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Problems With The Modern Diet

This is the food pyramid, a construct that's familiar to entire generations of American school children. The only problem is that it's pretty much all nonsense. At some point in the relatively recent past, the way we ate, the way we cooked, and the way we nourished our own cells became distorted. And the dietary habits our bodies are built to do naturally became clouded in confusion.

Over the past one hundred years, our dietary habits moved from primarily local, farm-fresh foods to prepackaged, processed convenience items. But, beyond those changes, an overwhelming form of diet culture also permeates almost every aspect of today's society. Consumers are constantly bombarded with confusing, conflicting, or just plain inaccurate information about foods and their influence on health and well-being. It's challenging enough just to sift through all that information—let alone figure out how you can effectively harness it to make positive changes to your diet.

Think about how your ancestors ate. The way-back ones, before we settled down and began to rely on the central agricultural crops--corn, wheat, or rice, depending on where they lived. These people were inextricably linked to their own environments, and the foods that existed there. In general, a hunter-gatherer diet would consist of about 130 different foods, far more than that of their, more recent, agricultural counterparts.

Yet even through most of the next few millennia, the vast majority of a person's sustenance came from local sources, and simple whole ingredients. Our great-grandparents nourished themselves with fresh, seasonal, whole foods, grown and nurtured on farms located within a dozen miles from their homes.

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Fast forward to today. Now, every year, there's a new trendy diet that hits the mainstream. You may notice this year's hot take on food will reverse the mainstays of last year's recommended guidelines. And, more often than not, the only thing that these different fad diets have in common is the message that you're somehow eating all wrong.

The end result of all of this back and forth, for many people, is fear and shame. And, for the millions who struggle with anxiety, all the conflicting information can make them even more fretful about their food choices. They feel like this is something they just will never get right.

Today, the American "foodscape" is built on the foundation of industrialized farming operations and prepackaged items. Nearly 60 percent of what we consume falls into the processed food category, with its correspondingly excessive levels of refined carbohydrates and sugar, food dyes, trans fats, and preservatives. You can't drive more than a few blocks without passing a fast food joint or convenience store. Sugar intake--particularly processed sugar--has skyrocketed. In some developed countries, the amount has risen to over 150 pounds per person, per year. The types of foods that are most accessible—and being actively marketed to you and your family—are full of the very ingredients your doctors are strongly warning you to avoid.

Look at the ingredient labels of many packages in the grocery store and you'll likely see more chemicals than actual food ingredients. Not only does this make it harder for us to eat the nutrients that can help us bolster and curate our own mental well-being—essential nutrients we best get through consumption of the foods that contain them—but the typical Western diet also has us taking in a number of nutrients and molecules that are actually detrimental to brain health.

As we move forward, I want to reiterate that there is no one right way to eat or to organize your diet for optimal mental health and well-being. As an individual and as an eater, your

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journey is like no one else's, and that's the way it should be. No one wants to live like our hunter-gatherer ancestors or eat exactly as they ate. So it's about making more informed choices within a modern context. And as a psychiatrist and therapist, my goal is always to help my patients embrace progress, not perfection. To make that progress, it's important that you respect your unique tastes, culture, and values about food, which are as individual as your experiences with other facets of mental fitness.

It's at this point where many people I've spoken with have the idea: wait a second, what about supplements?

For the last hundred years, many Americans have relied on a daily multivitamin to increase levels of certain vitamins and minerals. Supplements can be helpful in addressing nutrient deficiencies, of course—your physician may have even prescribed some to you—but multivitamins and other supplements cannot fully replace the nutritional value of good, real, whole, food.

It comes down to the matter of absorption. Your body is designed to absorb vital nutrients from food. Common minerals--some of which we'll be talking about in the next section--like calcium, magnesium, and iron can actually block others from being absorbed into the body through the gut. When two or more are packed into pill form, it can create a traffic jam, so to speak, and your body struggles to absorb the full amount.

There are so many other problems with supplements. That's one of the reasons that I choose and ask you to choose a food first philosophy. Not that perhaps there might be a supplement that could help you or if your healthcare practitioner has suggested you take something that you should throw it out – but what I mean is that the first way you should think about the nutrients you need and where to get them is to think about food.

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Supplements come with other issues. They're full of adulterants, meaning things that aren't supposed to be in there. In fact every year the FDA seizes hundreds of different brands of supplements for having things like pharmaceutical medications, analogs of medications, or just plain toxins like lead or cadmium. That's nothing that you want messing with your brain health. Another problem I see, just simply put, is people come in with so many different supplements that there's no way to really know what's helping and what isn't. It's some idea that people have gotten that just because something is natural or it says it's a vitamin that it's actually ok for your brain, and that's simply not the case.

So what happens, is that instead of getting vital nutrients found naturally in whole foods that provide the building blocks for healthy brains, we are instead getting a host of manufactured food-like substances--things we collectively refer to as supplements. The vast majority of Americans, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), aren't meeting the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) for key nutrients—about half of us are lacking zinc, 68 percent are deficient in magnesium, and a whopping 75 percent aren't getting enough folate. And, as we've established, our brains will struggle to function at their best if they can't get the basic elements they need to flourish, things found in nutrient-dense foods.

So if you've bought into what I've been saying so far, you're probably now thinking, "Fine, okay. Nutrients are good. Processed foods are bad. So what should I be eating?" And that's what we'll be talking about next--the most important nutrients that bolster mental health and equip you with the tools to live a healthier, more enjoyable, better nourished life.