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How to Manage Stress Eating (or Not Eating)

Coronavirus-related anxiety and changes in your routine may have turned your usual eating habits upside down. Here are some tips to help.



Nutrition experts say recognizing what stress and anxiety is doing to us in difficult times is the first step in getting a handle on the situation. Credit...Andriy Popov/Alam



By Jen A. Miller

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The coronavirus pandemic is unlike anything most of us have ever experienced.

One of the many things changing: How we eat. A lot of us are either eating more than we usually do, or not at all.

“With most people, the first thing to go when we’re stressed is self-care,” said Jennifer Wegmann, lecturer in health and wellness studies at Binghamton University, and author of the audio series [“Resilience: The New Science of Mastering Stress and Living Well.”](#) When Dr. Wegmann says self-care, she doesn’t mean things like massages and manicures, but the true basics: exercise, sleep and eating. “We let go of those things first because we think we need to be better for other people.”

Those affected by anxiety are the most likely to stop eating, said Debra Kissen, chief executive of [Light on Anxiety CBT Treatment Center](#) and member of the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#). This goes back to our ancient ancestors. “When you’re about to be eaten by a lion, and you either need to fight or take flight, it’s not really efficient for your gut to be digesting food. It’s a waste of energy,” she said.

This kind of reaction makes sense for an immediate threat, though it isn’t the best way to handle food in the long term. It’s “a prehistoric way of surviving that for a modern life crisis can be ineffective,” she said.

On the other hand, overeating can be the result of a gamut of things, from depression to simply having stocked up on your favorite sweet before self-isolating. For those who are now working from home, having unlimited access to the kitchen might mean more grazing.

Your body’s physical stress response could be playing a role too, said Mackenzie Kelly, [clinical psychologist at Rush University Medical Center](#). When stressed, our bodies release the stress hormone cortisol, and make more insulin, “which impacts the metabolism of carbohydrates and fats, and when that’s activated, it can impact food selection,” she said. The foods you are more likely to then crave are often carbohydrates or high in fat, which dampen the effects of increased cortisol and insulin, shutting off the stress response.

While an occasional food splurge like this won’t be a problem and you should give yourself a pass if you’ve binged on food you typically avoid, repeatedly eating carbohydrates and high-fat foods will dampen the impact they have on your moods. So you could still be eating like this without getting the same stress-relieving benefits, and eating less healthily to boot.

Recognizing what stress and anxiety is doing to us — and our eating — is the first step in getting a handle on the situation, Dr. Wegmann said. “Once we can acknowledge that we’re afraid,” she said, we can start to look at what behaviors that stress is changing.

In the short term, eating too much or too little “is probably not a huge deal for somebody who’s healthy,” she said. As this situation continues, though, “it’s beneficial to get back into moderation.”

Dr. Kelly said that one of the best things that will help with stress eating is time. “If people are feeling stressed or anxious, just allowing some time to pass can help,” she said. For those who feel they’re snacking too much, doing something else to pass the time can help those urges to eat go away.

For those who are eating too little, she suggests finding something tolerable to eat or trying something calorie-rich to drink, like a protein shake. “It would be one thing if this was a day or two, but we’re in this for a while,” she said.

If you are overeating, make sure that the foods you are reaching for aren’t only packaged snacks, and be sure to include things like fruits and vegetables in your snack choices.

Also, if you find yourself forgetting to eat (and then possibly eating too much at the time you are finally very hungry), you can also schedule meals into your calendar, just as you would any other appointment of the day. Or set alarms to remind yourself to eat your usual meals and drink a glass of water.

Remember, self-care also means allowing yourself to enjoy your food fully. Now is not the time to add stress in the form of worrying about consuming a few extra calories or one skipped meal. Reducing that pressure may make eating feel normal again, too.