

eating well for a healthy headspace



“When I started trying to improve my mental health I also knew I needed to improve the way I was eating. I started by having healthier snacks around and cooking up big meals. That way, when I was hungry, I had something that I could eat.”

Kimberley, hY NRG member
(headspace Youth National Reference Group)

Eating well gives you more energy, helps you sleep better, improves your concentration and, you guessed it, keep a healthy headspace.

Food and your mood

When you think of improving your mental health, you may not think about changing the food you eat, but there is a strong link between what we eat and how we feel!

We know an unhealthy diet can be associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, but now we are seeing a healthy diet (with a variety of fruit, veggies, nuts and whole grains) can actually improve mental health.

This is a pretty new and exciting area of research. In fact, two recent studies investigated whether healthy food could reduce depression symptoms. And the results were clear. People who ate a healthier diet improved their depression symptoms more than people who focused on only social support.

Here’s how eating well can improve your headspace:

- help you get a better night’s sleep
- give you more energy
- improve your concentration
- make you less likely to crave foods with high sugar, salt or fat.

Ask an expert: How can I eat for a healthier headspace?

Professor Felice Jacka is Director of the Food and Mood Centre. Here are her tips to eating a healthier diet for your mental health.

- Often we turn to unhealthy snacks when we are stressed. So it’s good to develop coping strategies that are not related to food, things like exercise or mindfulness.

- We know that some foods are very good for a healthy mind. So make sure your diet includes things like colourful fruits and vegetables, foods high in fibre (wholegrain cereals and bread, beans, chickpeas, lentils and nuts), fermented foods like unsweetened yogurt, olive oil, and fish (tinned is fine).
- Make small changes that are easy to stick to. Start by swapping an unhealthy afternoon snack for a healthy one, like a piece of fruit.
- You don’t have to be perfect, and don’t be too hard on yourself. A burger or a chocolate bar are fine every now and then (say, once on the weekend) but it’s important to make sure your diet includes a variety of nutritious foods, most of the time!
- Try to avoid too much red meat – a little bit is fine but keep it to 3-4 times per week.



“I’ve struggled with depression for many years. And for me, bad nutrition was a symptom of my mental health struggles. Basically, I would stop putting that time into self-care, and nutrition was a part of that.

Once I made some small changes I definitely noticed a difference. I can concentrate better, it’s easier to study, and it just makes me happier. It’s a sense of achievement.

I know if you are really depressed it can be hard to find the energy to even leave the house. So even doing your groceries online can be good – that way you have healthier options at home.”

Kimberley, hY NRG member
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Healthy habits

When you’re feeling low and struggling with life it’s important to put healthy habits in place – to give yourself a better chance of coping with life’s challenges.

Eating well is one of these healthy habits, but it’s not the only one. Things like exercise, sleeping well, and spending time with people you love also play an important role in good mental health.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)



If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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