Comfort Me with Radishes

When we're feeling frazzled, we often look to salty, fatty, or sugary foods for succor. How can we eat to nourish our bodies well, even as we get our emotional fix? By Dorothy Foltz-Gray

Torture me with a week of deadlines, flat tires, and endless troubles and I have only one solution: macaroni and cheese. In my frazzled state, I boil little pasta elbows, shred whatever cheddar is on hand, and throw in butter, salt, and pepper, and for 10 minutes, you can tell me any bad news you want. I stab my fork into this golden mound and I am happy; something about the blend of creamy cheese and toothy semolina stills my pain. I can accomplish the same thing with rice pudding or—and you may not make fun of this—salty things that turn my fingertips yellow.

Of course, this relationship I have with mac and cheese and other devilish comfort foods is a love-hate one. When my groans of satisfaction subside, I am left only with a feeling of guilt. What am I thinking in this era of burgeoning obesity and heart disease? I am comforting my overworked psyche with creamy fat and white flour—the nutritional equivalent of Styrofoam! Surely, there must be a way to find solace in foods that also enrich my body nutritionally—a way to vanquish stress without jeopardizing health.

**The Warm-Milk Solution**

I feel pessimistic—though slightly less guilty—when I learn from researchers at the University of California, San Francisco that our drive for comfort foods is built in. Rats under chronic stress that were given the option of high-nutrition rat chow or a mixture of lard and sugar headed for the latter every time. And that choice actually did lower their stress-hormone levels. In terms of evolution, the response makes sense: If a lion is loping after us, easily digested and high-calorie foods like fat...
EATING WISELY

and sugar give us fuel for our escape. “In a sense,” explains Norman Pecoraro, Ph.D., coauthor of the rat study, “it’s a survival appetite.” But only temporarily; in the long run, Pecoraro hastens to add, opting for fat and sugar will hasten our demise.

I’m not sure my fairly infrequent indulgences are that dire. But in the spirit of exploration, I check with several doctors and nutritionists: Are there healthy foods that lessen stress?

Actually, yes. Some foods and nutrients are good-mood builders that, like yoga, make our well-being harder to rock. Tryptophan, for example, is an amino acid found in fish, turkey, chicken, dairy products, avocados, bananas, and wheat germ that helps lift depression (often the outcome of chronic stress) by increasing serotonin, the same feel-good neurotransmitter targeted by Prozac. In fact, a study at Oxford University’s Department of Psychiatry of formerly depressed women found that those deprived of tryptophan were more likely to relapse, while those given ample amounts of the amino acid remained untroubled.

Drink a warm glass of milk and you have a dual-action stress reliever, says Hyla Cass, M.D., coauthor of Natural Highs: Supplements, Nutrition, and Mind-Body Techniques to Help You Feel Good All the Time (Avery Penguin Putnam, 2002). “The tryptophan in the milk releases serotonin, and the warmth releases endorphins,” she explains, noting that endorphins are the same neurotransmitters behind a runner’s high. And essential fatty acids like omega-6 (found in meats, milk, vegetable oils, seeds, and nuts) and omega-3 (found in flaxseed and fish) help serotonin do its work.

Of course, some foods can tip the stress balance negatively. Too much caffeine only ups jitters. Alcohol lifts and then dashes spirits. And hunger and thirst are themselves stressful. Eating regular meals and...
snacks throughout the day of high-fiber, slowly digested foods—like fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, and lean sources of protein—keeps your blood sugar even, which helps keep your mood and energy even.

Memorable Meals
Still, intuition tells me that the real relationship between comfort foods and stress is found not in any particular food but in remembering what comfort is really all about. I recently read a story about a mother who each spring gave her children cups of the first radishes and tiny carrots from her garden with a bit of her homemade dressing on the side. Now an adult, the woman’s daughter can’t wait to bite into the first radish of each spring. This tells us that comfort foods don’t have to be full of lard and sugar; they are foods given in love.

When author Pat Willard was researching her book *A Soothing Broth* (Broadway, 1998), she learned that famed late-19th-century cookbook author Fanny Farmer advised city readers to get the freshest ingredients they could. “Fresh-made is better for you,” Willard says. “But also how wonderful that someone would take the trouble to find the best they could. And that’s nine-tenths of the psychological comfort of what you do for yourself or someone you care for.”

For Willard, her mother’s poached egg in a toast cup still gives solace on a tough day. And when anyone in her family catches a cold, she fixes the toddy her mom made of hot tea, honey, and a capful of Irish whiskey. Even more comforting are the times when Willard and her family gather for a simple meal. “We’ve lost the sense that comfort food is an act of love,” she says. “We work hard and then get fast food. But how nice instead to sit for a minute and choose something that will make you feel whole again, like an orange. Or to ask, ‘What would restore me or give me a sense of who I am right now?’ That takes more than five minutes.”

Nina Simonds, author of the forthcoming *Spices of Life: Simple and Delicious Recipes for Great Health* (Knopf) and other cookbooks, agrees. “My yoga teacher told me I was a shallow breather,” she says. “Well,
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**Eating Wisely**

we're a nation of shallow breathers. And doesn't that just symbolize our whole lifestyle? You can't take comfort from food if you're jamming it down your throat while you drive. Food is a celebration, a time to connect to all of our senses."

**Cook and Be Well**

That celebration includes the comfort of cooking itself. On stressful days, preparing a slow-simmering marinara—its pungent richness saucing the air—reminds me that no matter how well or badly my day has gone, tonight at dinner, my family and I will step out of stress into a garden of food.

Comfort foods, even the classics, can evolve as we do. As a child, I worked hard to like asparagus, dipping it in Heinz sauce to make it palatable. Now I grill the spears with olive oil, garlic, and rosemary, and I am in adult comfort-food heaven.

“Our palate changes and broadens as we grow,” says Simonds, who now calls granola and soymilk her favorite before-bed comfort food. But that doesn't mean her old favorites go begging. She spices up her puddings with cinnamon and vanilla, cutting back on butter. And she’s plumped up her childhood spinach pie with lots more spinach, while using fewer eggs and replacing its butter with olive oil. “The bottom line,” she says, “is that it’s got to be pleasurable. Otherwise you take away one of the most important aspects of food: It nurtures your body but also your sense of satisfaction."And, adds Simonds—who, as we talk, munches a chocolate chip cookie—“indulgence is part of the balance of life.” Without it, we become food militants, viewing food through a cold lens.

Will I always want my macaroni and cheese? On days when I have too much to do and too little time, probably. But on other days, it will be enough—as it was last night—to comfort my body and soul with grilled trout and salad made by my husband, then carried to me on a tray with flowers. Now that’s comfort I can eat with a spoon. •

Dorothy Foltz-Gray writes often about food and fitness, and is a contributing editor at Health, Alternative Medicine, and Arthritis Today.