

## Well-Being Tip

July 2025



### Food and Feeling Good: The Role Eating Plays in Mental Health

It's widely understood that getting enough sleep, exercise, social connection, and sunlight are all supportive of our mental health, but what about a nutritious diet? This month's well-being tip explores how what and where we eat can support our well-being.

#### What we eat

- Ever experienced stomach upset when you're stressed about something? This is because there is a strong connection between the brain and the gut through something called the gut-brain axis. About 95 percent of serotonin, which is the neurotransmitter that plays a key role in mood regulation, sleep cycles, memory, and learning, is produced in the gastrointestinal tract ([Betkas et al., 2020](#); [Cleveland Clinic, 2022](#)). It's no surprise, then, that certain ways of eating, like a Mediterranean diet or a traditional Japanese diet, have been found to improve mental health and brain functioning. Focusing on eating primarily whole foods like vegetables, fruit, unprocessed grain, and fish protects your brain from oxidative stress and helps to reduce inflammation, which is a risk factor for depression ([Selhub, 2022](#)). Regularly eating foods that contain probiotics, like kimchi, kefir, or sauerkraut, has also been shown to improve symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress in several studies ([Johnson & Steenbergen, 2025](#)). It's helpful to avoid eating foods that contain a lot of added sugar or are highly processed because these can cause inflammation and negatively impact insulin regulation ([Selhub, 2022](#)). If you are craving something sweet, making it at home might be a good idea. Homemade baked goods and treats generally contain less processed ingredients than store-bought ones.

#### Where we eat

- There are certain ways of eating that may be more supportive of mental health, too. Mealtimes provide natural breaks in the day that can be used intentionally for connection and relaxation. Rather than scarfing down a meal sitting in front of a laptop or over an open textbook, consider stepping away from your desk to enjoy your meal. People who dine with others regularly report experiencing more positive

emotions and an increased sense of well-being ([Dugan, 2023](#)) You might coordinate with a friend to eat lunch at the same time so that you can connect, or you might decide to take 30 minutes to sit outdoors and eat peacefully. Even if you're eating by yourself, taking a break from studying to eat may boost your mood and productivity. In addition to the nourishment provided by balanced food, mealtimes can be built-in opportunities to pause, connect, and recharge (if we allow them to be).

## Food Access

While whole foods like fruits and vegetables are clearly beneficial to our well-being, they are sometimes more expensive than ultra-processed foods. Unfortunately, many health sciences graduate students and medical students experience food insecurity, where access to adequate food is uncertain and healthy options may be out of reach due to cost (Nguyen M, Shanab BM, Khosla P, et al., 2025; [Sackey, Rothpletz-Puglia, & Touger-Decker, 2021](#)).

The University of Iowa Food Pantry offers free food and toiletries to anyone with a university ID card who is facing food insecurity. There are no income requirements, and individuals can shop at the pantry once per week. The pantry is located on the ground floor of the Iowa Memorial Union on the east side of campus, at G200. For the most up-to-date information about the pantry's hours, visit the Food Pantry at Iowa website:

<https://basicneeds.uiowa.edu/food-pantry>

## Connect with the MSCC

The Medical Student Counseling Center (MSCC) offers free, confidential personal counseling, disability and accessibility services, academic and career development support, and wellness consultations to MD and PA students.

## Contact MSCC

Email: [osac-mscc@uiowa.edu](mailto:osac-mscc@uiowa.edu) Phone: 319-335-8056

(Email should not be used to share confidential information or in the event of an emergency.)

If you are in crisis or you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, call or text 9-8-8.

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