

## Healthy Comfort Food for Stressful Times

Human beings want to be happy all the time, and when stress punctures our happiness bubble, we turn to our favorite comfort foods, with their familiar rationalizations. “I deserve this, I work hard,” followed by, “I’ll get back on track tomorrow,” and of course, “I’ll have just a little bite.” You will work just as hard before you eat those chips as after, tomorrow either never comes or takes the scenic route around various parts of your body, and that little bite can somehow make a pint of ice cream disappear!” The only thing these rationalizations change during stressful times are your weight, self-esteem, and the level of guilt leading to more stress.

Everyone experiences varying degrees of stress, and these days you don’t have to look past your television to find more than enough stress to add to your load. The good news is you don’t have to ban comfort food, you simply need to redefine it and choose the types of comfort food that keep your body running efficiently and at optimum health.

First, do your body and wallet a big favor by clearing your cupboards and refrigerator of junk food and replacing them with light, healthy snacks and quick, easy light meals. That cookie, bag of chips or pint of ice cream you hear calling, gives you momentary instant gratification, followed by regret, which leads to more stress.

Pay attention to what you eat, especially when you feel stressed. Mindless eating packs more pounds on bodies than yo-yo dieting. Keep several flavors of low fat yogurt in your refrigerator, and add sliced fruit or nuts before eating. The crunch of the fruit and nuts in your mouth is a great substitute for angry thoughts that you might otherwise express in harmful, inappropriate ways. If you must have ice cream, choose a low fat reduced calorie variety or frozen yogurt. Placing your treat in small custard cup instead of eating from the container controls the portion, and satisfies your craving while keeping you guilt free.

Keep fresh vegetables such as broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, summer squash, zucchini, and other vegetables on hand. Cut into bite size pieces and place in your refrigerator next to a container of plain yogurt to which you have added a sprinkling of garlic, chives, Italian seasoning and chili powder. Munch on these instead of high fat, high sodium chips.

Make a salad using a variety of lettuce and your favorite vegetables and store in your refrigerator for a mid-day meal or snack with your favorite low fat, reduced calorie dressing.

Soup is a great comfort food and is easy to prepare. Buy low sodium beef or chicken broth, add your favorite vegetables, cook until vegetables are crisp tender, and add a green salad for a fast, light healthy meal. When the temperature soars and the last thing you want is hot soup, try a spicy chilled carrot soup. Peel and cut four carrots into chunks and cook until soft in three cups carrot juice, two tablespoons honey, and one-tablespoon low fat margarine. Remove from heat, place in blender or food processor and puree with one half cup low fat milk and one- teaspoon ground ginger.

Take advantage of seasonal fruits and vegetables. Summer berries are a great hand to mouth snack, and you can eat as much as you’d like without adding to your stress or your waistline.

Sprinkle berries with cinnamon sugar made with sugar substitute and cinnamon. Sit on your deck or in your yard and enjoy the delicious taste of summer. Pile colorful fresh fruit in bowls, and watch how the colors, fragrance and texture lift your spirits and lower your stress.

When stress reaches a level where you cannot think clearly, it's time to take a break. This may seem easier said than done, but is vital to your well-being. Take a moment to sit in a favorite chair with a cup of tea and your favorite fruit. Concentrate on the warmth and flavor of the tea, feel the cup in your hand as you breathe in the tea's aroma, and taste that fruit as if for the first time. You are not only giving your body a healthy snack, your stress is also getting a "time out."

Everyone experiences stress on many levels and in many areas of life. When stress sends you on a comfort food seeking mission, be sure you are well supplied with tasty, healthy alternatives to junk food.