

Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety

What's in it for me? Beat the blues by changing up your diet.

These days, it doesn't take an expert to see that a mental health crisis is upon us. Most people are overworked and stressed out – and even before the global pandemic, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide were all on the rise. Luckily, one of the easiest places to find comfort is at the dinner table. Just like physical health, your mental health relies on getting the proper nutrients – and lately, countless studies have shown a direct link between diet and mental well-being. Unfortunately, finding the right foods for you can be a confusing journey of culling through the latest fad diets and recommended superfoods. These blinks aim to cut through the chatter and show how you can make small changes to your diet to support your mental health. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to help foster a healthy microbiome; how to grow new brain cells; and why a Mediterranean diet is so good for you.

Food can help you cope with depression and anxiety.

For a long time, it was thought that the brain stopped growing once you reached adulthood. However, recent scientific research has shown that your brain's neuroplasticity – that is, its ability to make new connections – can continue to increase throughout your life. According to the emerging field of Nutritional Psychiatry, a healthy diet is an easy way to promote neuroplasticity and, in turn, relieve mental health issues. Over the past decade, it has become widely recognized that food is medicine. And because the brain consumes 20 percent of your daily caloric intake, it's only logical that the minerals, vitamins, fats, and proteins you eat affect how it functions. Eating is the most basic way you can take care of your body every day, so it makes sense you'd take care of your mental health the same way. The key message here is: Food can help you cope with depression and anxiety. It's important to be clear about what exactly depression and anxiety are. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, depression is typically characterized by low mood, lack of energy, and trouble concentrating. In turn, anxiety manifests as extreme worry, along with irritability and sleep disruption. Medicines to treat these symptoms do exist. But a study by the National Institute for Mental Health found that two-thirds of participants felt no relief from antidepressants. Similar results have been seen with anti-anxiety meds. So, to really beat depression and anxiety, a different approach is needed – one that helps manage symptoms through a combination of talk therapy and tweaks to your diet and exercise habits. For starters, the author suggests taking a look at the benefits of a Mediterranean-style diet. Consisting mostly of fruits, vegetables, fish, whole grains, and healthy fats, this diet helps reduce cholesterol and promote heart health. But there's more! It also supports neuroplasticity, fights inflammation, and helps foster a healthy microbiome in your gut. Over the course of the following blinks, we'll go deeper into which particular nutrient-dense foods are best for the brain. As will soon become apparent, a lot of these essential nutrients tend to come as a package, so making small changes won't be that hard. And if you're one of those people who hates kale, don't

worry – there’s plenty of other healthy options to choose from.

Positive lifestyle changes help your brain grow.

Depression and anxiety make change difficult, don’t they? The author recounts how one of his patients, a young man named Pete, felt like he was “stuck in place.” Not only had Pete been on medication since his teenage years, but he also came from a family with a history of depression. And because his depression seemed genetic, Pete felt hopeless. Recent studies have found that certain genes may increase your chances of depression or anxiety. But they’re far from the only factor at play. In fact, the field of epigenetics shows that while you’re born with a certain set of genes, your experiences and lifestyle choices – things like diet and exercise – all work to change your genome in response to your environment. The key message here is: Positive lifestyle changes help your brain grow. One region of the brain affected by depression is the hippocampus, the brain’s memory center. As part of your limbic system, which manages emotional responses, it can be disturbed by mood disorders. In fact, studies have shown that the hippocampus in depressed patients is up to 20 percent smaller. Interestingly though, scientific work coming out of UCLA showed that hippocampal growth in rats could be prompted by neurotrophins – neuron-growing proteins found in many foods, especially those containing omega-3 fatty acids. After seeing UCLA’s results, Felice Jacka, a scientist at Australia’s Deakin University, ran a study demonstrating that people who ate healthier had greater hippocampal volume. Another way to help support brain health is to reduce inflammation. Inflammation isn’t in itself bad – it’s just the body’s immune response. But chronic stress, toxins, and hormone imbalances can lead to an overabundance of inflammatory molecules, which disrupts neural activity and contributes to depression. While inflammation is caused by many factors like smoking and chronic stress, another major culprit is the Western diet, which is full of carbs, trans fats, and processed meats. By contrast, you can help your cells respond to chronic inflammation by filling your plate with colorful fruits and vegetables, seafood, and magnesium-rich foods like avocado and dark chocolate. Which is all to say, it’s not hopeless and you’re never stuck! Just look at Pete, the author’s patient. He started substituting processed foods with seafood and leafy greens – and, within a few months, he was able to raise his spirits and lower his medication dosage.

A healthy gut is crucial to having a healthy mind.

Have you ever felt a wave of disappointment? If so, chances are you felt it deep down in your gut. And there’s a reason for that. “Gut reaction” is more than just a neat turn of phrase. In fact, your gut is incredibly important in your day-to-day functioning. That’s because the many neurons in your gut are constantly sending messages to your brain – for instance, letting it know that you’ve eaten enough. However, when the gastrointestinal, or GI, tract isn’t functioning well, gut-to-brain communication also suffers. And animal studies have shown that limited GI tract function leads to higher levels of stress and fear, as well as cognitive problems. These symptoms are familiar to anyone who’s suffered from anxiety or depression. The key message here is: A healthy gut is crucial to having a healthy mind. To keep your GI tract healthy, you need to

maintain a healthy microbiome – the trillions of microorganisms living in your gut. That might sound a little gross, but the bacteria in your gut actually want you to stay healthy – after all, they can't survive without you. And they aren't just getting a free ride; they help synthesize nutrients and break down food. Without them, you couldn't be fully nourished. Back in the 1960s, researchers made the connection between mood and gut bacteria when they began to use germ-free mice in their studies. These mice, which had literally no bacteria in their systems, were physically healthy, but they also had trouble responding to stressful situations – like being moved to an unfamiliar habitat. The same problems were seen in humans. A study done by Houston Methodist Hospital analyzed patients suffering from severe depression and anxiety. It found that those with a less diverse microbiome had more serious symptoms, while those with more diverse bacteria actually saw their symptoms diminish more quickly. To promote diversity in your microbiome, try starting with probiotics. In a study conducted by John Cryan, a neuroscientist at University College Cork, participants who took probiotics for a month had lower anxiety and stress responses. However, probiotics don't work the same for everyone, which makes them tricky. And, of course, some people have diets full of highly processed foods, which negate the effects of probiotics. That's why the best way to keep your microbiome diverse is to feed the good bugs lots of fiber, as well as fermented foods such as kefir and sauerkraut.

To get healthy, find the foods that you enjoy eating.

Eating to beat depression doesn't mean relying on some miracle "superfood" or strictly following a restrictive diet. Instead, the author groups brain-healthy, nutrient-dense foods into categories – making it easy to add them into your diet. The categories are flexible, too; whether you're vegan, on a ketogenic diet, or even just a picky eater, you can use them as a guide. And there's no need to obsess over which foods are optimally nutritious. Just pick those you enjoy eating, and you'll get all the nutrients you need. The key message here is: To get healthy, find the foods that you enjoy eating. The first category is leafy greens, which includes kale, spinach, arugula, collards, beet greens, and chard. These foods are not just incredibly nutrient-dense, but also versatile – you can enjoy them in salads, stir-fries, pestos, or smoothies. The next category is a colorful one: rainbow fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes, bell peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, eggplant, red cabbage, and berries. Avocados are especially important here, as they're packed with healthy fat, fiber, and potassium. The seafood category can be a tricky one for some people, but it's so jam-packed with omega-3 fatty acids that it's worth exploring. There's a vast array of options, from whitefish and salmon to sardines and oysters, so it's likely you'll find something you enjoy. Nuts and seeds are an easier category to incorporate since they're so good for snacking. They're also great with smoothies and on salads. When it comes to the meat category, seek out grass-fed. It's not only better for the environment, but also has fewer calories and more nutrients. Then there's eggs and dairy. Eggs are another good source of protein – nutrient-dense, versatile, and affordable. Dairy isn't strictly required, but yogurt and kefir, which are fermented, have plenty of good bacteria, calcium, and protein. If you really don't like dairy, you can give your gut more of those good bugs by eating fermented foods like sauerkraut, miso, or kimchi. The last category is dark chocolate. Not only is it delicious, but a study in the National Health and Examination Survey showed that eating high amounts of it greatly reduces symptoms of depression!

The only “right way” of doing things is the way that’s right for you.

It’s time to acknowledge the obvious: changing your diet is really hard. For starters, online sources give out a ton of conflicting information, and sifting through it all can be a nightmare. What’s more, the message all these diets seem to convey is that you’re eating wrong. If you suffer from depression or anxiety, that kind of message doesn’t exactly inspire. There are a lot of outdated ideas out there, too. For instance, one of the author’s patients ate a lot of iceberg lettuce, which has basically no nutrients, because she saw her skinny waistline as a sign of being healthy. The patient had picked up this wisdom from her mother – but, clearly, it was no longer serving her. So the key message here is: The only “right way” of doing things is the way that’s right for you. Before going any further, take a few moments to remind yourself why you’re taking this journey in the first place. Ask yourself: Why am I here? What interested me in this topic to begin with? Write down your primary mental health concerns – and then ask yourself if you’re ready to make some changes. Second, consider your relationship with food. Did you clean your plate as a kid? Or did eating fill you with a sense of shame? Journal about your history and habits around food, asking questions like, Did my family eat together?, What foods did I eat when I was young?, and Would I rather eat out than cook? Exploring your eating habits will help you pinpoint both challenges and growth opportunities. Once you’ve considered your motivation, you can begin taking the small steps that will lead to big changes over time. By setting and achieving little goals, you’ll be more inspired to deal with the learning curve you’re bound to encounter. In the midst of depression and anxiety, we often forget to be kind to ourselves. So every time you add some new food to your diet or learn to cook a new dish, stop and celebrate yourself! Remember, this isn’t a restrictive diet plan where you’ll be relegated to eating just spinach all the time. It’s about finding foods you truly enjoy and discovering new strength in yourself – or maybe the fact that you actually like spinach. Stick to doable goals and, over time, watch your small wins add up to lasting change and a better state of mind.

Set yourself up for success by setting up your kitchen.

Now that you’ve mentally prepared yourself to eat healthier, it’s time to start cooking. But wait! Do you have all the ingredients you need? Is your kitchen a fully stocked workstation, or is it just the room that holds your microwave? And, importantly, do you even know how to cook? If you answered no to any of these questions, don’t worry. Remember, this is a slow, gentle process. There’s no need to feel intimidated – and you’re definitely not alone. You’ve already done a lot of mental work to prepare for your new lifestyle; setting up your kitchen is simple in comparison. So don’t let this important final step hold you back! The key message here is: Set yourself up for success by setting up your kitchen. First, take stock of your current kitchen. What are your go-to tools, and what utensils do you have on hand? What kinds of food do you always keep around? Oh yeah, and how is your spice rack doing? By figuring out what you already have and throwing out what you don’t need, you’re taking the first step toward creating an inspiring space to do your cooking. You don’t need lots of appliances or special tools to keep a practical kitchen and cook delicious food. In fact, your basic tool kit starts

with just a really good knife, a cutting board, a metal colander (great for washing veggies as well as straining pasta), a saucepan, and a frying pan. That's it. Really. As you get more confident with your cooking skills, you'll end up adding more tools as you need them. Next, go through your pantry and replace any processed foods with nutrient-dense staples, whole grains, and delicious spices. Also try to have a variety of cooking fats on hand – things like olive oil, grass-fed butter, and coconut oil. Be sure to cook on low heat so that all those nutrients are preserved and absorbed into the fat. Last, it's important to try and plan your meals ahead of time. That's because sometimes, especially in the midst of depression, deciding what to cook can be overwhelming. So try cooking a big meal to eat over a couple of days. And remember that there's nothing wrong with shortcuts – get takeout if you really feel like it! Just look for healthy options. This process happens slowly, bite by bite. Once you've set yourself up to succeed, all you truly need is the will to commit.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Whether you struggle with your mental health or are looking for optimal brain performance, it doesn't take a lot to get started. Unlike fad diets, eating to beat depression and anxiety doesn't require you upend your whole life or survive on a restrictive meal plan. Instead, you can use science-backed information to make your own wise choices. Remember, big changes come from slow, steady steps. Actionable advice: Add some nuts to your Mediterranean diet. Eating nuts significantly boosts your levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF – one of your body's most potent proteins. BDNF helps your brain grow new cells and stay adaptable into adulthood, and it also protects against toxins that result from chronic stress. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety as the subject line and share your thoughts!