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Comfort Foods Curb Stress (Really)
An indulgence now and then can ease anxiety—but too much will wreck your waistline
By Teresa Palagano

In the worst of times, we need a sugar fix. When the nation's terror alert goes up to "orange," a big project is overdue and all three kids have the flu, nothing settles the nerves like a slice of seven-layer cake. It turns out that there's a scientific reason why people head for the fridge in times of crisis. Recent research has discovered that when stress is unremitting, the brain craves foods loaded with fat, sugar or both. A dose of mac and cheese or chocolate ice cream doesn't just lift downcast spirits; your body actually seems to require it. (And you just thought you had no willpower.)

Studying the way the brain works under stress, researchers at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), have discovered that the need to eat comfort foods arises from chronic stress and that eating these foods does indeed reduce stress hormone levels and could even ease anxiety.

People have two different stress responses, explains the study's coauthor Norman Pecoraro. When you experience sudden danger—nearly getting run over by a taxi, for instance—the brain signals the production of stress hormones, readying you to fight for your life. Once you're safely back on the sidewalk, the hormones go back to the brain and shut themselves down, making you feel better. No cheeseburger necessary.

But the hormones behave differently when a person is under stress for prolonged periods of time. When you're constantly under deadline pressure or warring with an ultracompetitive co-worker, then the stress hormones become elevated and don't shut themselves off, says Pecoraro. You go into an inner Code Red, and that's when the brain starts telling you to bring on the burgers, because comfort food puts the brakes on the brain's stress system.

In the UCSF study, rats stressed out by being pumped full of stress hormones gorged on high-calorie foods. "The higher the dose of stress hormones, the more food they ate," says Pecoraro. No one knows why, but eating this pleasurable, high-calorie food shuts down the stress signal, behaving the way the stress hormones should—but don't when the stress is constant.

The UCSF scientists discovered another less comforting fact: Comfort food may be an effective stress buster, but it also makes you fat. The overstressed rats gained weight in their abdomens—and the same is true for people, says Pecoraro. Eating these sugary, fat-laden foods to cope with stress is a short-term solution that can have long-term consequences: It can lead to obesity, type 2 diabetes, depression and heart disease.

Why would our brains set us up for cravings that are detrimental to our waistlines? One theory is that the modern world has made us prisoners of evolution. "We're living in our ancestors' bodies," says Pamela Smith, a nutritionist and author of The Diet Trap (Regnery Publishing). "Our brains crave high-energy food because that's what gave us the edge we needed to fight off the grizzly bear or hunt for nuts and berries. Storing away added energy kept us in the game." Having a food store on every corner, however, sabotages our body's wisdom. Fruits and nuts no longer cut it as comfort foods—unless, of course, they're toppings on a hot fudge sundae.
The good news is that it doesn't take a lot to short-circuit these cravings. Stress signals can be shut down with a single cookie, says Shawn Talbott, director of the nutrition clinic at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. "When the craving hits, have one cookie and wait ten to fifteen minutes, instead of wolfing down the whole bag." Give your body a bite of what it wants, then take a deep breath.

**Eating high-calorie foods puts the brakes on the brain's stress signal and makes us feel better.**

"In those few minutes, your brain will realize that carbs and fat are on their way, and it will regulate the production of those stress signals," he says.

And if you find that a little sugar goes a long way, then something like a fat-free fudge bar may be enough to satisfy the cravings for chocolate, says Toby Amidor, a registered dietitian and nutrition instructor at the Art Institute of New York City. At the very least, you can opt for more nutritional versions of your favorite vices. For example, try oatmeal raisin cookies instead of chunky chocolate chip.

If you eat a healthy diet and give in to these cravings when you need to, you're going to be a happier person, says Joy Short, director of Saint Louis University's undergraduate programs in nutrition and dietetics. "Listen to your internal cues, but be careful not to use this as an excuse to overeat."

There is another solution for shutting down stress, although it's not nearly as much fun as eating cookies (even if you can have only one). Studies have shown that exercise also cuts off the production of stress hormones, says Smith. In fact, its effect is so strong that some experts believe just putting on your running shoes—going through the ritual of getting ready—will make the body secrete serotonin (a chemical in the brain that can elevate your mood), she says. "Exercise is the opposite of what most of us want to do when we're confronted with chronic stress," she admits. "We want to get into bed and pull the covers over our heads. But if you get up and move, the brain says, 'Okay, I've had my fight-or-flight,' and it cuts off the production of the stress hormone and processes it out of the body."

The best course to combat stress may be a combo of both remedies. When you're going through a crisis and a stress craving hits, pop a cookie and chase it with a brisk walk in the park. It's survival of the fittest, with a modern-day twist.

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**Nurture**

**Get Help As You Sleep**

Dreams weave solutions to work-related worries

*By Rachel Deahl*

Mindy Potter keeps dreaming about ditching her boss. As she sleeps, the library resources manager from Naples, FL, sees herself slipping out for lunch with her coworkers, then getting caught when her employer is waiting for her at the restaurant. "In the dream I'm embarrassed about not waiting for her," Mindy says. "But I wake up remembering the food was delicious."

Most people dream about their jobs at one time or another, says Patricia Garfield, author of *The Universal Dream Key* (Perennial). And Mindy's sleepy escapade is typical of what the mind does during slumber: It replays on-the-job stress as it sorts and organizes the day's events. In that way dreams function like "an inner therapist," Garfield says, not only revealing problems but also providing answers to work predicaments. Decode a dream's hazy message and you'll uncover solutions that the conscious mind can't find.

For instance, have you ever dreamed that you wore a really bad outfit to work? Many women express anxiety about balancing work and family through dreams that deal with clothing, Garfield says. A mismatched ensemble is a sign that you're struggling with self-identity. Some part of your home life is suffering because of your career, or vice versa.

John Suler, a psychology professor at Rider University in Princeton, NJ, who teaches a course in dream interpretation, suggests using a free-association exercise to aid the decoding process. Write down everything that comes to mind about each element of a dream. If you draw a blank, he says, repeatedly write down "I'm stuck" until a new association surfaces. Also, keep a dream log to help spot patterns and persistent themes.

As for Mindy's restaurant dream, it might be a warning to stop fraternizing with her boss, says J. Gary Sparks, an analytical therapist who specializes in dream analysis. And the tasty chow? It's a sign she needs to nourish herself with the company of good friends.