A healthy diet helps a healthy mind

There is a large amount of research that suggests what we eat affects not only our physical health but also our mental health and wellbeing. Eating a well balanced diet may be associated with feelings of wellbeing.

However, we do know that mental health is supported by a large number of different components. Diet is one of these and is becoming more and more researched as its importance is more clearly understood. We all know that a poor diet can lead to conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. We also know that there is a higher rate of mental ill health in people with these conditions and many others – the relationship is complex.

No matter how complex the situation the simple fact is that a balanced diet can reduce your risk of developing many conditions as well as support a better mental health.

The word balanced is important – sweets and treats are not off the table, they just need to be balanced with the foods that keep you healthy and should be had in moderation. The more time we have, the more likely we are to turn to "comfort food". Comfort food tends to be high in sugar, carbohydrates and turns to fat and short term energy encouraging us to have more to get the next "hit".

So what should I eat?

There are two parts to this and it may be better to say – what should I eat more and what should I eat less. There are so many "diets" out there it is hard to know what is good and what is not so good. However, the food groups remain the same in all balanced diets so choose carefully. If we consider these in order of volume and importance this could be a guide:

1. **Fluids** – We can live a lot longer without food than we can live without water. It is recommended that we drink 6-8 cups of water a day. This can include tea, coffee (in moderation) and other drinks but try to avoid sugary drinks - see '7. Sugars' below.
2. **Fruit and Vegetables** – Not surprisingly, most of us are still not eating enough fruit and vegetables. Fruit and vegetables should make up a third of what we eat. We should all aim to eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables each day – they can be fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or even juiced.
3. **Starchy Foods** – These foods should make up about another third of our diet. Good choices include higher fibre wholegrains such as wheat pasta, brown rice and leaving the skins on potatoes.
4. **Dairy** – Milk, cheese, yoghurt are good sources of protein and vitamins but also the most important source of calcium to keep your bones strong. Try to get lower fat milk, reduced fat cheese and natural low fat yoghurt.
5. **Protein** – Protein is important but also important to get a good balance. Beans, peas and lentils are good alternatives to meat and are lower in fat and higher in fibre. When eating red meat choose lean cuts and eat less processed meat like bacon, ham and sausages. Aim to have two portions of fish per week with one being an oily fish.
6. **Fats** – It is important to remember that all types of fat are high in energy so should be eaten sparingly. Unsaturated fats are healthier and include vegetable, olive and sunflower oils.
7. **Sugars** – A proper diet does not need extra sugar as there is enough in all the other food groups. Foods such as cakes, chocolate, biscuits and ice cream should be limited in all diets. This doesn't mean they are taboo, it just means they should be minimised.
8. **Alcohol** – While not technically a food, alcohol is particularly problematic for your mental health. Many alcohols claim to be low in sugar. However they are high in carbohydrates and convert to sugar when consumed. Be extra careful not just from a diet perspective. Alcohol should not be treated as part of your fluid intake.

I feel "stressed" so what should I avoid?

The go to comfort foods when we feel stressed can often be high sugar, high carbohydrate foods and high sugar or alcoholic drinks. While in moderation these foods are all ok, they can create a sugar "hit" and an immediate feeling of comfort and wellbeing that is short lived. This then creates a craving for more and more and the spiral can sometimes be difficult to stop.

So if you are feeling stressed, it is ok to eat, however, it is better to eat a healthy snack and even better to do some activity or have a glass of water. Be sensible - if you feel stressed try to understand why, take other steps like doing exercise, be mindful/meditate or talk to someone. If that doesn't help don't be shy to ask for help either from family, your doctor or one of the help lines listed below.

8 tips for healthy eating in stressful times

1. **Don't get thirsty** – Drinking water can help you feel fuller. By feeling fuller you are less inclined to snack or want as big a meal. Drink often and at least 8 glasses of water a day.
2. **Have meals based on higher fibre starchy carbohydrates** – Bread, rice and pasta are ok for you in small amounts but try to make it wholemeal or brown. Also, don't add fat if you don't need it like butter on bread, oil on chips or creamy sauces on pasta.
3. **Eat lots of fruit and vegetables** – Try to have five portions a day – 80g of fresh or frozen vegetables is one serve, while 30g of dried fruit is one serve.
4. **Eat more fish** – Fish is a good source of protein. Try to have two portions per week and have at least one that is an oily fish high in omega-3 fats.
5. **Cut down on saturated fats and sugar** – Fat is important but the amount and type is critical. Saturated fats can increase your cholesterol. Try to limit the fat you have by reducing fatty meat, butter, cream, cakes, biscuits and pies. Sugar turns into fat and therefore should also be limited. Free sugars, like saturated fats should be limited and are very high in sugary fizzy drinks, many breakfast cereals (even the ones you think may be healthy), cakes, pastries and chocolate. Look at the label on the packaging – anything above 20g of sugar per 100g of food is very high in sugar.
6. **Eat less salt** – Salt is in many comfort foods and is linked to increasing blood pressure. Processed foods are traditionally high in salt including soups, cereals, breads and sauces. More than 1.5g of salt per 100g means the food is high in salt – check the labels.
7. **Get active** – Regular exercise can help with your mental health as well as your weight and diet. If you are trying to control your weight, diet is most critical, but activity and exercise can facilitate weight loss, support muscle gain and ensure that your bones remain strong and healthy.
8. **Don't skip a meal** – In general, it is important to eat regularly and in reasonable portions. Skipping a meal, in particular breakfast can just make you more hungry at the next meal so you end up eating more or snacking in between your meals. Be sensible and eat smaller portions more regularly.

Where to get help if you think you need it?

If you, or someone you know needs help and are not coping, here are some links and numbers to contact. Reaching out is winning, it should not be considered defeat:

- **SANE Australia** (people living with a mental illness)
  Phone: 1800 18 7263
- **Beyond Blue** (anyone feeling depressed or anxious)
  Phone: 1300 22 4636 or chat online
- **Black Dog Institute** (people affected by mood disorders)
  Online help
- **Lifeline** (anyone having a personal crisis)
  Phone: 13 11 14 or chat online
- **Suicide Call Back Service** (anyone thinking about suicide)
  Phone: 1300 659 467

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