

How to deal with stress-eating for comfort in a time of anxiety

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Snacks and drinks with higher nutritional value are displayed during a news conference on school food nutrition in Washington, D.C. Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images

You're mostly stuck inside, you're home from school and the coronavirus pandemic is making the future seem less certain every day. The coronavirus is a flu-like illness that first arose in China. The virus has now infected people around the globe. Like 27 percent of Americans, you might seek comfort in a familiar place: the refrigerator.

Food can be one of the easiest and fastest ways to make ourselves feel better in stressful times. Experts say enjoying our food is a good thing. However, emotionally eating lots of food with little nutritional value can weaken our immune systems. Emotional eating can also worsen our moods. Right now, it is especially important to stay positive and protect our bodies.

Eva Selhub is a doctor who specializes in stress, resilience and mind-body medicine. Selhub says that if we want to feel better in the current situation, we need to think about how to fuel our bodies in ways that alleviate stress.

Why do my eating habits matter right now?

Selhub says that people may feel guilty or shameful for eating highly processed foods with a lot of sugar. Eating these foods can also cause inflammation in the body that increases fatigue, anxiety and depression. Selhub added that our bodies have various ways of connecting our stomachs to our brains. In this way, eating nutritious foods can help control our moods.

How can I tell if I'm eating because of emotion and not because of hunger?

Eating as a result of stress tends to be an automatic instinct, such as putting your hand into a bag of potato chips without thinking about it, said Deanna Minich. Minich is a nutritionist with the American Nutrition Association. By contrast, physical hunger lasts longer. Hunger can also be resolved with a variety of foods, rather than just with less nutritious foods.

How can I prevent or limit emotional eating in this uncertain time?

Food makes us feel better by releasing two chemicals called dopamine and serotonin in our brains. The release of these chemicals creates feelings of pleasure. However, Selhub says the effect wears off quickly. To stop emotional eating, she suggested doing a gut-check before you reach for a snack. Ask yourself, "Am I about to eat because I'm physically hungry, or because I feel stressed or sad?"

If it is because you are stressed or sad, Selhub said you should consider turning to other sources of comfort. Breathing exercises, physical exercise, hobbies, time in nature and other activities can all help relieve stress or sadness. Your daily routine may be different these days. However, Selhub said that you should still try to stick to your normal eating schedule of two or three meals a day.

Selhub recommended making eating into a ritual. "Make it a ritual of nurturing — that you're nurturing yourself, that you're fueling yourself," Selhub said.

If you want extra help for staying on track or managing your weight, Selhub suggests finding or making an online support group.

What if anxiety has the opposite effect on me and I struggle to eat enough?

Although many people eat extra when they feel anxious, you may have trouble eating at all. Stress can put your body into an elevated state as if you were facing an immediate danger. The feeling is similar to how early humans may have felt when being chased by a lion, Selhub said.

To digest food properly, we need a relaxed digestive system, Minich said. Warm teas can help your body loosen up, while protein shakes and electrolyte packets provide energy.

At the very least, Minich said you should drink a lot of water to stay hydrated. To really return to regular eating patterns, she said it's important to address the stress that is causing your eating patterns to change. Movement or doing a simple meditation are two ways to address stress.

What should I be trying to eat during this public-health crisis?

Making good food choices starts when you are choosing what to bring home from the grocery store, Minich said. Buy fresh, colorful foods as much as possible, Minich said.

If buying fresh produce and meat is not possible, Minich says frozen foods are usually more nutritious than canned food. Frozen food has not been altered much and usually, has little interaction with the plastic it is stored in, she said. Canned food, on the other hand, touches its

metal container and the substance used to seal it. Canned food is also usually stored in liquid with a lot of salt or sugar.

Minich also suggested using spices to reduce inflammation caused by stress. She recommends eating foods with vitamin C to strengthen your immune system. Now is a good time to share recipes with friends and family, she said. Make sure you're also paying attention to other aspects of your health, such as moving your body and getting enough sleep.

Ultimately, Minich said eating well improves our sense of well-being, increases our curiosity and makes us happier.

"And I think this is the time that we need more well-being and happiness," she said.