

A Nutritional Perspective on Addiction and Depression

It is not widely known that depression plays a significant role in the disease of addiction. Frequently depression exists as a co-occurring disorder and must be treated at the same time as the chemical dependency if a successful outcome is to be achieved.

This article seeks to explore some of the physiological factors that impact the functioning of an addict. If these imbalances are corrected they can greatly assist a chemically addicted person in achieving sobriety along with a 12 Step program and/or therapy.

The first area to look at are the eating habits of the addict. These recommendations can apply to many forms of addiction. Frequently the diet is high in sugars, caffeine, nicotine and starchy, highly refined foods. How does this impact the addicted person? Sugar, coffee and donuts all give us that dramatic boost we often crave to kick-start the morning. What's happening to the body? The blood sugar levels are soaring, producing a rush of insulin in the blood, elevating our mood till suddenly, having peaked it comes crashing down as the body becomes depleted of this artificially stimulated insulin supply. What do we do as our spirits collapse and depression starts to engulf us? We reach out for an external agent, a drink, smoke, coffee, sugar, sex or drug. Whatever it takes to elevate our mood back to its original high.

What's going on in the body? Again, after a sharp decline in the blood sugar level the blood sugars begin to soar again bringing with it a euphoric sense of well being – if only short lived. And so the day goes on with dramatic peaks and valleys of the blood sugar and corresponding shifts in mood.

Does the description fit? What are we looking to change in this picture? As a first step for optimal health and smoother emotional well being it is important to strive for a more graduated flow of blood sugar. No longer the dramatic highs and lows that are artificially produced by our food selections. How can this be achieved? First by starting out the day with a good source of protein – eggs, bacon, milk, yogurt etc. and complex carbohydrates such as whole wheat, fruit and vegetables, the less sweet the fruit the better. As we place good quality whole foods in our system on a regular basis the craving for sugars and highly refined foods which create the mood swings will gradually lessen. The body is supplied with a more balanced source of blood sugar as digestion takes place. Good protein and complex carbohydrates (whole foods and vegetables) should be served at each meal. Gradually, as the highly refined flour products and sugars (including undiluted fruit juices and sugar substitutes) are removed from the diet the blood sugar levels will moderate and so the mood swings.

The next area that needs to be looked at in most cases of addiction and depression is the body's ability to produce the neurotransmitter serotonin. Serotonin, a brain chemical, is responsible, in part, for feeling hopeful, reflective, focused and having impulse control; characteristics that the addict all too frequently lacks. It has been suggested that the inability to produce optimal levels of serotonin is an aspect of the hereditary nature of

this disease. In depression Prozac is often prescribed as it helps the body maximize the use of the little serotonin the body does produce.

The amino acid tryptophan is particularly important in the production of serotonin in the body. Tryptophan is fragile and not easily absorbed into the blood. A balanced diet that includes such food as chicken, pork, cheddar cheese, ground beef, tuna, tempeh, cottage cheese or tofu are good sources of this amino acid. An additional and effective method of accessing tryptophan that is recommended by Kathleen DesMaisons in her book 'Potatoes not Prozac' is by consuming a baked potato before going to sleep. While the body is resting tryptophan is more readily absorbed and the benefits are particularly noticeable the following day. Alternatives to the potato include other complex carbohydrates such as an apple, oatmeal, whole wheat toast or orange juice. Note that these foods should be taken on their own without protein.

The third and equally significant factor in relieving depression is through elevating one's beta-endorphin levels. Beta-endorphins are responsible for feelings of well-being, reduce pain and increase self esteem. Beta endorphins are not obtained from an external food source but rather exist in the body. A beta-endorphin response may be induced in the body through such activities as exercise, meditation, prayer, therapy and 12 Step meetings. Many of us can identify that shift in mood that frequently takes place when we become engaged in some form of group activity. Runners are keenly aware of the sensation called a 'runner's high.' If they are not careful this can lead to overdoing the activity and physical injury, as part of the beta endorphin response is to ease pain.

Beta-endorphins may be induced in the body through alcohol or sugar consumption particularly for addicted people. Hence the craving for such substances. But this only places us back on the roller coaster ride of high and low mood swings and further craving for those substances.

So basically what are we striving for - to live a more balanced, emotionally stable life where we can function at our best and lead productive lives? Taking care of what you eat and how you eat as well as getting plenty of exercise can go a long way toward overcoming many forms of addiction and depression.

The dietary recommendations in this article are consistent with nutritional approaches from a variety of professional disciplines. The combination of these three aspects comes from the book by Kathleen DesMaisons entitled 'Potatoes not Prozac.' These recommendations are not to be used for self-medication but rather in conjunction with a doctor's advice, nutritional support, therapy and/or 12 Step meetings.

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