When Your Brain and Your Stomach Don’t Get Along

by ERIC PATTERSON

The Connection Between Depression and Appetite

Have you been depressed for a while? Have you noticed changes in your appetite and eating habits? Have you lost weight in the last month without even trying? Have you found yourself eating food despite not being hungry? If you have, you are not alone.

Food and depression share an interesting relationship. One of the questions that any mental health professional will ask when assessing for depression is: How is your appetite? The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the reference book that professionals use to diagnosis mental health issues like depression, lists one of the symptoms of depression as weight loss of 5% of total body weight in a month without trying. Some find their appetite and weight reduced, while others gain weight as their hunger is never satisfied. How does this happen? Why does this happen? What can you do to resolve this?

Too often, people take a passive approach to issues of diet and appetite in regards to depression. They figure that these symptoms will improve when depression does. In reality, if you do not receive the proper nutrition, your depression will not improve. Your body and your mind work together in a seamless unit. One cannot recover if the other is being starved.

Under Eating in Depression

Many people experience diminished appetite and weight loss during periods of depression. On some level, this is a logical outcome. During a depressive episode, people report feeling lack of motivation, lack of energy and lack of ability to follow through on goal-directed behaviors. With this being the case, going to the grocery store, buying fresh, healthy ingredients and standing over the stove to cook a healthy meal is unlikely. Someone with depression may struggle to complete this once a week, let alone three times per day.

Instead, someone with depression will isolate and stay motionless on the couch or in bed. They will look for the little food that they have which is readily available and requires no preparation. Without food to provide energy, the person with depression will continue feeling lack of energy and motivation. The cycle will continue without end.

Next page: overeating and improving your diet.

Overeating in Depression

Other people with depression will experience increased appetite and insatiable hunger. Along their way with depression, they learned through association that food makes them feel better. They discover that calorically dense and loaded with bad fats, sugars and carbohydrates boost their mood. The influx of wanted chemicals in their brain is a welcome reprieve from the constant depression.

Unfortunately, the improved mood is fleeting. It is followed by a crash in energy level and increased depressive symptoms. Rather than realize the error in this process, they choose to repeat the pattern, increasing the amounts of food as they go. Binging on ice cream, fast food, sugary drinks and potato chips becomes the norm.

This will result in added weight and reduced feelings of self-worth and self-esteem as they will no longer appreciated what they see in the mirror. Depression increases. This addictive cycle will also continue without end.

Improving Diet During Depression

Depression is comprised of many symptoms that the sufferer has little control over. It is extremely challenging to address mood, self-worth or feeling of pessimism directly. Because of this, spending more time, effort and energy working to improve eating habits is the most efficient use of limited resources. Do you want to eat better to feel better? Here's how:

- Many times, the first step to resolving an issue is to understand and monitor the current state of it. You may not even fully grasp the level of malnutrition that you are enduring. If you do not feel good physically, your diet may be the culprit. It is possible that poor diet is disturbing your mood as much as your mood is upsetting your diet.
- After the acknowledgment, begin tracking your current status. What are you eating? When are you eating? How much are you eating? Knowing what you are putting into your body will provide an understanding of what your body is able to give in return. Find and utilize online nutrition tools to gain nutritional information of the food you are eating.
- Many people say things like "I really need to start eating better." Some say, "Beginning tomorrow, I'm going to take better care of myself." These are good starts, but unless there is a plan to supply guidance, little progress will be made. Talk to someone that understands the connection between food intake and mental health.

What and When

When building an eating plan, people often focus on what to cut out rather than what to add. This is like a parent telling a child "no." It only serves to teach what not to do instead of the desired behaviors. Want to build a plan the focuses on what to eat and when to eat it? Here's how:

- **Eat more frequently –** Whenever you go long periods of time between meals, you tend to eat more because you will feel hungrier. The longer you wait between eating, the lower your blood sugar will drop. Low blood sugar is related to feelings of irritability, anxiety and poor concentration. A large meal will send your blood sugar skyrocketing, which will leave you feeling uncomfortable, drowsy and unmotivated. Eating often will also lower adrenaline and cortisol, which lowers stress. Aim for five or six small meals per day.

Next page: 'What and When' continued.

What and When

- **More protein –** Sugar causes your blood sugar to spike and drop rapidly. Carbohydrates are better but still lead to a spike and drop. To keep your blood sugar as level as possible throughout the day, eat protein at every meal. Protein is even a good option for snacks throughout the day. Protein leads to better energy, more restful sleep and improved metabolism that aids in maintaining a healthy weight. Eggs, nuts, cottage cheese and tofu are amazing sources of protein.
- **More good fats –** Over the years, fats were removed from many foods and "fat-free" replacements filled with sugar appeared. During the same time, average weights increased. Not all fats are problematic. In fact, good fats like those found in nuts, avocados, olive, flax and cod liver oils can provide a good source of energy, limit inflammation, maintain nerve cell protection and produce desired hormones. Good fats are a great option.

- **More water –** You need to consider your drinking habits as well. The nutrition found in store-bought juices does not compensate for the tremendous amount of sugar in them. Milk and water need to be your best friends and go-to options. Being dehydrated will encourage you to eat when you are not hungry. It leads to poor decision-making and inattention. There is a formula to determine your needed amount of water each day. Divide your weight by 3 and convert to ounces. Therefore, if you weigh 150 lbs, you would need 50 ounces of water daily since 150 divided by 3 equals 50. Start drinking.
- **More movement –** Having bowel movements regularly is actually an essential aspect of health directly related to your diet. With appropriate water and fiber, you should expect to have one or two bowel movements daily. Constipation leads to fatigue, headaches, depression, irritability and mental fog. This is just another way in which physical health contributes to poor mental health.
- **Fewer stimulants –** Caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and sugar all artificially influence the functioning of your body. Too much of these chemicals shift the natural state of your body. For example, caffeine is a known accelerant that can dehydrate your body by increasing urination. As you read above, dehydration will adversely affect your state. Allowing your body to function without stimulants gives it and you the best chance for success.

Conclusion

Take a look at your plate. Does your plate make sense? Colorful vegetables and lean protein the size of a deck of cards should cover the majority of it. If your food is white, grey or deep fried, reconsider eating it. What are you drinking and how much of it? A 72-ounce drink from the gas station for only 99 cents may seem like a great deal, but you will pay for it later. Do not seek out solutions that sound easy or quick – changing your eating habits will take time. Do not let irrationality get in the way.

If your plate is empty, recruit friends and family members to help with your menus. Your goal is to improve your mental health and it is likely their goal, too. They will be happy to help and the noticeable change will be encouraging to the both of you.

If addressing the depression has not helped your appetite, target the appetite directly. You may be able to eat yourself well.