

Stress and its effect on our diet

I recorded this podcast with my daughter who has a Masters in Nutrition and is a registered associate nutritionist.

She has a special interest in how stress can effect our eating habits, and agreed to record a 13 minute video with me exploring the subject in more detail.

In the current environment where both ourselves, our staff and also friends and family could be struggling with our relationship with food and diet, this podcast may give people some strategies that can help with self-care during this difficult period.

This might be useful to share with your team.

To watch the video visit: <https://vimeo.com/413979653/313d709468>

For people who struggle with body image issues and diets, this document may also be useful:
<https://www.consultingroom.com/uploads/Business/Non-Diet-Self-Isolation-Survival-Guide.pdf>

Or we have printed the transcript below:

Ron Myers:

Hi there, this is Ron Myers, and I'm one of the directs of The Consulting Room. I've been really looking forward to discussing the subject of stress and the effects on our eating habits with Madi Myers, who's one of my very entrepreneurial daughters. Hi, Madi.

Madi Myers:

Hello.

Ron Myers:

Madi's got a Master's in Human Nutrition and is a registered Associate Nutritionist with The Association for Nutrition, and she's also the contributor on a wide variety of subjects relating to nutrition and aesthetics in our Consulting Room Magazine. However, one of the subjects that Madi is really most passionate about is people's relationship with food and how this is affected in particular by stress and also body image. And it occurred to me that as many business owners and their families are currently living working and eating together in a higher stress environment than normal, I thought this would be really a subject worth exploring in more depth.

So Madi, I know that we all as a family really enjoy eating food and normally see it as a pleasurable experience. However, that isn't the case for everyone, and I know that you help people who struggle with their relationship with food for a number of different reasons, as I said, including those related to body image. But how does stress and in particular more stressful periods in our life affect how we eat?

Madi Myers:

That's a really good question and I think it's a really individual response. People tend to respond to stress in different ways. So for some people, stressful times can mean that they eat less because of the hormonal changes that go on in our body and the physiological response to stress. But for other people,

they tend to eat more. People fit in one of those categories typically, but if we think about right now, especially if you're responsible for feeding your household, if you're the one who's in charge of meal planning, grocery shopping, the ritual of eating can just be another thing that compounds stress right now. So as well as this stressful period affecting how we eat, how we eat also affects our stress levels as well.

That can be one of those other things to do on your to-do list, which can be really difficult, and stress also has knock-on consequences for us. Lots of people, if they're struggling with stress, can really affect how they sleep as well, which in turn can influence your appetite. So lots of people say that when they're more tired they tend to crave more carbohydrate foods, which makes perfect biological sense because our body's looking for that quick energy source. There's lots of different things going on, but yeah, I would definitely say that it's often a very individual thing.

Ron Myers:

Okay, fine. And if people are feeling stressed at this point, what are your top tips for trying to eat well, especially during self-isolation?

Madi Myers:

I think the first thing to really drive home is to just be really kind to yourself. Obviously none of us have been through a global pandemic before, so it's perfectly normal if you're feeling a little bit more stressed. If you're struggling, especially in terms of food, and particularly now you might need to reframe what a balanced diet looks like. Food might not be top of your list of things to do right now, and that's perfectly okay. I would really encourage anyone to drop the perfect eating mindset. There's no such thing as a perfect diet anyway, so loosening up on that can really help people.

I would also say maybe try and broaden out the types of foods that you eat, and particularly, I know processed foods in particular get a really bad rap, but they can be really useful and they're super convenient and oftentimes if we're talking about things like canned foods or frozen foods, they can be just as nutritious or even sometimes more nutritious than fresh food.

Not shutting down different food groups and different types of foods, that can be helpful. I would also encourage, if you are one of those people who's responsible for doing the grocery shopping, making a list before you go and having a look at what foods you already have in the house. So having a look through your cupboards and the fridge and the freezer and making note, and then that means that when you go shopping you're not just blindly choosing foods. You know what foods you need in order to make a few easy meals that week.

Also, one thing that I always incorporate when I'm talking to my clients is mindful eating and making sure that you're really in the eating moment, trying to connect your mind and your body and really being present with your food. Slowing it down, that can be really helpful, so that you can really get the most pleasure and satisfaction out of your food. You can really savour it, and that can really help also to just enjoy food, because food should be enjoyable.

Ron Myers:

Yeah. Well, I think that's interesting. I think that's one thing I probably learned from you as well, because I can eat food anytime, anywhere and I'm more of a functional eater.

Madi Myers:

Yeah.

Ron Myers:

But I must admit, actually just taking that time to, as you say, sit down and really enjoy every mouthful of it. Especially for us as well, because I sit down as you know with your mum every night and we sit across the table from each other. We don't sit with it on our laps watching television. I think that also helps as well.

Madi Myers:

Absolutely.

Ron Myers:

To eat with your family, and something that we've always done whenever we can do.

Madi Myers:

Definitely. Yeah, always encourage people to remove distractions when eating. So not having your phone, not reading a book. If you're with someone else, yeah, sure, share it with them, have a conversation, but definitely turning off the TV and putting your phone to one side can be really helpful to increase mindful eating and pleasure from food.

Ron Myers:

Brilliant. Okay. I know one of the things we had discussed a number of times is emotional eating. Can you explain what that is and whether or not it's a bad thing?

Madi Myers:

Sure. Emotional eating simply is eating in the absence of physical hunger. So you're eating for comfort. If you're feeling a bit stressed and anxious, sometimes we do turn to food, and I think especially nowadays, emotional eating gets a really bad rap.

I've seen loads of guides online about how to never emotionally eat again, but I actually think that compared to lots of other coping mechanisms, it's really not that bad. We need food to survive. We couldn't cope without food, clearly. It's a biological need. I also try and, when I'm working with my clients, I try and get them to reframe how they think about emotional eating.

Really, it can be a gift in disguise. Often, if we're feeling the drive to maybe eat food, even when we know we're not physically hungry, it can be the first sign that maybe we need a little bit more self-care.

Maybe there's something going on that needs a bit more attention, because when we experience more stress, we need to be doing more to counter that.

It's all about getting a balance of stress and coping mechanisms. So the only time I would say though that emotional eating is potentially not so great is when it's the only way we have of coping with difficult times in our life.

Even though it's something that lots of us do turn to and that comes from how we're raised as children, oftentimes, parents will use food as soothing and as comfort things for their children, if it's the only thing we're doing, it tends to not be so great, because often we're drawn to what I would term fun foods when we're feeling particular emotions, which in turn can lead people to feel more guilty if they're eating those foods and especially overeating.

But again, at this kind of time, lots of our usual coping mechanisms that we have, like getting a hug from your friends and stuff like that, we don't have access to. So it does make sense that we are turning potentially to food more.

Ron Myers:

Okay. So having that little piece of chocolate when you really feel like it, like I do, is not a bad thing, and you shouldn't feel bad about it. If it does make you feel a little bit better, as long as, as you say, you don't feel guilty about it afterwards. I think that's the key thing, isn't it?

Madi Myers:

That is absolutely key, because the only time we should ever feel bad about food is if we've stolen it.

Ron Myers:

Okay. So Madi, what else can we use to cope with emotions and stress right now?

Madi Myers:

I would say firstly try and name what it is that you're feeling, because sometimes it can feel really uncomfortable if we're feeling some form of emotion, but we're not really sure what it is. So giving it a name can really help to take the power out of it and to give you some self-awareness around what you're feeling and then you can use that to guide what it is that you might need right now.

And then I would say ask yourself if you're hungry, because oftentimes we think that we're emotionally eating, but actually we're actually just hungry. So checking in with our physical sensations of hunger. If you are hungry, then just eat. And then beyond that, working on ways that work for you to help you cope beyond food, really.

One practical thing that I can say that everyone can do right now with just a piece of paper and a pen is to make a list of the five fives. So these are the five people you can pick up the phone to talk things through with, five ways you can relax, five places you can go to take a minute just to yourself. That might be a little bit difficult right now for some people, but even just going for a short walk or going to your bedroom. Somewhere you can close the door and just be by yourself. The five things you can say to yourself to pick yourself up, whatever little mantra it is that works for you. Like, I can do this or I've got this. And finally, five ways that you can distract yourself, because sometimes we don't have the ability to tackle our emotions head on, and that's also okay. So that's just something that everyone can do right now with nothing special, and this is just something that you can go to whenever you're feeling those emotions, so you can just have it right there.

Ron Myers:

Fantastic. That's really useful information. Thanks. I tend to use the distraction one. If I can keep myself busy, then I don't really think very much about stuff. So I think at this point in time, probably a lot of people do that.

Madi Myers:

The distraction side of it is fine. You might still need to eventually tackle it, but if you don't have the capability to do it right in that second, that's also fine.

Ron Myers:

Well, thanks Madi. I hope that's been useful for our listeners. I think you've given some really great information across there at a time when I think, you know, we've all got to eat, and when people are stressed and all these sorts of situations going on, I think there can be more issues around food than maybe in normal times. So if any of our listeners need any additional help or advice or personal help and support, is there anything else that you could do to help them, Madi?

Madi Myers:

Yeah, absolutely. I offer one-to-one online consultations for anyone who has specific concerns around eating or even just wanting to manage a health concern that they have, but wants to do it in a way that's really accepting of themselves and their body. I always offer free discovery calls, and that's for anyone who wants to discuss their individual needs further. You can sign up to those through my website, which is www.nondietnutrition.co.uk, and there you can schedule in a phone call where I give you a call and we just have a brief chat. And then if you feel then that you'd like to have some more in depth conversations about your individual situation, then I offer full length consultations after that.

Ron Myers:

Brilliant. Thank you very much, Madi. I really appreciate it. I know you're busy. You've probably got a number of other things to do today, but have a nice weekend, and I'm sure I'll speak to you soon again anyway.

Madi Myers:

Absolutely. No, thank you for asking me to do this. I appreciate it.