Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Using Food to Boost Your Mood

The old adage “you are what you eat” should really be “you feel what you eat.” While life’s ups and downs will obviously impact your state of mind, so too can what you choose to put in your mouth. Increasing your intake of foods that contain mood-boosting elements while reducing cranky-causers can not only lift your spirits, but might also help keep excess emotional and physical "baggage" at bay. Try:

Drinking more water. Okay, so it’s not technically a food, but drinking six to eight glasses of the wet stuff daily is probably the single most important thing you can do to keep your body and mind in peak condition. Symptoms of dehydration can range from fatigue, to false hunger pangs, to irritability and headaches, so if you’re feeling any of these, try washing back a glass of water for a quick, refreshing lift. It’s especially important to stay hydrated while exercising: not doing so can actually slow down the rate at which you burn fat.

Eating smart carbs. It’s not your imagination, digging in to that hunk of bread or bowl of pasta may actually help you feel better and calmer. Studies suggest that certain carbohydrates—including bread, cereal, rice, and pasta—may indirectly encourage serotonin production. Serotonin is a chemical in the brain thought to help generate a sense of well-being, energy and calm. Maximize the benefits of carbs even further by sticking to whole grains which contain higher fiber (that keep your bowels happy), can help you feel full longer and will keep blood sugar levels—and, in turn, your mood— on a more even keel.

Beginning with breakfast. It may seem cliché, but a well-balanced breakfast really is the most important meal of the day. It provides you with the energy you need for the day and can leave you feeling more positive and alert. Try pairing complex carbohydrates, such as whole grain toast, with lean proteins and fruits and veggies for a nourishing, nutrient-rich start to your day.

Feasting on folic acid. While many people associate folic acid with a healthy pregnancy (as it’s been shown to help reduce neural tube defects in babies), its benefits seem to be more widespread. People with low levels of folic acid, found in green leafy vegetables, flax and citrus fruits amongst others, are more likely to suffer from depression. Folic acid is also thought to be a brain booster and may even reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s.

Eating omega-3 fatty acids. Found in fatty fish like salmon, flaxseed and walnuts, research suggests omega-3 fatty acids’ influence on the brain’s neurotransmitters may help to ward off depression. If that’s not reason enough to embrace omega-3 consider this: a study of older adults who ate omega-3 rich fish once or more a week found a reduction in cognitive decline by 10 to 13 per cent over the span of a year.

Seeking out selenium. Smaller studies have shown that selenium-rich foods may help people with mild to moderate depression. Foods rich in selenium include nuts, whole grains, lean meat, seafood, legumes and low fat dairy.

Avoiding alcohol. Hitting the bottle will not only leave you dehydrated, the effects of a few after dinner drinks can be sleep disturbance, headaches (as alcohol expands blood vessels) and a drop in blood sugar. All of which may not only leave you feeling physically bad, but down or cranky. If you enjoy the occasional cocktail, limit yourself to one drink and accompany the booze with plenty of water.

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Going easy on caffeine. In the past, caffeine was portrayed as a nutritional no-no as overindulgence is linked to sleep disturbances, blood sugar disruptions, and a "lift" followed by a drop in energy. But several recent studies have actually found that taking in a moderate level of caffeine (no more than 400 milligrams or about four cups of coffee) can actually boost short-term memory, the brain's functioning and mood. *The message in all this mixed messaging?*If you're sensitive to caffeine's negative effects steer clear, but if not enjoy caffeinated drinks such as coffee and tea in moderation.

Eating smaller but more often. Avoid a grumbling stomach and grumpy attitude by eating four or five smaller meals or snacks throughout the day. You'll help keep your blood sugar levels up and avoid that lethargic late afternoon feeling a large lunch can bring on. Stick with smaller servings of the four food groups—such as whole grain bread, pasta or rice, fruits and vegetables, nuts or lean proteins (fish, lean meat or tofu) and low fat dairy (e.g., yogurt, skim milk, cottage cheese).

Though you may not be able to erase the effects of a major life hurdle or super-stressful day, making a concerted effort to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet rich in nutrients while slim on fat, salt and sugar, can play a key role in keeping your body and spirit lighter and brighter.