

# HOW FOOD AFFECTS OUR MENTAL HEALTH



**Brain function and mental health rely on optimal nutrition for basic function, so when deciding what to eat we should aim for more than a quick energy fix.**

If you've ever reached for chocolate or cake when stressed, you will know that what we eat is intrinsically bound up in our ever-changing mood states. When we feel low or demotivated, we can quickly carve the dopamine fix that sugar, caffeine and junk foods can deliver. With motivation to move and look after ourselves relying on this mood-lifting neurotransmitter (take note – dopamine levels are depleted by stress) it's easy to see how a vicious cycle can result. Emotional eating can replace taking on the nutrients we need to support good mood.

We need the right carbohydrate sources for sustained energy, quality protein for neurotransmitter and hormone production and healthy fats for the cells in our nervous system to pick up and use these. We also require B vitamins, C, zine, magnesium and omega-3 oils to metabolise these macronutrients and produce the hormones, enzymes and neurotransmitters that run the whole symphony. To continue the musical analogy, this orchestration is put under more pressure when physical activity is increased. Yes, this is a good stress but it does increase the nutritional needs for both energy and mood.

## **Balancing blood sugar**

Sports nutrition has a basis of sufficient blood sugar needs before training, and replenishing spent muscle with protein soon after. This is supportive of blood sugar balance and therefore mood as a whole. For example:

Before training, these carbohydrate sources are easily digested

- A low sugar berry smoothie
- A few oatcakes
- A banana or other piece of fruit
- Nut and dried fruit or trail mix

After training, depending on time and how close to a meal you are, these make good snacks

- Boiled egg with avocado
- Spinach frittata and omelette
- Nut butter on bread or rye crackers
- Yoghurt with berries or coconut
- Good quality protein shake or snack bar

Unfortunately, many believe eating 'little and often' is the way to fix rollercoaster blood sugar levels where people may feel energy dipping and low blood sugar between meals. Symptoms include low mood, intolerance and irritability, lost motivation, fatigue and poor concentration – not to mention the effect on performance of those training.

It is true that eating small amounts regularly will prop up and sudden drops in glucose delivery to cells, but this may not be a viable long term solution for everyone. It not only creates a fixation on what goes in our mouths, but can also set up a confused relationship with appetite and may place a strain on digestion.



For most of us, work time is likely spent sitting behind a desk, stewing in stress hormones that create the urge for our bodies to move, but because they can't, result in tight muscle and fascia. This can then create signals to 'fuel up' as the stress response is also a survival mechanism that demands immediate energy to protect us from perceived danger. When the stress is in response to a pressured work environment or upsetting email, the whole mind-body still prepares for the full physical flight or fight reaction.

For many in workplace culture, the pull to snack on sugary items available can be profound. Particularly if sugar and junk fats or the deeply satisfying combination of both - as cakes, cookies or pastries – are used to numb against stress or boredom. When we see food, it is natural to want to have and eat it as any animal is primed to do. Blaming poor willpower for giving into temptation is a recipe for more stress inducing self-criticism, guilt and shame. Recognise the signs that we need to support our blood sugar and step back from the pressure to take smart breaks.

This feeds into exercise too. Those who are stressed tend to 'live in their heads' and may only be driven by their next goal or aim. This can prevent us from being able to listen to our bodies, eating and exercising mindfully. A key sign that the energy balance has been pushed over into depletion is knowing you need densely supportive nutrient-rich food, yet are feeling compelled to fuel up with quick-fix foods that create an energy spike, followed by a low. Reducing sugar intake and regulating exercise appropriately can prevent using up the nutrients needed for healthy mood and focus.