

## The Food and Mood Connection

by Rebecca Stanwyck, LCSW

Last week I had the pleasure of co-teaching a class on this subject, with a colleague who is a nutritionist and cooking instructor. In the process, we realized that we're both seeing a lot of stressed and depressed clients, who share a common denominator: what they're eating is contributing to their low mood and energy.

Most of us know that when we're stressed or depressed we don't sleep as well, don't feel like exercising, feel aches and pains more intensely, and have less physical energy. If we go to the doctor, we may be told we have high blood pressure or "pre-diabetes" along with anxiety or depression. These are physical manifestations of mental or emotional distress, which in turn create more distress - now we have to take all those medications! So then we might conclude, "it's my job that's the problem," or "the commute" or "where I'm living" or "who I'm living with" - but since most of us can't very easily change any of those things, we feel stuck, which only makes us more stressed and depressed.

What people often don't recognize is that the solution may lie in something as simple as what they're putting into their mouths every day. What we eat - and what we don't - can make a HUGE difference in our mood, physical energy and even cognitive functioning. If you're suffering from low mood and energy, chances are you're also low in some of the essential nutrients your body needs to boost mood and energy - and no, a double mocha frappuccino is not an essential nutrient!

If you don't know where to start to improve your nutrition, a good place is breakfast. I believe breakfast is the most important meal of the day: it *breaks* the *fast* of a night's sleep, and it sets the tone for the day ahead. Too many people skip it altogether, or go for the "quick fix" of coffee and a refined carbohydrate like toast, or add sugar with OJ and a pastry. Yes, that may give you enough energy to get through the morning commute and the first couple of hours of work, but you'll be sagging before lunch (and craving more caffeine and quick fix foods). And if you don't do any better at lunch, you'll be dragging your way home at the end of the day, too tired to stop at the gym or cook a healthy dinner.

The easiest way to make changes in your daily routine is to ADD something GOOD, rather than try to take away everything bad. So instead of telling you to stop drinking that coffee and eating that muffin, I'll suggest that you add one of the following sources of protein: a glass of low-fat milk, a carton of Greek yogurt, a hard-boiled egg; as well as a source of fiber and nutrients: a banana, an apple, a couple of carrots. (Your favorite coffeeshop may stock all of those items - except the carrots!) And mix it up a little - try different foods every day.

It really doesn't take any more time to cook a simple omelette than to brew a pot of coffee, if you plan ahead a little. My favorite: spinach and swiss cheese. But if you don't have time for that, then try one of these options: a protein smoothie (see my recipe below); 6 oz of Greek yogurt with sliced bananas or strawberries and a sprinkling of granola on top; or an 8 oz glass of milk, almond butter on a slice of whole-grain toast, and an apple.

Once you've improved your breakfast routine, you'll undoubtedly feel better, so then you'll be ready to tackle the rest of your eating habits - making sure you first focus on adding high-protein, nutrient-dense foods, like kale or spinach salads with chicken, eggs or seafood, and then gradually eliminating the high-sugar, refined and processed stuff.

My basic guidelines for improving mood and energy: eat three meals a day, each one with at least 20-25 grams of protein. Don't skip meals, and have plenty of fruits, veggies and nuts on hand for healthy snacks. Drink water, lots of it, instead of sodas (even diet sodas can trigger mood imbalances). Avoid sugar and refined carbohydrates - this is really more important than reducing fat, because your body just converts sugar into fat anyway.

Eat fresh, minimally processed foods (shop the perimeter of the grocery store, avoiding the inner aisles - or better yet, go to your neighborhood farmer's market). And if you want to lose weight, eat less. Reducing portion size, and eating more slowly (as well as mindfully) is a far more effective long-term weight-loss strategy than the latest fad diet.

By the way, if you're already taking an antidepressant medication, like 1 in 10 Americans, it's more important to make sure you have plenty of protein in your diet, because that's what allows your body to produce serotonin, the brain chemical the medication acts on.

### **Basic Protein Smoothie**

1 egg  
4 oz milk (preferably low-fat or non-fat)  
4 oz orange juice  
1 scoop whey or soy protein powder  
1 small banana, or half a large one  
Handful of strawberries (fresh preferred, frozen OK)

Put all ingredients into a blender and blend for 1-2 minutes. This simple and delicious concoction will give you about 20 grams of protein, plus fiber and other nutrients. If you want more protein, add another scoop of protein powder, or more milk, or some plain yogurt. For more nutrients, try adding some blueberries.