



Honoring God With Our Bodies Through Nutrition: Mood Disorders

■ by Stephanie Shelton, PhD, LCSW

As the series on how to glorify God with our bodies continues, the focus of this article will be on mood disorders and nutritional guidelines that best meet the needs of those with such disorders.

First, we need to understand what a mood disorder is. According to the DSM V, mood disorders are defined as a mental illness that describes a serious change in mood. Illnesses under mood disorders include: major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder (mania - euphoric, hyperactive, over inflated ego, unrealistic optimism), persistent depressive disorder (long-lasting low-grade depression), cyclothymia (a mild form of bipolar disorder), and SAD (seasonal affective disorder).

As a Christian counselor I have met with many clients of faith who express shame regarding their depression. As I work with them to learn coping skills for managing their depressive symptoms, I also give direction to God's Word, the Bible, which shares that once sin entered the world, we no longer have a perfect world; therefore, our bodies become sick and illness is among us. Depression is just that, an illness and an outcome of a sinful world. When an individual has been diagnosed with a mood disorder their body is experiencing certain deficits which are causing an imbalance in mood related hormones such as a decrease in serotonin levels or the brain receptors are blocked from receiving the hormones.

One recommendation that I give to my clients is the use of natural foods that God has given us to treat and manage this illness. Many of my clients are excited about this approach and have seen significant results. Below you will find a list of foods that have been shown to either improve mood or disrupt mood. It is best to make small changes and gradually increase so you will not obtain a spirit of defeat. And remember these are suggestions to supplement along with regular Christian counseling and any recommendations received from a medical doctor.

Foods that improve mood

Avocados

Avocados are known as a source of good fat. The nutrients that avocados provide assist the brain receptors in receiving serotonin.

Beans

Beans are a great source of vitamin B9 also known as folic acid. Individuals with bipolar disorder are known to lack folic acid. The greatest source of B9 is found in pinto, garbanzo (chick-peas) and mung.

Fruit

Any kind of fruit is good for the body, but a couple are best to target mood disorders. Bananas are filled with B6 which is known to build serotonin levels and pineapples as well as oranges, which are filled with vitamin C, assist in increasing energy levels.

Salmon

Salmon is filled with omega-3 which is necessary for a healthy body and mind. Salmon also contains protein to increase energy levels as well as tyrosine which is used to create two mood-stabilizing neurotransmitters, dopamine and norepinephrine. Other fish that have the same benefits include: tuna, mackerel, herring, trout, halibut, and sardines.



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Walnuts

Walnuts are a wonderful snack choice or pairing it with a meal such as in oatmeal or on top of a salad. Walnuts are packed full of nutrients that assist in mood disorders including vitamin E, vitamin B6, folate, protein, and Omega-3.

Dark Chocolate

Cocoa beans are full of mood-lifting ingredients such as phenylethylamine which assists in relieving depressive symptoms. It is imperative that the chocolate consumed be at least 75% cocoa; milk chocolate does not have the same effect, in fact it will have the opposite effect due to the added sugar.

Dark Leafy Greens

Greens such as spinach, collards, kale, and turnip greens are filled with folic acid, vitamin C, vitamin E and other antioxidants which are great for reducing depressive symptoms.

Foods that disrupt mood

Alcohol

Alcohol is a depressant and reduces serotonin levels. Alcohol has also been linked to increased levels of stress and anxiety.

Caffeine

Caffeine has addictive components in it which increases depressive symptoms and anxiety. An alternative to coffee is Green Tea which contains high amounts of anti-inflammatory properties while providing a lower amount of caffeine.



Monitoring effects of diet changes

There are two ways that you can monitor the effects that changes in your diet are having on your mood. First you can complete a Food-Mood Diary¹ to monitor daily the foods that you are eating and how they impact your mood. Second, you can complete the PHQ-9 Depression Screener² prior to any changes with the foods in your diet and then every 30 days after implementing the changes. If you score your results and are concerned about the outcome, please review them with your physician and/or counselor. Remember these are suggestions and have been shown through empirical studies to help with mood but there is no guarantee as every body is different and responds differently to nutrition. Just keep doing the best you can making little changes daily until you find what works for you. ■

¹Food-Mood Diary <http://www.chicagochristiancounseling.org/files/Food-Mood-Diary.pdf>

²PHQ-9 Depression Screener <http://www.chicagochristiancounseling.org/files/PHQ-9-Depression-Screener.pdf>

³Hallahan, B. & Garland, M. R. (2005). Essential fatty acids and mental health. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 186(4), pp. 275-277, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.186.4.275>

⁴Leng, G. (2009). Impact of antioxidant therapy on symptoms of anxiety and depression. A randomized controlled trial in patients with peripheral arterial disease. *Journal of Nutritional & Environmental Medicine*, 8(4), pp 321-328 DOI: 10.1080/13590849861899

⁵Young, S. N. (2007). Folate and depression – a neglected problem. *Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience*, 32(2), pp 80-82.



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