



## Food and Mood

The old adage 'you are what you eat' may be more important than we think. A survey by the Food and Mood Project found that of 200 participants, 88% reported that changing their diet improved their mental health significantly. According to the Feeding Minds report, produced by the Mental Health Foundation and Sustrans in 2005, 'what we eat (and drink) affects how we think and feel every day of our lives'.

Healthy eating reduces the chance of being affected by a range of physical illnesses, including cancer and heart disease, and also affects mental well-being. Eating well gives you more energy, improves your self-esteem and can be enjoyable.

### Stressors and Supporters

Amanda Geary of the Food and Mood project identified that some foods can be "stressors" on your body, which can have a negative effect on your mood, while other foods are "supporters". Which foods affect you varies between individuals, but here are some common stressors and supporters

### Food Stressors

- Sugar - raw or in foods.
- Caffeine - found in tea, coffee and fizzy diet drinks.
- Alcohol.
- Chocolate.
- Some wheat-containing foods, such as white bread, biscuits, cakes and various cereals.
- Additives, such as E colourings, found in many processed foods (check their labels).
- Dairy, such as milk, butter, cheese and eggs.
- Saturated fats, found in food like bacon and other fried items.

### Food Supporters

- Water.
- Vegetables, such as carrots, broccoli and swede.
- Fruit, such as bananas and tomatoes.
- Oil-rich fish, such as salmon, herring, pilchards, mackerel, trout (rainbow), sardines, dogfish, shrimp, crab and fresh tuna. If you buy tinned fish, check the label, as the processing may have reduced these important oils.
- Wholegrains, such as wholegrain bread or pasta.



## Some Signs of Depression

Symptoms may include:-

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feeling inadequate
- Anxiety
- Feeling negative about your life
- Not liking yourself, feeling ugly
- Feeling unable to enjoy things that you used to like doing
- Feeling guilty or bad
- Feeling agitated
- Feeling unhappy, miserable and lonely a lot of the time
- Feeling irritable or moody
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Loss of energy or motivation
- Loss of sex drive
- Disturbed sleep
- Poor concentration
- Frequent minor health problems, such as headaches or stomach-aches
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide

If symptoms are present for more than two weeks and are affecting your life, contact us for details of help in your area (our contact details are at the end of this factsheet) or talk to your GP.

## Making a start

Here are some pointers to help you start improving your diet:

- Discuss your eating and drinking and any changes you feel need to be made with your GP, practice nurse or dietician.
- Eat breakfast. A good healthy breakfast will set you up for the day.
- Keep a food diary. Write down everything you eat and drink and include the emotions you are feeling. This will help you to see more clearly which foods have an effect on your mood; and to identify which foods are your stressors and supporters.
- Eat at least 3 meals a day, at regular intervals, to prevent your blood sugar from getting too low. Low blood sugar can cause mood swings, irritability, fatigue and cravings for sugary foods.
- Include protein with every meal. Protein contains a good source of the mood enhancing tryptophan, an essential amino acid which is converted into serotonin - a brain chemical which can be low in people affected by Depression. Protein foods include meat, fish, beans, lentils, eggs and cheese. Eating complex carbohydrates, such as wholegrains and oats, can help the tryptophan reach your brain.
- Eat oil-rich fish at least once a week to get Omega 3s. If you are a vegetarian or don't like fish, Omega 3s are also found in Linseed (flax) oil or you can buy supplements from health food shops or online.
- Cut down on salt (eat no more than 6g a day).
- Drink plenty of water. Current recommendations suggest you should drink 2.5 litres a day. Reduce your intake of drinks containing caffeine and alcohol, which can dehydrate you, cause stress and anxiety, and disrupt your sleep.



- If you think that certain types of food, such as wheat, caffeine,

gluten or sugar, could be having a negative effect on you, experiment with cutting down. Note the results in your food diary. Be gentle with yourself and don't cut everything out at once, as this will give your body a huge shock.

## It's all in the planning

Plan meals in advance, so you are less likely to just grab the nearest meal or takeaway. If you don't have much time during the week, why not spend some time cooking at the weekend and freeze the meals to give yourself healthy ready meals!

## Take it slowly

Introduce a few changes at a time to help your body adjust. Don't just stop some foods. For example, eggs are dairy, which can be a food stressor for some people, but also contain tryptophan, which can be helpful for others. Use your food diary to work out what helps you and what doesn't. It's not about a 'diet' so much as a plan to introduce healthy balanced eating.

## Enjoy yourself

Eating healthily is not meant to be a punishment. Enjoy food! Find new ways of preparing and eating healthy alternatives. Find out about locally produced organic foods. Go to farmers markets or farm shops and see what is available. If you are not confident cooking, think about learning. Buy a beginners' cook book or attend an evening course. If you burn your first attempt, throw it out and try again!

According to the Feeding Minds report, eating well can lead to improved mood and a reduction in mood swings within only a few weeks, so good luck and bon appétit!



## For Help and Support

- **Depression Alliance Scotland** 3 Grosvenor Gardens, Edinburgh, EH12 5JU, Tel: 0845 123 23 20, [www.dascot.org](http://www.dascot.org)
- **The Scottish Healthy Living campaign** has lots of good advice on healthy eating and the option of free personal e-mail or phone advice from nutrition specialists. Helpline: 0845 2 78 88 78 [www.healthyliving.gov.uk](http://www.healthyliving.gov.uk)
- **The British Dietetic Association** 0121 200 8080 [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)
- **Mental Health Foundation and Sustain** Feeding Minds Report and campaign materials available online at [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/feedingminds/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/feedingminds/) or phone tel 0141 572 0125
- **The Food and Mood Project** Dietary self-help for mental and emotional health [www.foodandmood.org](http://www.foodandmood.org).

## Books

- **The Food and Mood Handbook: How What You Eat Can Transform How You Feel** by Amanda Geary (Thorsons)
- **Optimum Nutrition for the Mind** by Patrick Holford (Piatkus Books)
- **Potatoes Not Prozac** by Kathleen Desmaisons (Pocket Books)