



# ON CALL

Lay Community Health Advisors

# Relation between food and emotions

## Introduction

This short handbook will provide you with some additional information about how your mood dictates what kind of food choices you make and what health consequences it may have.

This handbook will be useful in promoting positive mental health with members of your local health network. Thanks to reading this handbook you will be aware how what we eat relates to our state of mind.

## Food and mood

Relation between our food disorders and mood disorders is a verified phenomenon. If we are in a bad mood, we tend to crave for so-called comfort food, which are usually rich in fat, sugar and salt (like pizza, ice-cream or chocolate). Even if we fulfil those cravings we won't feel satisfied as we cannot kill emotional hunger with food.

Fighting stress, anxiety, sadness, depression and other feelings that keep us down with food is unhealthy, yet natural reaction. Human race for ages tend to eat only when feeling safe, therefore simply an act of eating tends to calm us down.

## Keep track on your cravings

Having cravings is completely natural thing and it doesn't have to be bad for our health, we just need to be careful which ones we choose to fulfil.

When we crave, it means that we simply lack something. When we feel down, our mind sends signals to our body that we should rise our levels of serotonin and dopamine – so-called “hormones of happiness”, in order to feel better. The quickest way to do it is to shovel down food which is rich in sugar and fats. It will actually make us feel better, but only for a short while leaving us with the feeling of guilt and shame afterwards.

Not all cravings are bad for us. Sometimes we crave healthy food, like specific kinds of fruits, vegetables or nuts. It may mean that we lack some vitamins or minerals.

There are two kinds of cravings: selective and non-selective.

Non-selective craving is the desire to eat anything. It may mean the real hunger or be a sign of thirst. Drinking water may help with intense non-selective cravings.

Selective cravings are cravings for specifying kind of food. Most often for unhealthy fatty or sweet food, but sometimes also for fruits, vegetables or

even inedible things like dirt. All of them are sign that we lack something – vitamins, minerals or hormones- - and our mind send signals to our body to fix it.

## Cravings and health

Our cravings can tell us a lot about our state of health. The list is really long, but let's focuses on the most common ones:

- Craving ice may mean that we have anemia,
  - If we have weird cravings for inedible food like dirt or soap, it may mean that we have low iron level,
  - If we crave chocolate it may either mean that we fell sad, anxious or depressed and need to rise lever of serotonin and dopamine, or that we simply lack magnesium,
  - If we crave sweets in general it may mean that we are sleep deprived,
  - Craving cheese may mean that you need to relax a bit and thanks to l-tryptophan cheese can help you with that. But if you constantly crave for a cheese it may mean that you have problem with memory, concentration or even ADHD syndrome.
  - Craving soda may mean that you just need a caffeine shot.
  - If you crave potato chips, fries or other fatty snacks it may be a signal you're low on healthy fats.
- If you crave water, it may mean that you are dehydrated, but craving drinks constantly may be a signal of bigger health problems like diabetes
  - Craving salty products can be a sign of a mineral deficiency
  - Craving spicy food may mean that you are overheated and want to cool down (trough sweating after eating hot dish), or just need an adrenaline rush
  - Craving specific vegetable or fruit may mean that you lack vitamins or minerals it provides.

All cravings are caused by hormones, and that explains why pregnant woman, who are having real hormone rush, may have a really strong and weird cravings.

## Replacing cravings

Fighting cravings may not be an easy task. Even if usually they last only few minutes, they may be really strong and completely destroy our mood increasing our need for a comfort food. How should we fight them then?

1. Start with checking if you are not just thirsty. Drink some water first.
2. Calm your nerves. Maybe you are stressed or scared and looking for a short break and some comfort? If yes try some relaxing techniques or eat something healthy instead.
3. Look for healthier alternatives :

- Instead of eating salty snacks, like chips, eat cashews, walnuts or popcorn which are richer in healthy fats.
- Instead of chocolate eat magnesium-rich foods like almonds, or if it doesn't work – choose dark chocolate over milk one
- Sweet cravings may be satisfied with fruits, and fructose is better for your health than glucose or saccharose
- Replace fizzy drinks with sparkling water with a fruit juice or slices of lemon or orange and mint

There is nothing wrong with treating yourself to something delicious, yet unhealthy, as long as you don't do that frequently and don't make it your way to deal with stress, bad mood, boredom or exhaustion.

## Don't stress over food or your weight

If you let yourself to fulfil some craving and now feel guilty about it, try not to stress over it. The best you can do is to compensate it to yourself by exercise a little, planning eating healthier from now on and keeping yourself in a good mood.

Thinking too much about food and being too emotionally attached to it is the easiest

way to eating disorders. Either constantly feeling bad about what you just ate will lead you to eating even more, which may lead to obesity, or to eating way to less, which may lead you to anorexia or to eating even more, just to throw it up the moment you will feel bad about it – in other words - to bulimia.

Of course those are extreme situations, and feeling bad about what you eat doesn't necessary lead to such extreme disorders

The best way to learn to eat reasonably is to learn to manage your emotions. Bear in mind that eating your emotions is never a good idea.

## Eat food that will improve your mood

There are kind of foods and spices that will help to improve your mood without having any bad effect on your health.

If you want to have more energy and your mind to work better eat food which is rich in antioxidants like fruits and vegetables. Eat food rich in proteins, all carbs food as it is rich in the key amino acid required for the synthesis of serotonin (hormone of happiness – tryptophan).

## How to use this Resource with your Local Health Group?

This handbook presents information on the topic of relation between food and emotions. It helps us understand how our diet can influence our mental state.

Reviewing this handbook before each session with the group will help you to lead a discussion about the topic. In the resources you will also find a PowerPoint presentation which will help you to explain the topic to your group and start a conversation with them.

## Group Activity

After you have shared the digital resource and the PowerPoint presentation with your

group, you can start a group discussion asking your group members if they happen to eat their stress. Ask them for their ways to relief stress, overcome anxiety, kill boredom, and fight fears.

Once they finish this task ask them to divide into groups of 3-4 people and prepare a one-day menu for different kind of person for each group. One group will have to prepare healthy menu for stressed person, other for person dealing with anxiety, next for person who work way too much and feel constantly exhausted etc.



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