



# Food and mood



**Health**



**Wellness**



**Nutrition**



**Support**

# Introduction

How we feel affects not just *what* we eat but also *how* we eat. Equally, what we eat and how we eat affects how we feel. Food plays a huge role in our day-to-day lives and will impact our mood.

Understanding our mental wellbeing and how we can break the cycle of negative thoughts is as important to achieving our goals as understanding nutrition and physical activity.

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## Mental health

Everybody has mental health. Mental health is not a disease or a diagnosis, but how we are in our own mind day-to-day.

Some days will be better than others and it is never completely stable. When our mental wellbeing isn't good, we may become anxious or depressed.

Some signs of anxiety and depression include:

- not wanting to do things you used to enjoy, like hobbies or seeing friends
- feeling down or hopeless about the future
- having trouble sleeping or sleeping more than usual
- feeling tired or having little energy
- not being able to stop worrying
- feeling restless and agitated
- feeling afraid all the time, like something bad is going to happen
- living with a long-term health condition that is affecting your mood
- struggling with feelings of anxiety or low mood related to being pregnant or caring for an infant under the age of two years old

If you or someone you know needs more support with mental wellbeing, Wigan Talking Therapies offers free NHS therapy for people with common mental health problems like anxiety or low mood. You don't need to see your GP and can get in touch by calling 01942 764449 or by visiting [www.gmmh.nhs.uk/wigan-talking-therapies](http://www.gmmh.nhs.uk/wigan-talking-therapies)

## The vicious cycle

How we feel can affect what we eat, and what we eat can affect how we feel. This 'vicious cycle' effect can apply to any thoughts or behaviours, not just those related to food.

Each section of this cycle can affect another. It can start in any place and affect us in any direction. It explains how our thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical actions are all linked.

**Thoughts:** You believe you are useless, or that it's all your fault. Nothing good happens to you.

**Feelings:** You feel guilty, down or hopeless.

**Behaviour:** You stop doing usual activities, become more isolated. Stop looking after yourself or others.

**Physical:** You have a lack of sleep, appetite changes, can't concentrate and have no motivation.

**Here's an example:**

It's Friday afternoon, you have had a bad day at work (*feeling*) and on the way home choose to get a fast food takeaway (*behaviour*). You eat the takeaway instead of going for a swim as you had planned (*physical*) and this makes you feel

guilty and that you will never reach your goals (*thoughts*). You feel frustrated with yourself and tell yourself it's all pointless anyway (*thought, feelings*). You decide you will continue eating fast food and drinking alcohol all weekend and start again later (*behaviour, physical*).

You may recognise some situations you have been in where thoughts and feelings have affected your behaviours in this way, and this cycle can continue to repeat itself unless we can learn to break it.

## What affects how we eat?

Our eating patterns can develop in childhood. For example, as a child we might have been told: *"have a biscuit and you'll feel better"*, or *"you'll get no pudding until you've cleared your plate"*.

From birthday cakes to chocolate treats for performing well at school, we learn from a young age to use food as a celebration or reward.

Since our relationship with food is created at such a young age, it isn't surprising how complicated that relationship can be in adulthood. How that relationship might have been developed, and how for how long, will vary for everyone.

We snack for different reasons, and sometimes we eat without even really thinking about it.

Snacking isn't always unhealthy; it can be a positive thing. Eating a snack will help to keep you satisfied between meals so that you don't overeat at your next meal, and there are also lots of ideas and suggestions for healthier snacking.

Think about the reasons you eat. For example, you were hungry, bored, lonely, or celebrating. It was 'just there' or was all that was available.

Think about your normal days and the days that aren't so normal. This is the first step to recognise the different reasons that you eat. A good idea is to take time over the next few days to ask yourself *"Why did I just eat that?"* and write the reason down.

As you start to become more aware of these triggers, you can develop alternative ways of dealing with how you are feeling.

Remember that not all your choices need to be changed. For example, if you had a piece of cake because it was someone's birthday, that's fine! This isn't going to prevent you from achieving your long-term goals.

Also, make sure to be kind to yourself. No one gets every decision right first time, and there will inevitably be challenges as you learn to create new habits and eating patterns. Remember why you started and don't be too hard on yourself when setbacks occur.

## Breaking the cycle

Once you're aware of some of your food and mood triggers, you can identify a plan to overcome them using a 'delay, distract, decide' method.

**Delay:** Don't reach for the food straight away. Instead, set a timer and wait. This can be as long as you like - five, ten, fifteen minutes or longer.

**Distract:** Do something else, don't sit and watch the timer. Occupy your mind with another task. This works better if the thing you choose to do involves being active. Some people may choose to read, play a game, go for a walk or do housework.

**Decide:** After you have delayed and distracted yourself, decide not to eat the craving food and answer the following questions:

- Why will it be good to stop myself eating this food?
- What would happen if I gave into the craving?
- What are my reasons for stopping myself?
- What are my long-term goals?

## Final thought

Changing our eating habits is not easy, especially when our associations with food are created from a very young age. Be patient with yourself when trying new things and building new habits, as some changes may not fit or make sense at first.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch.

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Food affects our mood, however if you need more support with your mental wellbeing then please speak to someone. More support for mental wellbeing is available on the Wigan Council website: [www.wigan.gov.uk/Resident/Health-Social-Care/Adults/fit-and-well/Mental-health/Index.aspx](http://www.wigan.gov.uk/Resident/Health-Social-Care/Adults/fit-and-well/Mental-health/Index.aspx)

