

Meditation: The Nutritional Connection

As mankind's understanding of the functioning of the human body has increased, it has become obvious that we cannot treat our bodies as mere bags of chemicals whose balance can be manipulated at our whim. A growing body of research demonstrates that the mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of one's daily life play a huge, if not predominant role in determining the overall state of health. One of the most therapeutic activities in this regime of holistic health is the practice of meditation.

The scientific research community has conclusively demonstrated the beneficial effects of meditation: blood pressure lowers; stress is alleviated; basal metabolic rate decreases; insomnia, anxiety and a number of other psychosomatic disorders either decrease or disappear altogether. Additionally, regular meditation practitioners develop increased brain wave coherence, leading to positive changes in attention span, creativity, learning ability and memory retrieval. What's more, the effects of consistent, daily meditation last progressively longer into our daily activities, with the benefits increasing over time.

Despite these advantages, many clients tell me that they just can't seem to get the mind settled enough to benefit from meditation. The "hamster cage" (i.e., the left brain) always seems to be running with an endless list of thoughts. While visualization and breathing techniques can certainly help combat this tendency, many times the problem lies in what the client is eating and drinking.

In his landmark book, *The Biology of Transcendence*, Joseph Chilton Pearce masterfully describes the various functions of the human brain. In particular, he points out that the higher mental functions, such as creativity, judgment, decision-making and access to the spiritual, require optimal operation of the pre-frontal cortex, the most advanced part of our brains. This is the part which is most critically tied to the ability to meditate. In contrast, the so-called "primitive" parts of our brain, having to do with maintenance of critical autonomic functions and survival reflexes, can kick in virtually automatically with the appropriate stimulus.

The body was designed to react and respond effectively to these stimuli on an episodic basis in order to escape from threats to its survival. However, 21st Century society has created an environment where the body detects almost constant threats. This has the physiological effect of simultaneously stimulating the "flight or flight" reflex in the more primitive areas of the brain almost constantly while decreasing the blood flow to those areas governing the higher functions.

Believe it or not, diet can play a crucial role in this process, and therefore in one's ability to successfully use meditation as a complementary wellness therapy. When we consume foods such as caffeinated beverages, white flour, processed sugar or any processed food product, the effect on the body can be virtually the same as if one had experienced a "fight or flight" stimulus. The reason is that the adrenal glands, the primary managers of our ability to withstand stress, play an important role in the processing of these foods. They secrete various types of hormones called corticosteroids

which help the body assimilate each type of food. In the case of caffeine, the body simply reacts to introduction of the substance as if an actual physical threat has been presented. Although the effect of the other foods mentioned above is somewhat more indirect, the reaction of the brain is very similar: an increase in blood flow to the “primitive” parts of the brain, and a decrease in the blood flow to the more advanced parts of the brain.

The overt effects of ingesting such foods are readily apparent to almost anyone who has experienced or observed them: decreased reaction time, more aggressive behavior, decreased emotional margin (i.e., trivial events cause a reaction out of proportion to the stimulus), the list goes on. At the same time, the ability to access the functions of the more advanced portions of the brain is compromised. Ask anyone who is on a caffeine or sugar high if they can settle down long enough to meditate; the answer will be self-evident. Because the effects of these foods last far longer than an immediate threat stimulus, it is small wonder that people who consistently consume these foods have difficulty with meditation.

Obviously, this points up one more important reason why a healthy lifestyle does not include such foods. If you are consuming these foods for whatever reason and still trying to meditate, you will have a greatly decreased probability of success if you continue their use. Conversely, elimination of these foods from your diet will remove a significant obstacle to your success with the practice of meditation. We can help you design a diet and lifestyle program to address all your needs, including the successful ability to meditate.

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