

Is Your Lunch Making You Crabby? Eat Your Way to a Better Mood

By Lisa T. Wood

I love food! A salad of roasted beets dotted with lovely pillows of creamy goat cheese is just my cup of tea. What about a perfectly grilled wild salmon filet with fresh organic vegetables? Divine. Oh, don't forget homemade, warm, chocolate chip cookies. Eating should be simple, nourishing and tasty. However, we're all bombarded with new research, diets, fads, studies, advertisements, choices and labels—sometimes I'm not sure what to eat.

Americans think a lot about food. We're exposed to constant data about food and nutrition but much foodie news focuses on losing weight or mitigating health issues. Another food topic is "emotional eating"—reaching for our favorite treats when bored, stressed, sad or wound up. This is an outward reaching movement where our emotions drive us outward to action, in this case the action of eating. But I'd like to explore this body/mind connection with food from a different angle.

What if we think about eating from the other way around? This is more of an inward movement where, after we eat, the food literally drives an inward action—in this case, the action of creating our emotional state. Viewing nutrition in this context, food contributes to the creation of our moods, which affects how we go about our day, which in a nutshell, is the essence of how we experience our lives.

This idea has been around for a while, but most of just don't think about food this way. However, science backs it up and it also just makes sense that our emotional state is connected to and generated by what fuel we choose for our bodies. In *Food and Mood*, author Elizabeth Somer, M.A., R.D. states, "Many people don't realize how immediate the food-mood connection is. What you chose to eat two hours ago is having an effect on your mood right now."

We're obviously talking about more than a physical feeling like fullness. I'm specifically referring to moods, like whether after eating lunch we are motivated to creatively tackle that problem at work or

do we barely make it home to flop onto the couch, passing on the opportunity to catch an evening hike with friends. Do we run out of patience and snap at our children or do we have the fuel in our emotional tank to take the high road to a productive discussion?

All these emotions are generated by a combination of many factors including the chemicals in our body. Certain chemicals surge around through our brains and cells, many of them directly creating our moods through the day.

According to *Discovery Health* and an article by Josh Clark entitled *Can Food Make People Happy*, these mood-affecting chemicals aren't made out of thin air, they're created by the compounds found in food. The very food you eat for breakfast contributes to how you navigate your day—not just if you have the energy to do it, but also if you even feel like tapping into that energy. We're talking about quality of life.

One place where theory meets daily practice with our awareness of the mind/body connection concerns the foods we choose on a meal-by-meal, snack-by-snack basis. But it's a challenge—it's one thing to know it in theory and another to live it through our choices.

In many ways, this acknowledgement that we literally "feel what we eat" is bigger than us and yet it boils down to each of us. At the end of the day, it's just you in your flannel pajamas facing down that Oreo cookie while glancing over knowingly at the grapes. But the healthcare and nutrition industries are finally starting to help us make wise choices by providing a more holistic framework to address our entire realm of food experiences, including the physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Just ask Pam McDonald, a leading Integrative Medicine Nurse Practitioner based in Danville, author of *The Perfect Gene Diet* and a graduate of the Andrew Weil MD Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. "We are shifting from the mass consumer diet de jour, with its promise of quick weight-loss

that lasts only a short time and then fails, to a lifelong plan that will prevent and reverse chronic diseases—truly healing a person's physical body as well as the mind, emotions and spirit."

When meeting with patients, in addition to a medical consultation, Pam considers food and its impact on more than the physical body including stress and relaxation, quality of the mental and emotional environment and the type of spiritual energy and intentions in a person's life. All this related to food? You bet.

So what are the foods we should eat to create the best emotional outlook for each of us? Honestly, it's everything you know you should eat and all the other foods you know you shouldn't. Natural, organic, whole foods are high on the list of good stuff. Fruits, vegetables, lean meats and whole grains are your friends. Cheez Whiz is not your friend. Salt, bad fats and sugar are not your friends, either.

Most of us have food sensitivities we aren't even aware of. Something we eat may keep us from feeling our best, emotionally and physically, by creating a chemical imbalance when we eat it. This, says Lorie Gehrke, CEO, Cambiati Wellness Programs in Pleasant Hill, really makes a difference in our daily happiness. "What we eat clearly impacts our emotional state for the day. Highly processed sugar, bad fats and salt do not nourish us at a deep level. We do not feel good, instead we are in a fog."

We usually know, either intellectually or intuitively, what foods provide the best nutritional bang for the buck. Let's also start considering that these same foods influence our emotional well being every day. Yes, brain chemistry is complicated. Fortunately, you don't need to be a brain scientist to eat your way to a better mood.

First, take responsibility for the food on your plate. Read, research, and seek local experts whose philosophies align with yours. Start with minimally processed natural and whole foods, avoid hormones and antibiotics, say no when you

can to genetically modified foods and most farmed fish, and ensure that your home only offers wholesome, mood-enhancing nourishment for you and your family.

Of course the best recipe for homemade, life-enriching moods includes a good night's


rest and exercise. And, when it comes to food, you're the boss. So here's the question: what's on your plate?

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