

Real Food – The best medicine for your brain

Goals:

- Understanding the connection between good nutrition and healthy brain functioning
- Exploring easy and economical sources of unprocessed whole food

Real food provides vitamins and nutrients that processed foods and pharmaceuticals just don't. Nutrition fads and facts are changing all the time. Here are some tried and true real food facts to motivate you to incorporate real food into your diet and some easy ways to make it happen every day.

Exercise:

After learning about economical sources of unprocessed whole food, plan a trip to your favorite grocery store. Challenge yourself to try at least two recipes that contain the nutrients listed below. Take a few deep breaths before you eat your meals. Remember that deep breathing will help activate the rest and digest response, helping you to absorb, and enjoy your meals.

We are fatheads – The human brain is made up predominantly of fat that we can only get from our diet. We need these sources of good Omega 3 fatty acids like EPA and DHA for maximum brain function.

Easy source: Fish oil is easily assimilated by the human body and a healthy source of good fatty acids. However it can be expensive and hard to ingest. Ground flaxseed is less pricey per serving, readily available and can be mixed into a morning smoothie, oatmeal, or applesauce, and sprinkled into soup or salad. Most nuts and seeds also contain omega-3s and are a great snack choice.

Protein is not optional – Without a food source of protein, we can't produce serotonin and dopamine – two major players in mood and brain health. It's best to get a little protein at every meal.

Easy source: Breakfast – make time for low-sugar yogurt or a handful of nuts. Lunch – Turkey slices, or a scoop of peanut or almond butter. Dinner – small catch fish (salmon, trout) or chicken. For vegetarians, beans, soy products, or cheese, are easy ingredients to mix with rice and veggies.

Manage stress with B vitamins – Stress increases the body's need for B vitamins. When B is low, we can't convert food to energy. Some people have a genetic tendency to have trouble with this conversion, and may need supplementation. Start with your diet, and consult with your doctor about supplementation.

Easy source: Quick power salad with roasted veggies: Slice some root veggies like beets, potatoes, and squash and spread them in a baking dish. Sprinkle with olive oil, salt and pepper. (Mindfulness tip: Take a second to enjoy the color of this dish). Bake at 400

degrees until tender. Meanwhile boil an egg or two (or more if you want extras for tomorrow's breakfast). Slice up your favorite greens and toss with olive oil, vinegar or lemon juice. Top greens with roasted veggies, chopped eggs, and avocado.

Magnesium (and other mineral) madness – Are you feeling the kind of physical stress that manifests itself as tight muscles, cramps, constipation, or insomnia? It's likely that magnesium can help. Many factors can make it hard to get enough minerals in our diet. Again, try food sources for these nutrients, but if you are experiencing some of the above symptoms, magnesium can be absorbed through the skin by Epsom salt baths. The pill form of magnesium is an inexpensive and easy-to-find supplement.

Easy source: We all have time for this one: dark chocolate! Pair this with pumpkin seeds for an on-the-go source. Grate dark chocolate and melt into cow or nut milk for a healthy, yummy snack. Leafy greens (although not sprinkled with chocolate) are also a great source of a full spectrum of minerals.

One more worth mentioning: Vitamin D can be obtained through salmon and mackerel as well as fortified dairy products, but one of the easiest ways to get vitamin D is by soaking up the sun.

Easy source: Twenty minutes a day in the sunshine can help boost mood and energy. If you have concerns about low vitamin D levels affecting your mood, ask your doctor for a simple blood test and appropriate levels of supplementation.

Physical Exercise for Emotional Well-being

Goals:

- Understanding the connection between physical exercise and mental clarity
- Building motivation to make physical exercise a habit

You may be motivated to exercise in pursuit of a certain body type. But one of the best benefits of regular exercise is that it increases the experience of positive emotions and makes your mind and body more resilient to stress.

Exercise:

Here are some mood-related motivating tidbits that will help you incorporate exercise into your self-care routine. Try one or more a week for the next month. Record your mood changes (as opposed to body changes) in your centering journal.

- The term *stress inoculation* describes the process of inducing small amounts of stress for the sake of building resiliency.
- You may be familiar with how this idea works on your muscles, but did you know it works on your mind too? Even a short burst of exercise registers as stress in the brain. After the short burst of exercise, during the recovery phase, your brain says, “Hey, I survived that!” Then, the next time you feel physical or mental stress, say a meeting with your boss, you will have more resiliency against the fight or flight response.
Try this: Take a run around your neighborhood for ten minutes right now, or do two sets of 25-50 jumping jacks. Did you survive? Do you feel more calm and clear-headed?
- You may be a digital native, working behind a screen or desk, but your nervous system is stuck in the Stone Age and has not caught up with rapid cultural evolution. The nervous system is the same model that our Paleo ancestors had, and is still designed to keep the body as alert and active as when food supplies were scarce and required a lot of time and energy to find.
Try this: Treat your physical body like a caveperson’s when gathering food. When you go to a grocery store, convenience store, or restaurant, park further away than necessary. If it’s safe and well lit, take a lap or two around the parking lot. This is an easy way to add more steps into your weekly routine, and a reminder that the human nervous system has some serious catching up to do before it is designed to be as sedentary as our modern lifestyle.
- Exercise helps tryptophan and BDNF (a protein that encourages new brain cell growth) to cross the blood-brain barrier. The result: production of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that boosts mood, manages anxiety, impulsivity, and assists in learning.
Try this: Choose a book or an article on a new topic. Read four pages before exercising, then read four more after twenty minutes of rigorous movement. Did you notice a difference in your ability to pay attention?

- GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), the brain's major inhibitory transmitter, increases with exercise. GABA puts the breaks on (inhibits) the fight or flight response, and is the main target for many anti-anxiety drugs. GABA calms the mind down enough to take in positive experiences.

Try this: Get your heart rate up with a 20-minute brisk walk, a 10-minute run, or two sets of fifty jumping jacks. Notice the contents of your thoughts before and after. Are they slightly more positive post-exercise? Even if you are worried about an upcoming event, do you feel more in control?

- We all have a different stress set-point. It is a product of our genetic code and environmental exposure to stress, we all have a different threshold for switching on the fight or flight response. The good news is exercise helps to raise the trigger point of the physical and mental response to stress.

Try this: Practice ten to twenty minutes of aerobic exercise every day this week, or forty minutes three times a week, whichever best fits into your schedule. After a week, notice your reaction to a typical stressor, like getting stuck in traffic, social stress, or a heavy workload.