Is Stress Making You Fat?
The mission of AIS is to improve the health of the community and the world by setting the standard of excellence of stress management in education, research, clinical care and the workplace. Diverse and inclusive, The American Institute of Stress educates medical practitioners, scientists, health care professionals and the public; conducts research; and provides information, training and techniques to prevent human illness related to stress.

AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.
CONTENTMENT

We value opinions of our readers.

Please feel free to contact us with any comments, suggestions or inquiries.

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AIS Daily Life Stress Board

Chaired by Dr. Michel Woodbury-Farina, the role of this board is to develop initiatives and communications to serve the stress management needs of all people.

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Fight, Flight...Fatten Up?

Cynthia Ackrill, MD, FAIS

Has chronic stress left you struggling to zip up your jeans? You are not alone! This double whammy of stress and weight gain is real and the result of your brain and physiology doing their jobs to keep you safe.

Your eloquent neuroendocrine system evolved to handle stress in a time when the threats to human survival were occasional, discrete, and physical—the irate mammoth, forest fire, or empty cave larder. The lucky human who learned to recognize danger and flee to safety lived to tell the story and procreate. Brain wiring evolved to orchestrate a cascade of more than a 1000 chemical reactions at the mere sight of a snake—before you can even say, “Snake!” Blood is whisked away from the thinking centers of your frontal lobe and rushed to your legs so you can run. Adrenaline and cortisol flood your system. Your heart races and your pupils open to take in more information.

Initially the stress reaction shuts down your digestion, dumps sugar (fuel) into your bloodstream, and your appetite diminishes. But when the stress lingers—the never-ending to-do list, the passive-aggressive teenager, or mounting debts—so do the chemicals of the stress reaction. Glucocorticoids rise, seeking to replenish the fuel burned by stress. They increase your appetite and make your cells resistant to leptin, the hormone signal for satiety. (More chips, please!)

Since your body can’t tell the difference between drowning in emails or famine on the range, it begins to store fat around your middle. And then to make matters worse, this fat accumulation becomes biologically active, secreting hormones and chemicals back into your bloodstream. The result is decreased insulin sensitivity, worsening cholesterol numbers, and greater inflammation.

Chronic stress also disrupts the balance of normal “gut flora,” making changes in the incredibly important collection of billions of bacteria that line your gut to aid proper absorption of nutrients and initiate immune reactions. Just when you need more nutrients to handle the challenges to your body, your stress is sabotaging their uptake and increasing inflammation.
A 3\textsuperscript{rd} factor in the perfect storm is your poor stressed brain. To assure fast, instinctive reactions in the face of danger, the blood flow to the prefrontal cortex is hijacked. This stress biology is incompatible with frontal-lobe dependent self-control, willpower, or mindful choice. So even if you started the day wanting to make choices based on the wisdom of what your stressed body needs, your “chooser” is tapped out.

Meanwhile the sugars, salts and fats in the typical stress diet stimulate your endorphin response and drive cravings even deeper. (Chips = crack at this point!) Of course, most of you have already done this experiment, reaching for the chips or chocolate at the end of a trying day. Now, add in loss of sleep, thanks to worry or over-packed days, or a little alcohol and your frontal lobe is really challenged to help you change the pattern.
So what can you do to break the cycle and zip up your jeans with ease?
1. RECOGNIZE YOUR STRESS AND GET PROACTIVE.
Life is full of stress and successful management is the key to health, happiness, and productivity. The good news is humans are incredibly adaptive. Armed with awareness, tools and a plan you can make good choices. You often can’t change what is thrown at you, but you can get strong and confident to thrive. There are a myriad of stress management options, including those on the Stress.org Learning Center. Experiment to find the recipe that works for you!

2. THINK NOURISH
You would not think of sending your 4 year old into a stressful situation without rest and nutrition. Do not skip meals! Especially breakfast—this fuel primes the pump of your metabolism and reduces the brain stress of running on empty. Try to make one trip to the store to stock up on nourishing snacks to eat before you get hungry— even if you have to set the alarm to remind yourself in the middle of marathon work mode. Choose foods with lower glycemic index numbers—these raise sugar and insulin less and provide longer sources of fuel. “Eat the rainbow” to get the variety of nutrients your body and brain need to keep up the pace. Shake up the traditional food choices, such as having dinner for breakfast, to get a little more protein and calories to start the day.

3. MOVE
The human body was designed for movement. Due to the extreme health consequences of a sedentary lifestyle, sitting is often referred to as the new smoking. Every bit of movement will help boost your metabolism while supporting brain function, immune function, and heart health. Exercise releases endorphins and counteracts the damage of chronic stress. Even if you can’t possibly get to the gym, take the stairs, park farther away, pedal under your desk, dance for 3 minutes, stretch, walk and talk….get creative!

4. REST
Skipping sleep is the fast track to fattening up. Stress keeping you up? Check out resources for calming at the end of the day, putting your worries to bed, capturing more on paper so your poor brain can take some time off. Power naps can help as well. Just too busy? Recognize the limits of your efficiency. Too often in the middle of stress you don’t realize that your productivity has slowed beyond effective. You would be far smarter to crash, and set an early alarm to crank out the same work in half the time after some rest. Even breaks are key—5 minutes of deep breathing with some music can reboot the system!

5. CONNECT
You are never alone. Too often stress interferes with your feeling connected to your purpose, your people, your rituals—the very things that make you strong in the face of stress. You do not need to deserve to connect. You are not weak if you ask for help. Connect to empower yourself and others. Sometimes a 3-minute phone call can renew your energy more than any candy bar!

Here’s to zipping with ease in the face of stress!
Most people don’t realize that their greatest stress response is triggered from excess stimulation within their own body. This can be triggered by obvious threats such as running out of food, but may also be caused by more subtle irritants such as food sensitivities and an overload of irritating substances that have been added to our food supply. It’s obvious that running out of food or not being able to breathe is certainly a death sentence, but our brain begins to fear a shortage quicker than you may realize. There are three simple guidelines than can help you calm down your digestive system and utilize nutrients more effectively for energy production and sustainable health. These “golden rules” include balancing blood sugar, decreasing stimulation and increasing nourishment.
1: Balance Blood Sugar

One of the most important ways to maintain your brain’s health and performance is to keep blood sugar levels stable throughout the day. The problem is that our current lifestyle seems to support exactly the opposite of the consistency that our brains crave. We’re usually rushing through our days, often completely unaware of hunger due to constant stress and busyness. The fact is that eating just once or twice a day not only wreaks havoc on your energy levels; it's also certain to expand your waistline. And as if that's not enough, the sugar spikes we experience throughout the day have been shown to be toxic to the brain.

Nutrition is critical to providing your system with the right quantity and quality of energy. While your best nutrition strategy depends on your unique goals and priorities, the fundamentals are always the same: eat light, eat often, and eat balanced. These simple rules keep blood sugar levels stable throughout the day and must be at the core of your program, or your energy will be compromised.

We each have an ideal range of energy that we need at any given time. While it's not important or realistic to know exactly what that amount is, we can assume based on fundamental nutritional science that we need to replenish glucose approximately every 3-4 hours. When we go too long without eating, we signal to the body that there is an emergency situation and we have run out of fuel. Our body interprets this as famine or starvation and provides energy from
stored glucose in the cells (protein and fat). We cannot be fully engaged when we are functioning in survival mode, because the body won’t provide adequate energy to all cells -- just the most essential ones. This is when you may notice yourself feeling irritable, moody and impatient or find it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. In an effort to conserve available resources, the brain signals a metabolic slow down that fuels only the most critical functions such as heartbeat and breathing. Being patient, loving and kind really isn’t that important if you’re stranded on a deserted island.

Any time our glucose is elevated too much or too quickly, the body receives a signal that there’s an emergency surplus of glucose or energy, some of which it must store away in order to keep blood sugar from staying high (which ultimately leads to serious problems such as high blood pressure, circulatory issues and organ damage). In this case, the brain perceives a threat to survival but also embraces the idea
that we have more than we need -- so we can amp up our energy reserves (aka fat cells). There is nothing better to a hungry brain than storing away excess calories for the future -- which is one of the reasons that cortisol, triggered by chronic stress, is so clearly linked to fat storage.

Just like so many other topics when it comes to health and stress management, balance is the key. When it comes to nutrition, too much and not enough both pull us out of balance and can cause additional stress. Few things are as toxic to the brain or as inflammatory to the body as a sudden spike in insulin caused by an energy surge (too much sugar) or the chronic cortisol stimulated by long lapses in mealtimes.

You can use meals and snacks throughout the day to provide stable glucose. Meals should last you about 3-4 hours and consist of about 4-5 handfuls of food, combining protein, carbohydrate and fruits or vegetables at each meal. This nutrient combination gives you the fast energy you need from carbohydrates while, slower-processing foods that contain protein, fat, or fiber keep blood sugar from spiking too quickly.

Most people have 3-4 meals a day, depending on their schedule. If that’s not convenient for you, snacking regularly might provide a better way to manage your blood sugar during the day. Ideally, snacks should bridge the gap between meals and last about 2 hours, consisting of approximately 150 calories of a low-glycemic food or combination of foods. Depending on their schedules, most people have two to four snacks a day. Examples of low glycemic snacks include:

- Almond butter and rice cakes or whole grain crackers
- Hummus and veggies or rice chips
- Apple, orange, pear, or bowl of berries
- Almonds, pistachios, cashews, walnuts, or pecans
- Small glass of almond or rice milk
- Half of an all-natural nutrition bar
- Trail mix

2: Eliminate Stimulating Foods

When we start to slow down, we may experience an initial crash -- which can cause us to consciously or subconsciously reach for substances that will help rev us up again. Many of these come in the form of food, or food "stuff" (overly processed consumables that look like, smell like, and taste like food but have no nutritional value). The best way to determine a good food choice is to ask yourself if your grandparents' grandparents would recognize it as food. Ideally it shouldn't come in a package or need a label to tell you why it's good for you. Because these "foods" give us sugar and often times come packaged with other highly addictive substances like salt and fat, we get an immediate rush and feel energized, if only for a few moments. By temporarily eliminating these stimulating and toxic foods, we bring the body back into balance and are forced to depend on natural foods that give us more bang for our buck.

You can create a nutritional rest period by beginning with a simple elimination diet, a process that has been used for
years in order to determine potential food sensitivities and allergies. While there are many potential culprits in our current food supply, seven particular foods seem to cause the majority of problems across the population – we’ll call them the "stressful seven". These highly inflammatory foods include wheat, corn, soy, dairy, peanuts, sugar (including alcohol), and artificial sweeteners. Because of its stimulating effect it's also a great idea to eliminate or at least reduce the use of caffeine for this first step of the process. Don’t worry – you’ll get to re-introduce all of these items back into your routine a bit further into the program. But for now, we need to give your system a chance to rest.

While it may seem like there are no options available after getting rid of everything on that list, there are plenty of great foods that make easy substitutions for all of those listed above. Rice, potato, and squash are great choices for carbohydrates, while eggs, almonds and other nuts and seeds (other than peanuts), legumes, and quinoa in addition to lean meats supply adequate protein to balance out blood sugar. Of course optimizing your intake of fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables is an important part of a balanced diet, and we'll focus more on these particular foods as we move into the repair phase of the program. For now, do your best to minimize processed and stimulating foods. This will give your body a better chance to get the rest it deserves.

If the elimination diet feels too shocking to your system, begin your rest process by getting rid of the most stimulating of the bunch by avoiding processed sugar, alcohol, and caffeine. Purging just these irritating nutrients will give your system a better chance at obtaining rest; then, as you start to feel better, you might then be motivated to clean up your diet even more. If you're like me, you might not want to get rid of anything more than what you absolutely must get rid of based on your own unique responses; in which case you might want to consider further exploration to find out what specifically triggers an internal stress response for you.

Several common criminals cause inflammation; you can narrow your focus even further by getting a food sensitivities test. People ask me all the time if I believe that people have really developed more food allergies nowadays -- or if we're all just overly cautious and trying to blame the wrong things for our fatigue. There are so many reasons why food has become more challenging; a substantial one is that many foods have been genetically modified, overly processed, or completely stripped of their original nutritional value. Some experts estimate that our current corn and soy production is nearly 80-90% genetically modified, which means that our bodies may not recognize what we're eating as being food. In addition, our soil is becoming increasingly weaker over time – which means that we might not be getting everything we're used to be getting through our food, and too much of what we don't want.

Although the causes and consequences of our current food production habits far outreach the scope of this article, there are some great resources available to you if you'd like more information. For
now, it’s sufficient to be aware that when food undergoes modification in any way -- including how it's treated before, during and after preparation -- it can alter the way our body responds to it. Because foods change much quicker than our digestive system can evolve, this can cause us to be out of balance. If you're interested in learning more about food allergies and intolerances, or if you’d like to do your own food sensitivities test, reach out to us at info@synergyprograms.com and we'll give you some additional guidance.

This can be a scary and frustrating road to explore – but don’t feel overwhelmed. Take a deep breath, and start to make the simple changes we discussed earlier to balance blood sugar and eliminate key nutritional stressors for now. As you feel more rested and energized you can continue to learn more about how you can have a positive impact on this growing problem.

3: Eat Energy Enhancing Foods

It goes against our instincts of getting as much volume as we can for as cheap as we can -- but we need to retrain ourselves to recognize the importance of quality over quantity when it comes to nutrition. Finding cheap food is not challenging for most people these days. However, in order to make food inexpensive, it usually requires a laboratory to make it tasty, portable and able to withstand a long shelf life. If you eat healthy, real foods the majority of the time you will be getting a much greater return on investment with regards to quality nutrients. I suggest that you aim to have about 80 – 90% of your food come from natural sources, and then 10 – 20% can be whatever you want. This gives you the nutrients your body needs but also keeps you from feeling deprived.

The choices you make for your meals and snacks can make a big difference in how your body and brain perform for you. As discussed in the previous chapter, eating in a steady, stable and balanced way is the most important factor. Once you have that down, then you can increase your energy return by eating high impact foods that have been shown to provide benefits to your system beyond just giving you the calories you need.

Of all the diets out there, I find that the Mediterranean diet provides the highest nutritional return on investment from both a brain and body perspective. Many of the foods included in this diet are anti-inflammatory, and help optimize blood flow and decrease overall wear and tear. Generous amounts of vegetables provide the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and polyphenols that reduce oxidative damage in the body and brain, which may contribute to most major health concerns including heart disease, diabetes, dementia and cancer. Some studies show that people who eat a Mediterranean diet are less likely to experience depression, and may have a reduced risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The amount of healthy fats and complex carbohydrates make this nutrition regimen very satisfying -- and might also help people trying to lose weight or sustain weight loss.
The whole grain carbohydrates, lean protein and healthy fat of the Mediterranean diet are excellent at keeping the body functioning at its best and sustaining a balance of nutrients. Eating this way stabilizes blood glucose, which gives the body and brain a consistent and stable source of fuel. In addition to maintaining energy levels, the quality of nutrients is also high impact. These foods provide monounsaturated fat, Omega-3 fat, lean protein, fiber and many vitamins, minerals and other protective nutrients such as antioxidants and polyphenols. At the same time, there is a decreased focus on foods that may be harmful to our health -- such as saturated fat, trans fat and highly processed carbohydrates.

The Mediterranean diet focuses on the following key nutrients:
A. Monounsaturated fat: olive oil, olives, canola oil, avocado, almonds, nuts and seeds
B. Omega-3 fat: fatty fish, some nuts and seeds, some eggs
C. Lean protein: fish, moderate amount of eggs and poultry, low fat cheese, low fat yogurt
D. Fiber: beans, lentils, fruits, vegetables, whole grain bread, cereal and pasta
E. Vitamins and minerals: fruits, vegetables, whole grain bread, cereal and pasta
Antioxidants and polyphenols: fruits, vegetables, dark chocolate, moderate amount of red wine and other alcohol, coffee and tea.

Some of the best anti-inflammatory foods are wild salmon, green vegetables such as kale and spinach, cruciferous veggies including broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower, dark berries such as blueberries, raspberries, and acai, soothing oils such as extra virgin olive oil, coconut and rapeseed oils, and spices such as turmeric, garlic, and ginger.

3.5: Don’t Forget The Experience of Eating

One part of the Mediterranean diet that's often left out of conversations is the lifestyle that supports the dietary components. A "diet" includes much more than just what we eat; it also pertains to how we eat. Food is more than the sum of its parts in this lifestyle; the Mediterranean diet approach is about nature, culture, community, friends and family. It involved technique, preparation, garnishes, color, texture -- all the seemingly minor details that add positive energy to the foods we eat while creating a healthier, more enjoyable emotional experience.

Our busy schedules can make it difficult to prepare our own foods every day, or slow down enough to add the special touches that make food more fun. But consider these efforts to be yet another energy investment that can provide you with a significant return. After all, it's not just the nutrients we put into our body but also the way our internal system is prepared to receive, process, and digest those nutrients that makes a difference. When we're full of stress hormones, we tend to “cut to the chase” and store more calories as fat for the upcoming emergency our brain believes is ahead. When we're in a relaxed state of mind, however, our body is able to take the time it needs to fully digest and synthesize nutrients into the body for more optimal energy production.
Grocery List for Recipes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 lb of ground lamb (or ground grass-fed beef)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 lb lamb stew meat (or steak)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 lemon</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 zucchinis</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 red bell peppers</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 orange bell pepper</td>
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<td>1 red onion</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 small shallot</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 large heart of Romaine lettuce</td>
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<td>1 large tomato</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 cucumber</td>
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<td>1 carrot</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 head of garlic</td>
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<tr>
<td>dried oregano</td>
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<td>granulated garlic</td>
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<tr>
<td>sea salt</td>
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<tr>
<td>black pepper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tbsp capers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 can artichoke hearts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 jar of capers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extra-virgin olive oil</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Mediterranean Meatball Salad**

1 lb ground lamb  
(can also use ground beef)  
zest of one lemon  
1 small shallot, minced  
1 bell pepper, diced  
1/2 tsp dried oregano  
1/2 tsp granulated garlic  
1/2 tsp sea salt  
1/4 tsp black pepper  
1 lemon, sliced thinly  
2 Tbsp capers  
Romaine lettuce, chopped  
1 cup canned artichoke hearts  
1 large tomato, sliced  
1 cucumber, diced  
1 large carrot, diced  
juice of 1 lemon  
(from zested lemon above)  
1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
1 tsp dried oregano  
1/2 tsp sea salt  

Preheat oven to 400 F

In a mixing bowl, combine the ground meat, lemon zest, bell pepper, shallots, oregano, garlic, sea salt, and black pepper. Mix well until all the ingredients are thoroughly integrated.

Form the meat mixture into 12 meatballs and place in a baking dish. Place the sliced lemons on top along with the capers and bake for 20-25 minutes (or until the meat is cooked through).

For the salad: Place the lettuce in a two salad bowl and top with artichoke hearts, tomato, cucumber and carrot. In a small bowl, whisk together the lemon juice, olive oil, oregano and salt and pour over the salads. Place 5-6 meatballs on top of each salad along with the cooked capers and serve.

**Greek Style Grilled Kabobs**

1 lb lamb stew meat (can also use steak), cubed  
2 zucchinis, sliced into 1" pieces  
1 red onion  
1 red bell pepper  
1 orange bell pepper  
1 cup extra virgin olive oil  
1 tsp oregano  
3 cloves garlic, minced  
1 tsp sea salt  
1/4 tsp pepper

Whisk olive oil, oregano, garlic, sea salt, and pepper in a small bowl.

Place vegetables in a bowl and place the meat in a separate bowl. Divide the marinade (reserving 4 tablespoons for later) and pour over both the vegetables and the meat, place in the refrigerator and allow to marinate for 1 hour.

Preheat an outdoor or indoor grill to medium heat.

Arrange the cubes of meat on heat-safe skewers, alternating with the bell peppers, onion and zucchini.

Place the skewers onto the grill and cook for about 3-4 minutes per side or until done. Drizzle the skewers with the reserved marinade before serving.
First we got your brain...

Now we need your heart.

Can we count on you for a dollar?

The American Institute of Stress helps people learn to manage their stress every single day. We help veterans returning from war find a sense of normalcy again. We help students who are stressed about exams, busy schedules and bullies reach their fullest potential. And we help people like you deal with whatever life throws at you! With your ongoing support, we will continue to be there providing people with relief for today and hope for tomorrow.

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March 2015 CONTENTMENT
The American Institute of Stress
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GET INSIDE OUR HEAD

It’s Not Our Credentials That Make AIS So Impressive, It’s the Fellows That Go with Them.

The American Institute of Stress is a non-profit organization established in 1978 at the request of Dr. Hans Selye (the Founder of the Stress Concept) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on all stress related subjects. AIS Founding Fellows include:

Paul Rosch  Linus Pauling  Alvin Toffler  Bob Hope  Michael DeBakey  Herbert Benson  Charles Spielberger

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The American Institute of Stress

This is to certify that
Imagine YOUR Name Here

Having satisfied the requirements for education, training and experience, is duly qualified and has been elected to the status of Fellow of the American Institute of Stress

and is entitled to all of the benefits deriving therefrom

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"I find myself very stressed out when I eat. I keep wondering if I’m eating the right food. Are there hormones in this that will kill me? Should I eat high protein, low carb, no fat? I can’t enjoy a meal anymore."

With many different, and sometimes conflicting, information about food, it can be difficult to know what to do. People who are health-conscious are most affected by this. You don’t know what to believe, especially when so many studies are being funded by companies with a vested interest in the results coming out in their favor. Even when the research is completely uninfluenced by industries, the information can be confusing.

For example, the research on the diets of octogenarians across the world cite many different reasons for their long and healthy lives – anywhere from tea to cacao beans. However, none of the research has been able to control for environment, climate, social support or exposure to other diets. In my opinion, everyone’s physical health and lifestyle is unique that no one type of diet will work for everyone. You may need to speak with a nutritionist or certified dietician to see which type of diet will work best for you.

As for the stress you feel around food, just like a balanced diet is good for the body, a balanced attitude around food is good for the mind. Food can be for enjoyment as well as for health. You want to enjoy the food that you eat, but too much em-
phasis on the enjoyment of food can lead to obesity and health problems. On the other hand, too much focus on food just for health reasons can lead to deprivation which can backfire and lead to binge eating. Try a more balanced view of food. Take time to acknowledge and enjoy of the look, smell and texture of food while being confident that you care enough about your health to also provide your body with healthy foods.

Also, keep in mind that health is about more than just what we eat. Health is the ability to fully enjoy life. For some people their ability to fully enjoy life is hampered by their physical health and for others, their ability to fully enjoy life is hampered by their emotional health.

Effective stress management contributes to the full enjoyment of life. Some stress management techniques deal with the physical symptoms of stress, such as insomnia, fatigue, headaches, etc. Other stress management techniques deal with the mental and emotional symptoms of stress.

Take an overall look at your life. Is your concern about food your only concern or is this a sign of a larger worry? If so, you may need to consider seeking out professional help to manage your other concerns in addition to learning to manage stress.
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