the ten most important food factors that are linked to anxiety and depression.

The Ten Food Factors

Food Factor 1 Social eating. Depression and anxiety can be worse when there is nobody to share our worries with. Humans evolved as social animals, obtaining their food and eating in groups, so try to prepare and eat simple meals with others.

Food Factor 2. Eat organic as much as possible. It is a good idea to have as much organically produced food as possible and to avoid food produced by industrialised chemical agriculture.

Food Factor 3 Additives. It has been estimated that more than 3,500 chemicals are used as food additives in the manufacture of convenience foods and drinks. Some additives, such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), are of particular concern because of their potential effects on mental health. Products likely to contain MSG include cheap meat products and some types of soya sauce and it is a good idea to limit your exposure to them.

Food Factor 4 Balancing the diet. Food intake affects brain function and hence mood and behaviour. The balance of protein, carbohydrates and fats in the diet is particularly important, as is the intake of vitamins and

minerals. Equally, the balance between acid-generating and alkali-generating food is important for mental well-being.

Food Factor 5 Fats. The brain is approximately 60 per cent fat, and fat is essential for its structure and function. Avoid saturated fats and trans fats, which science shows are bad for the brain, and instead obtain good levels of the types of fat that are essential for brain function such as those in oily fish, nuts and seeds. Eminent neuroscientists working at the University of Pittsburgh in the United States and at Imperial College, London have suggested that even serious disorders such as bipolar disorder can be improved dramatically by achieving the correct fat profile in the diet.

Food Factor 6 Bad and good carbohydrates. Refined sugar can be described as 'Pure, white and deadly' (the title of a book by the famous nutritionist John Yudkin), whereas other carbohydrates such as fresh fruit are the very energy foods that we evolved to eat.

Food Factor 7 Proteins: the good, the bad and the dangerous. Protein intake can affect brain functioning and mental health, and some of the brain's important neurotransmitters are made from amino acids. Most people in the West eat too much protein especially animal protein such as meat and cheese. Vegetable protein from nuts and seeds, pulses and cereals is more beneficial.

Food Factor 8 Vitamins, minerals and supplements. Many vitamins and minerals are essential in making the chemicals needed for optimum brain function, including the synthesis of neurotransmitters from precursor chemicals. Good food sources include fresh fruit and vegetables including sea vegetables. Brewer's yeast, spirulina and ultrapure fish oils are helpful natural supplements.

Food Factor 9 Precursors of neurotransmitters. All the known neurotransmitters are manufactured in the brain from precursor substances. Ingestion of particular foods containing such precursors can effect the physiological functioning of the brain. This produces only subtle effects in most individuals but can have significant impact on those with anxiety or depression. Porridge, for example, contains good levels of tryptophan, the precursor of serotonin

Food Factor 10 Healthy drinks. Use good sources of water such as filtered tap water and avoid too much caffeine and alcohol which can exacerbate anxiety and depression respectively.

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