

THE IMPORTANCE OF NUTRITION FOR TRAUMA RECOVERY

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Trauma is a common occurrence in the world today and can result from childhood abuse, loss, accidents, medical procedures, and military experiences to name a few. When we experience a traumatizing event, our bodies immediately begin a stress response in order to survive. This response includes shutting down certain parts of the body while extracting every ounce of energy out of others. The body can continue to experience this state of stress, even after the traumatizing event is over. Prolonged stress can lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance abuse, sleep disturbances, a compromised immune system and other health problems (Bremner, 2005, p.4-10). Furthermore, what few people realize is that prolonged stress can deplete the body of essential nutrients (Ross, 2002, p. 92-94). Nutrient depletion and traumatic symptoms can take months or even years to develop. Therefore, even when symptoms are not noticeable you might consider utilizing nutritional support in order to combat the negative effects of stress and to preserve your health. Choosing foods that support health and recovery and avoiding foods that put more stress on the body is important.

Here are a few basic nutritional tips:

- **Meals:** Eating three healthy meals a day, each consisting of protein, provides your body with essential amino acids, which are the building blocks that keep everything (especially your mood and mental health) functioning optimally. Skipping meals creates more stress for your body because your body interprets the lack of food as a state of emergency (Ross, 2002, p. 84).
- **Fats:** Several tablespoons a day of good fats such as olive oil, nuts, seeds, avocados, and fish oils support brain activity and health. These good fats provide a vital buffer against stress and can also increase your mood and energy. Avoid products that contain hydrogenated oils because these oils prevent good fats from doing their job (Holford, 2004, p.54-55).
- **Caffeine:** Although caffeine provides a boost for those of us who feel exhausted and overwhelmed, it does not support trauma recovery. In fact, caffeine can actually drain the adrenal glands, whose function is to protect us from stress and to provide us with energy (Wilson, 2007, p. 3, 171). Nutrients such as B vitamins, vitamins C, D, and E, omega-3 fats, adaptogens (i.e. ginseng and ginger), and the amino acid L-tyrosine support the adrenal glands and energy.
- **Water:** Water is invaluable to your health as dehydration causes additional stress on your body. Drinking eight 8oz glasses per day, preferably of filtered water, will keep you hydrated. Water is essential because “every cell of our body requires water to carry nutrients and energy to them and to carry away toxins and metabolic wastes” (Ross, 1999, p. 259).
- **Whole foods:** Whole foods contain more nutrients than processed foods. Whole foods are grains, fruits, vegetables, animal meat, and products that have not been processed. Whole foods are usually found along the perimeter of the grocery store while processed foods are often stacked in the center aisles. Refined foods, especially sugar and flour, cause additional stress because they extremely overwork the body in order to be metabolized (Wilson, 2001, p.156).
- **Fruits and vegetables:** Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables will supply you with essential vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Antioxidants are especially helpful in protecting your body from the harmful byproducts of stress (Balch & Balch, 2000, p.53).
- **Allergens:** Any allergy that you have – whether it is to food, animals, or pollen – creates stress in the body (Ross, 2002, p.88). Common food allergens include peanuts, milk, wheat, soy, beef, chocolate, corn, and tomatoes (Wilson, 2001, p.175). Avoid allergens so that your body does not have additional stress to combat.

- Supplements: “After even a single high-stress week, your supplies of vitamins and minerals can drop 30-40 percent” (Ross, 2002, p. 93). Thus it is important to take a good multi-vitamin. Please read more about how to choose a multivitamin in *The Mood Cure* by Julia Ross or ask someone at your local health food store. When buying supplements choose capsules or liquids over tablets as they are easier for the body to assimilate.
- Sleep and relaxation: Supporting what is restful and restorative for your body can encourage health and strength while you are recovering from trauma. Avoid eating late at night, as it keeps your body working when it should be resting. Try the herbal tea called Sleepytime by Celestial Seasonings to promote relaxation and sleep. If you tend to feel anxious or have a difficult time relaxing you may want to try taking a supplement such as True Calm by NOW, Gaba Relaxer by Country Life, or a homeopathic called Calms Forte by Hyland’s.

Following the above basic nutritional tips can support your nutritional health after trauma. When determining which foods to eat, ask yourself whether they are creating more stress and depletion on your body, or whether they are helpful and supportive. Eliminating additional stress through healthful foods and habits promotes physical, emotional, and mental health.

The information contained in this article is not intended to be a substitute for medical care and should not replace the advice of a licensed health care provider.

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