

Good Nutrition: How to Combat Anxiety and Stress

Too rushed or stressed to eat well? Think again!! Good nutrition is an important stress management tool. When our bodies are poorly fed, stress takes an even greater toll on our health. No one would expect their car to run if they neglected to fill the tank with gasoline. Yet many people fail on a daily basis, to "fuel" their body with healthy food, and then wonder why they feel the way they do. You may think that when life gets too hectic, it's easier to just grab something fast and forget about this whole eating healthy thing. Life IS crazy at times, but it is still possible to eat healthy amid all the chaos. *Here are some tips for getting good nutrition and maintaining a more healthy diet, even under stress. After a few weeks, they'll become habit and you won't even have to think about good nutrition. And your body—not to mention your stress level—will feel the difference!*

Eat Breakfast: You may rationalize that you're not hungry yet, that you don't have time, that lunch will come soon enough, that you need to diet anyway, or that the milk in the latte you pick up on the way is all the good nutrition you need. But skipping breakfast makes it harder to maintain stable blood sugar levels and effective functioning during your busy morning; when you need it. (You can easily grab a hard-boiled egg and container of orange juice on your way out the door, right?)

Cut Back on Caffeine: Having several cups of a caffeinated beverage each day can precipitate nervousness, insomnia, irritability, headaches and diarrhea. Drink more water instead (caffeine depletes your system of water, so drinking it is akin to *un*-drinking water!), and you'll be avoiding other caffeine-related side effects. If you do drink caffeinated beverages don't drink them after 2pm. Since caffeine has a half-life in your body of at least 6 hours, caffeine you ingest with dinner can interfere with your sleep at night.

Carry a Snack: Having some protein-rich, healthful snacks in your car, backpack, or purse can help you avoid blood sugar level dips and accompanying mood swings and fatigue. Trail mix, granola bars, and certain energy bars all contain good nutrition. Along these lines, you should always have water handy, as it's so vital to health and proper physical functioning.

Healthy Munchies: If you find that you absently munch when you're stressed, or have a pattern of snacking at certain times in the day or week, you can replace chips, cheese puffs and other less-healthy munchies with carrot sticks, edamame, celery sticks, sunflower seeds or other more healthy choices. (Even popcorn is a better choice if you leave off the butter and salt!)

Brown Bag It: Many people go out for lunch to fast food places, coffee shops or restaurants that serve less-than-optimally-healthy fare. While this does save a bit of time, you can save money and usually eat much healthier if you take a few extra minutes to pack and bring a lunch from home. Even if you do this only a few days a week, it would be an improvement over eating every lunch out.

Banish the Bad Stuff: It's easier to avoid sugary, fatty, and otherwise unhealthy foods if they're not in your home, practically begging you to eat them! This may sound like a no-brainer (yet it's sometimes harder to do than you'd expect), but you should go through your kitchen and throw out anything your body can't use in a healthy way. (Or at least most of it.) That way you'll be forced to snack on healthy food when you're stressed.

Stock Your Home With Healthy Fare: Even more important than getting the bad stuff out of your house, is getting healthy food *in*! The best way is to plan a menu of healthy meals and snacks at the beginning of each week, list the ingredients you'll need, and shop for everything once a week. That way you know you'll have what you want when you need it, and you won't have to stress over what to eat each night; you'll already have thought of it! (This makes eating at home much easier, too!)

Avoid Self-Medication: Although you can use alcohol and other drugs to relieve stress temporarily, they do not reduce the conditions that caused the stress in the first place. In fact, they may be habit forming and create more stress than they take away.

REMEMBER...

Stress is a choice. How you deal with stress is also a choice. Too often people turn to cigarettes, sweets, television, coffee, drugs and/or alcohol to "manage" stress. These are short-term fixes and won't help you in the long run. Instead, control stress by adopting a healthful lifestyle, which includes eating well, exercising, sleeping adequately, and enjoying your free time.

So where to start...

Try making at least one of these small healthy eating changes in your life and notice the difference in your anxiety and stress relief. Then start to incorporate more!