

## Module 13 Transcript

### Essential Food Categories

If you watched the previous session, you've seen the quick breakdown of the twelve most vital nutrients for mental fitness. But while it's important, from a scientific standpoint, to highlight these nutrients, talking about vitamins and minerals doesn't do much to change people's diets in real terms. According to the CDC, deficiencies in nutrients including iron, vitamin A, and zinc remain a serious issue—with more than two billion people across the globe suffering from some sort of micronutrient deficiency. Telling people to improve their vitamin B12 status only goes so far—and, often, it tends to inspire people to hit the supplement aisle instead of eating a more balanced diet. That's not our goal here.

Eating a brain healthy diet requires you to think beyond just adding a superfood or two to your menu planning. To help the brain work its best, I've learned, it's more valuable to think more broadly about your diet in terms of food categories and your overall dietary pattern.

Let's revisit the Mediterranean way of eating, which is low in processed foods and high in fresh fruits and vegetables, seafood, nuts, olive oil and some whole grains. This general dietary plan is not only good for your heart, but also good for your brain. Study after study showed this diet was instrumental in reducing the risk of heart attack and stroke—and as the researchers delved deeper into the data, they also noticed eating in the Mediterranean style was linked to a decrease in the incidence of dementia and depression. And this makes sense because the body is a system where everything is connected. The brain does not exist in isolation. It just makes simple sense that eating more nutrient dense foods from food categories that have the most of the 12 antidepressant nutrients is best for overall brain health.

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But too often, when we discuss diet and nutrition, conversations turn to one “superfood” or another. Or to a supposed end-all-be-all diet plan. In addition to the Mediterranean Diet, for example, you’ve likely heard experts talk about the health properties of blueberries, green tea, matcha, or spirulina. I’ll admit I’m guilty of this.

Why? Because these are all great foods! They are all chock-full of healthy nutrients that promote brain health and are a great addition to any diet. But eating to beat depression and anxiety requires you to think beyond just adding a superfood or two to your diet.

Importantly, you need to pick the foods you enjoy eating. The only component of a brain healthy diet besides unprocessed foods, from my perspective, is a certain amount of joyfulness that should come along with whatever you select. After all, food is meant to be delicious and bring added pleasure to our daily lives. With that in mind, let’s get into the major categories that you can consume on a regular basis to best improve your mental health and optimize your mental fitness.

Leafy greens. You saw this one coming I imagine. Leafy vegetables give you the most bang for your buck when you’re talking about nutrient density, the nutrient-to-calorie ratio. Spinach, kale, watercress, arugula, collards, beet greens, and chard are all great for getting your daily dose of vitamin C, vitamin A, and folate. And, thanks to the bright colors in the leaves, they’re full of healthy phytonutrients, too. Eating more greens means you are getting more hydration, satiation, and nutrient density--that is, valuable nutrients per calorie--in every meal.

Rainbow fruits and vegetables are things that are, well, colorful! You may have heard nutritionists--including me--use the phrase “eat the rainbow,” which is a snappy way of saying to pay attention to the color palette of your plate. Eating rainbow fruits and vegetables, like tomatoes, avocados, bell peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, and berries, is a

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great way to not only get important phytonutrients called flavonoids and carotenoids, but also fiber for the good bugs in your gut to thrive on. Flavonoids and flavanols are responsible for the bright colors of these foods— and you can only get these health-promoting molecules in the plants you eat. Purple foods have anthocyanins. Orange gives you carotenoids. Reds signal lycopene. And all of them have powerful antioxidant and DNA-enhancing properties and can help keep pro-inflammatory molecules at bay—and, in the process, help keep your brain in good shape.

When you eat that bowl of blueberries or tuck into a great piece of roasted eggplant, molecules present in these foods called anthocyanins tell the body to produce more of a neuroprotective molecule called kynurenic acid through special messages they send the brain through the microbiome. This molecule has the power to facilitate sleep, boost mood, and decrease feelings of brain fog. And, of course, to help reduce inflammation in both the gut and brain.

Seafood can be a tough one for many people. But even those who typically turn their nose up can find ways to successfully add seafood into their diets. It's the only food category where you can get those long-chain omega-3 fatty acids that your brain so desperately needs. Sardines, oysters, mussels, and salmon are also chock-full of B12, selenium, iron, zinc, and protein. With so many seasonings, sauces, and methods to prepare seafood, there's bound to be an option that will work for you, your palette, and your brain. I know maybe it sounds easy, you should eat more seafood, but I understand how much of a journey that can be. I grew up in rural, Midwest America and there was not a lot of seafood on the menu. It's something that didn't smell good to me, something that I never really experienced or tasted. But as a young psychiatrist living in New York City I realized I was there living on the ocean and all this data started coming out about Omega-3 fatty acids. That's when I changed my diet because I wanted to take better care of my brain and improve my mental fitness and I knew I needed to understand more about how to

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incorporate seafood into my diet to get more of the long chain Omega-3 fatty acids that I knew I needed. I started with just a little white fish baked in the oven, moved on to wild salmon, and today I eat every type of seafood and I really enjoy it. I think it's a part of our palates that a lot of us need to work on to develop and I hope you hear my encouragement and take some inspiration from my success. You can love everything from raw oysters and mussels to clam chowder to delicious fish tacos to sushi. There's so many different ways to enjoy and experience seafood and I hope you find the one that fits your brain just right.

Now let's talk about nuts, seeds. From cashews to pumpkin seeds to lentils, nuts, seeds, and legumes are a top source of plant-based protein. They're also rich in fiber, zinc, iron, and other essential nutrients. They also are filled with phytonutrients. When working with patients, one of the first things I suggest is replacing their current go-to snack food with some almonds, walnuts, and cashews. Just a handful can go such a long, long way. They're satiating, filling, and they're one of the few foods that's linked to protecting us from very low levels of BDNF. And don't forget beans. Throw a handful of black or red beans into your favorite soups or stews. Drop them into your favorite pasta. Beans are a great way to get lots of fiber, lots of magnesium, and to feed your microbiome. Let's highlight one of my favorites which are pumpkin seeds. The reason is that they are a top source of tryptophan, the amino acid that your body uses to make serotonin. They're also a great source of magnesium and zinc, two nutrients we know are tied to increased production of BDNF. Pumpkin seeds can get tossed into your omelet, into a salad, smoothie, or pesto.

Meat is a tricky food category for many people, and I get that. Many of you avoid it altogether for any number of reasons—and honestly, that's okay. It's still possible to nourish your brain without it. However, we do need to acknowledge that meat is a remarkable source of iron, protein, and vitamin B12. As such, I've come to believe the age-old debate over whether we should or shouldn't eat meat instead needs to evolve into a discussion about how we can eat meat in a way that is both healthy for our bodies and

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sustainable for the environment. Many small farms now focus on soil health and raising animals on pasture and grass, not feedlots, a movement I support called regenerative agriculture. Finding your local farms and farmers is something I believe helps our mental health. It helps us be connected to our food supply and helps you connect to your community. Grass-fed beef has a third fewer calories than the meat that comes from grain-fed cows. It also boasts a different fatty acid profile—grass-fed beef has fewer omega-6 fatty acids, which helps to make sure your omega-3s are in balance thereby keeping inflammation in check and promoting brain health. But what grass-fed beef lacks in calories, it makes up for in nutrients. Because the animals freely roam and eat natural vegetation, you'll get more healthy fats, vitamin E, and carotenoids.

The egg is an incredibly nutrient-dense food. A single egg contains only 70 calories. Yet, this incredibly affordable and simple food also boasts an ideal complete protein, B vitamins, and choline, a cousin to the B vitamins that has been linked to lower rates of anxiety symptoms. Eggs are also very easy to prepare and eat. Whether you boil one for a high-protein afternoon snack or whip up a rainbow vegetable frittata for your breakfast, eggs are an easy addition to your go-to meals.

Fermented foods. As we discussed in the microbiome section, keeping a healthy population of diverse bacteria in your gut known as the microbiome depends on consuming more fermented foods. Some great sources of probiotic foods where you get more of those “good bugs” are kombucha, kefir, yogurt, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, natto are all sources of live probiotic bacteria that help promote a healthy and diverse microbiome.

This last one is, hands down, one of my favorites: dark chocolate. Not only is it delicious, but the flavanols contained within this treat— including epicatechin, a molecule shown to have wide-ranging cardiovascular benefits—are mighty good for your brain, too. People who eat higher amounts of dark chocolate have a 70 percent reduced risk of clinically

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relevant depression symptoms according to a study of 13,626 adults.. This benefit was not seen in those who consumed milk chocolate, which is lower in flavanols and higher in sugar. Look for dark chocolate with two ingredients, cacao and sugar, and a cacao content of at least 70 percent. The higher the percentage of cacao, the better it is for your brain. If people question your motives, let them know it is doctor recommended.

So there you have it. These are the food groups that have the highest nutrient density of the specific vitamins and minerals that can both prevent and better manage the symptoms associated with mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. That said, how you integrate these different categories into your diet is entirely up to you. Pick the foods that appeal most to you and eat them in the way that aligns with your tastes and values. Considering these different categories, and the foods you enjoy the most within each of them, is the first step in tapping into a powerful new way to care for both your body and your brain. Eating to feed your mental health.