

Healthy & Resilient You



*Think
before you
open your
mouth*

How conscious food choices can reduce the impact of stress

Feeding Frenzy

When you think of stress eating, what comes to mind? It's probably not going to town on three bags of romaine lettuce, right? Statistics show that when stressed we tend to crave sugary, carby comfort foods, like a pint of ice cream, a pan of mac and cheese, or pecan crumble pie just like grandma used to make. Why is that?

The Vicious (Sugar) Circle

The answer lies in our brains. When we're stressed, our brains produce cortisol and adrenaline, chemicals that facilitate the **flight or fight** response to threatening environmental stimuli. From an evolutionary perspective, this reflex helped our ancestors avoid danger. But in our modern society,

it's not always possible, or socially appropriate, to fight or run away from stressors. So, we've taken the matter of modernizing our stress response into our own hands. Or in this case—our mouths.

When we eat sugar, it acts as a chemical balancer decreasing our cortisol levels in the short-term, which explains why it's often the first thing we reach for when stressed. But the feeling of relief is only temporary, and when it wears off, the stressors (deadlines, financial worries, the news, relationship woes) usually remain.

"That leads us to reach for more sugar, which can create a vicious cycle of stressing, bingeing, withdrawal and more bingeing."

This kind of stress eating can not only lead to physical health problems, but also to lasting impact on our mood—even to the point of feeding chronic depression and anxiety.

Rethinking Comfort Food

The good news? The same nutritional neuroscience used to expose the vicious sugar cycle has also illuminated some positive food-to-mood relationships. We can use this knowledge to adapt a healthier version of stress eating, one where we eat mindfully to minimize stress instead of eating mindlessly because we're stressed. To help build up biochemical resilience to stress, try incorporating some of these food strategies into your regular diet.

1. **Go a little nuts** – Nuts are chock-full of B vitamins, which can help keep our neurotransmitters happy and minimize fight or flight responses.
2. **See to some vitamin C** – Fruits and berries like oranges, kiwis, and strawberries and veggies like red bell peppers, kale, and broccoli all have high concentrations of this essential vitamin, shown to lower blood pressure and cortisol levels.
3. **Fish for omega-3s** – Fish like salmon and tuna are high in DHA and EPA, types of fatty acids that can help improve cognitive function and reduce anxiety.
4. **Be like Popeye** – Eating magnesium-rich spinach and other leafy greens can help regulate cortisol and blood pressure and has been shown to alleviate anxiety and depression.
5. **Choose carbs wisely** – Unlike other starchy carbs, oatmeal can satisfy a craving for warm and comforting without spiking your blood sugar. Craving something sweet? Dark chocolate with at least 70% cocoa provides more antioxidants than conventional candy bars for a sweet treat that better lowers cortisol and adrenaline.



Bonus Pro Tip:

Do social situations like lunch out with co-workers, family dinners and holiday parties make it hard for you to stick to wiser food choices? Try these tips for setting healthy food boundaries without offending.

- Be confident, definite and say a simple, “no thank you,” when offered something you shouldn’t, or don’t want to, eat. Hesitating or softening your response gives a cue to your food-offerer to keep offering.
- If someone insists, try a compliment the food/give a reason you can’t eat it approach, like, “Auntie Eugenia, I know you make the best cheesecake in the world, but I’m lactose intolerant.”
- If they still insist, do the thank and divert. “Really Auntie E., thanks for offering. Now where did you get that beautiful broach?”
- Be polite and don’t feel guilty. Remember, there’s no shame in wanting to be healthier.

For more resilience-building tips, visit the [Calm Down & De-Stress](#) Toolkit in the Resilience Hub.

This article is meant only as a guide and is not a substitute for medical advice. If you have any concerns about your diet or overall health, please consult your primary doctor.

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