Excuse Me, Does That Salmon Come With A Side Of Happiness?

By Nichole Pervere

Do you search in your freezer for that half eaten pint of Ben and Jerry’s after a long and stressful day? If you answered yes, you are not alone. Many of us can openly admit to stress eating or eating our way to the bottom of the bag of chips when we are sad. This is a habit that Americans have become accustomed to doing, eating our feelings. We eat to make ourselves feel happy or relaxed or comforted. But what if the reverse were possible? What if we could turn the table on our feelings and instead eat in a way that could prevent sadness and depression?

The connection between psychological status and nutrient intake is a relatively unexplored area of science and research. Researchers note the difficulty in trying to single out one nutrient that could be affecting overall mental health and furthermore, how to accurately measure this effect. Thankfully, this topic has gained more attention in the past several years as society is becoming more aware of nutrition concerns and the nutritional status of our nation.

We have all felt the emotional effects that food is able to give us. Is it the act of eating that carries emotional ties with it, say feeling happy and comforted by an ice cream cone because that’s the treat that you shared with your grandfather when you were a little kid? Or perhaps there is more going on here. Let’s take a journey into the body and our diets and try to figure out how food is affecting our moods.

The Mediterranean diet has received much notoriety over the past several years due to its focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats from olive oil and fish. This diet has been recommended by many of the nation’s health organizations, such as the American Heart Association. In 2006, a group of researchers choose to study the nutrients found in this diet, in relation to rates of depression among the study’s participants. The researchers paid closest attention to the effects of B-vitamins (thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, B 6, biotin, folic acid, and B 12) and the essential fatty acids omega - 3 and omega - 6. The results of the study showed a significant association between recommended intake of vitamin B 12 and reduced prevalence of depression in women. Vitamin B 12 seemed especially important for women who smoked or women who defined themselves as physically active. The remaining
nutrients held no statistically significant associations between intake and prevalence of depression. The researchers did become aware of trends in recommended folate intake and reduced rates of depression in men only. Likewise, they noticed that omega – 3 fatty acids may reduce rates of depression in women. It is important to note that these findings were based on one study, based on the responses of 9,670 subjects. We cannot definitively say these findings are any more than correlations.

A separate study that was published in 2010 by the American Dietetic Association aimed to find a correlation between healthy eating and depression within an urban population. The findings did suggest that diet and diet quality were significantly related to depressive symptoms. However, the results of the study also suggest that income level played a stronger role in depression than did diet. These findings are not to say that diet quality is not important and should not be considered when addressing mental health. A diet filled with fruits and vegetables and whole grains may lead to more mental and physical stamina, therefore breeding a healthier lifestyle. Healthy lifestyles can then lead to a more positive outlook on life and fight the hopelessness and helplessness that is associated with depression.

While these two studies may seem as though they don’t provide very conclusive evidence, we should be mindful that scientists are just skimming the surface when it comes to nutrients and brain chemistry. These studies are wonderful springboards off of which future research can be composed. We do know how important nutrient-rich food is for our vitality, concentration, and stamina. What we can ascertain from our everyday eating is that variety, moderation, and balance of foods is essential for health. Eating healthfully makes me feel energetic and accomplished, as though I am proud of myself, and that makes me happy. Balancing healthy foods with an active lifestyle will keep your brain and body happy. Until science is able to draw more solid conclusions, try not to get too buried by milligrams and percentages of vitamins and minerals. What is important is your overall diet quality. When dinner time comes around, think about what you’ve eaten so far and ask yourself if you could eat more or less from any food group for the remainder of the day. If I realize I haven’t really had any vegetables today, I’ll be sure to include some leafy greens on my dinner plate, then maybe snack on some carrot sticks after dinner. Be proud of yourself for choosing the steamed
broccoli with almonds over the pasta with cheese and butter. Happiness follows good intentions. If you intend to treat your body well, happiness will follow. Science or not.

References
