

## **The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns**

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### **Is There A Link Between Diet And Your Mental Health?**

from the American Counseling Association

Say the word "diet" and the usual reaction is that we're talking about losing weight. Today, let's talk about "diet" as simply our daily food choices, the ones we often make without giving them much thought.

While our food choices certainly affect our weight, they also play an important role in our emotional well-being and overall mental health. Numerous studies have found that the foods we consume play a large role in how we feel and act.

Most parents, for example, have seen how a sugar high affects their kids. Although numerous studies have failed to find a link between sugar and hyperactivity, just about any mom will tell you that her son or daughter seems more excited or active after eating a sugary snack.

The reason may not be so much a physiological link as a psychological one. Eating foods we like makes us feel better, and most of us are genetically programmed to like sweet-tasting things. Our love of sweet tastes comes from our ancient ancestors who learned that sweet fruits and veggies were ripe and ready to eat.

Recent studies have found even more direct links between our food choices and mental health. A 2014 study of over 3,500 people reported that long-term exposure to an unhealthy diet, one high in sugar and processed foods, appeared to increase the risk for depression.

Foods high in sugar and fat have also been cited as a risk factor leading to addictive eating. Sugar and fat trigger the same pleasure centers in the brain that addictive drugs do. The pleasurable feelings that come from eating such foods help relieve stress and cause people to overeat or even to binge eat.

Being more aware of your food choices and how they affect your moods and overall mental health can help lead to a healthier and happier you.

If you think your food choices are affecting your moods or well being, try keeping a food diary for several days of what you eat and how you feel afterwards. You may find that you are turning to unhealthy choices and overeating simply to feel better.

That information can help lead you to making healthier choices. Or, if extra help is needed, talk to your family physician, a local nutritionist or a professional counselor to help steer your diet back on track for better physical and mental health.

*Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.*

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