

April 2024 National Stress Awareness Month: The Intersection of Stress and Food
McKenna Welshans, MBA, RD, LD, ACSM-EP, CSCS, CSSD



Can you believe there are only 3 more weeks until finals? Time is flying as it always does with a busy semester.

In recognition of National Stress Awareness Month, I want to take a moment to share some ways where nutrition and stress can overlap, whether you're experiencing chronic life stressors or feeling the effects of more acute stress from the last few hectic weeks of the semester.

Did you know?

Stress can cause release of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol, both of which enable the body's "fight-or-flight" response and affect different systems in the body, especially digestion. Ongoing stress can trigger physical reactions that lead to inflammation and cell damage. Over time, we can experience health problems that include digestive issues, weight fluctuations, lowered immunity, increased blood pressure, sleep disruption, and anxiety.

Chronic stress increases the body's energy and nutrient needs as well as affects our food cravings and eating behaviors. We tend to crave higher-energy foods and lack motivation to prepare balanced meals for ourselves. If we aren't sleeping well, this will strengthen that cycle.

While we can't always decrease the amount of stress we experience in certain seasons of life, we can develop productive patterns of coping with it. Consider which activities will best support stress management in your own life that include moving your body in a way you enjoy, connecting with others, and practicing mindfulness.

Mindfulness in our eating can play out in a variety of ways, but below are a few tips:

-Create rhythm in eating time throughout the day as much as your schedule will allow. This starts with aiming to eat something within 1-2 hours of waking up and roughly every 2-4 hours throughout the day. Small, frequent meals/snacks keep you from the extremes of hunger and fullness and better enables you to stay in tune with your body cues.

-When eating, try to choose at least one meal/snack throughout the day where you commit to avoid multitasking while eating. Engage all 5 senses in eating that meal and give yourself at least 20 minutes to notice the shift from hunger to fullness. Let's define comfortable, satisfied fullness as about 80% full. Creating a mindful scenario where you are slowing down and focused on your body can help you discover what amount of food gets you to that 80%.

-Give yourself permission to enjoy the foods you are craving without guilt, but also consider the balance of how your body feels after eating certain foods. We are more physically satisfied when we include foods that contain protein, fiber, carbohydrates, and a little fat in our meals/snacks. We can add some satisfaction to our emotional needs by enjoying the sweet treats as the cherry on top to our balanced meal.

-You can improve your sleep patterns by cutting off caffeine intake 7+ hours before you go to bed and aiming to eat a balanced protein-rich snack roughly 1-2 hours before sleeping

Whatever you are working to incorporate into your self-care routine, avoid the tendency of perfectionism. Setting yourself up with realistic goals that you aim to hit 20% of the time can provide flexible structure that enables you to better balance both physical and emotional well-being.