

Mental Health Food by Lloyd Robertson

I had not been in La Ronge long and the Northern Health Branch management group was meeting at the Harbour Inn for lunch. I arrived a little late and quickly placed my order with the waitress who was standing on one side. Our meals came at the same time. I looked at the other plates: various salads, broiled fish, skinless grilled chicken. I looked at my plate: hamburger with thick brown gravy on greasy fries. I looked back at their plates then again back at mine. There was a pause. I said, "Well, I'm a mental health worker and this is mental health food!"...

... She looked at me coyly and said, "I feel so sinful". To my disappointment she was referring to the black forest cake she was about to order off the menu. "Comfort foods" have also been described as addictive as in "I have this terrible craving for blueberry pie and ice cream". They have even been associated with death as in "I could just die for a double fudge sunday".

The evils of cholesterol have been so internalized that a random sample of college students rated people who were eating fruit, whole wheat bread and chicken as more moral, trustworthy and likeable than the identical people when they were eating steak, hamburgers, fries and doughnuts. Now, we all know that high cholesterol levels are a cause of cardiovascular disease; however, I know of no studies that show that people who eat chocolate milk shakes, hamburgers or cheese cake are any less likeable, trustworthy or moral than those who don't.

Further, and to the surprise of everyone, researchers have found that people with low cholesterol levels die off at a younger age than those with average levels of cholesterol. True, they do not die of heart attacks. It turns out that they suffer from higher levels of depression, suicide and accidents along with lower functioning immune systems.

One of the problems is that most people who swear off animal fats in North America replace it with corn or sunflower oil. The body cannot convert most vegetable oils to docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), an important component in brain cell membranes. Fish oil is rich in DHA. Further, the essential fatty acids in such fish as salmon, sardines, mackerel and tuna, appear to fight depression. High fish eating countries like Taiwan and Japan, for example, have one tenth the rates of depression that we do here in North America.

Low serotonin levels are associated with depression, anxiety and sleep disorders. Folic acid found in liver, kidneys, dark green leafy vegetables, dried peas and beans is a "natural prozac" in maintaining normal levels of serotonin. Other B vitamins found in eggs, organ meats (such as liver and heart) and legumes aid in memory and neurotransmitter production.

Carbohydrates, found in copious amounts in pastries such as black forest cake, also boost serotonin levels. In addition, the sweet taste of sugar releases endorphins, the body's natural opiates.

Then there is the effect of conditioning. If you learned, as a child or youth, to associate particular foods with happiness, wholesomeness or culture then those foods will probably help you to feel good as an adult.

The key is to not overdo it. Keep a balanced diet and don't feel guilty. Unless you already have a diagnosed medical condition that requires it, don't feel that you have eliminate foods. In fact, broaden your diet. Some foods like ocean fish, cabbage and wine have actually been shown to reduce cholesterol levels while you continue to eat, within moderation, your hamburger and fries.