

# Fuelling your Mental Health

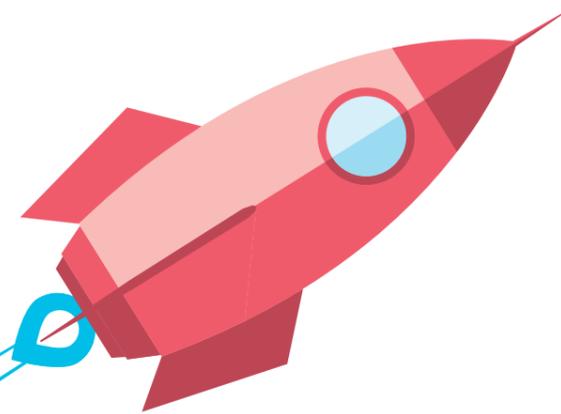
Your mood and stress levels are affected by both the type and amount of food you eat. Without enough of the right foods, it is harder to concentrate and think clearly. *Katherine Baqleh* takes us through the key nutrition principles that, when followed, can help optimise stress management.

**D**iets that focus on specific foods or food groups and exclude or severely restrict others are unsustainable in the long-term and put people at risk of nutrient deficiencies.

## Everyday Stress

Stress can be a good thing. It can motivate during times of approaching deadlines, and can give an added adrenalin rush required for ideas to blossom quickly. On the other hand, too little stress can hinder motivation, creativity and productivity, as well as increase boredom and restlessness. Finding a balance between healthy and unhealthy stress is important. Too much stress can lead to anxiety, exhaustion, loss of control, eventual burn out and an inability to effectively complete any task at hand. As such, to manage everyday stress, experts recommend a few techniques:

- Talk about it. Find someone that you can console in and who can give you a second perspective.
- Exercise and meditate for mindfulness on most days: by being involved in more leisure-time activities, particularly in nature-based areas surrounded by more greenery, you are giving your mind and body time to relax and rejuvenate.
- Think carefully about how you want to achieve work-life balance. Wishful thinking will remain a wish when your strategy is unclear.
- Spend more time strengthening your social health – surround yourself with friends and family.



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## Everyday Nutrition

The nutritional demand for every occupation and lifestyle varies. Stress affects our dietary habits and dietary habits can affect our stress levels. For optimal health, concentration and improved mood, follow these key nutrition principles:

Enjoy eating a variety of nutritious foods, including vegetables and legumes, fruit, grains (cereal foods), meat and alternatives, dairy and alternatives. Portion out your main meals so that at least half is composed of colourful vegetables and salad, and one quarter each for both grain foods and meat or alternatives. Every main meal should also include a source of healthy fats, such as avocado, olive oil, oily fish (examples include salmon, tuna, sardines) and unsalted nuts and seeds. Healthy fats are not only beneficial for heart and brain health, but will help to stabilise blood sugar levels and keep you feeling full for longer.

Cook at home more often and choose healthier cooking methods, such as stir-frying, steaming, baking, grilling, roasting, BBQ and microwaving. Meats should be lean with all visible fat trimmed off and the skin on chicken removed.

Eat regular meals: skipping meals due to a lack of time will keep you feeling exhausted, may prevent healthy and sustainable weight loss, and may directly affect your mood and hence interactions with others.

Keep well hydrated with plenty of water to increase alertness and productivity. To benefit your waistline, if you choose to drink alcohol, limit intake to no more than two standard drinks per night, with two to three alcohol free nights per week. Alcohol may be a short term stress relief, however it may contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety in the long term and make stress harder to deal with.

Treat foods and sugar-sweetened beverages such as soft drinks and juices should be limited to

special occasions and enjoyed in small volumes.

Look out for fad diet red flags, such as:

- One-size-fits-all diets
- Diets that promote an obsessive focus on particular foods or nutrients
- Diets that are based on significant restriction of food groups or fasting without medical reason
- Diets with exaggerated health claims including an anti-medical treatment focus
- Detoxification diets
- Magic-bullet solutions that do not include long-term lifestyle changes
- Diets based on conspiracy theories, including those against food industries
- Diets based on compulsory vitamin and mineral supplementation and complementary medicines such as colonic irrigation
- Recommendations to include non-food substances in the diet, such as charcoal.

Most of these diets prey on vulnerable individuals that have tried improving their health and lifestyles in the past with no success, so it is important to consult an Accredited Practising Dietitian for individualised advice and appropriate goals that suit your needs and your lifestyle. A healthy diet is the foundation of a healthy mind.

Whilst some workplace stress or stress at home is normal and often a result of increased demands and responsibilities, excessive stress can interfere with productivity and can impact physical, social and emotional health. The right balance of food and nutrition promotes optimal health and improves concentration and mood, making stress management easier.



## Katherine Baqleh

Katherine Baqleh is an Accredited Practising Dietitian and nutritionist and founder of Health Victory Nutrition Experts, a private practice and nutrition consultancy located in a number of clinics across Sydney. Katherine conducts private consultations, menu reviews and seminars and conferences in a number of community (such as schools, rehabilitation centres, mothers groups, aged care centres) and corporate settings. She is also actively involved with the media and has both contributed to and been cited in numerous print and online platforms. Her main passion lies with cardiovascular disease, diabetes and weight management. To find out more, visit [healthvictorynutrition.com.au](http://healthvictorynutrition.com.au) or Like “Health Victory Nutrition Experts” on Facebook.

The Dietitians Association of Australia recommends seeing an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) who can tailor an eating plan to benefit individual needs and assist community and corporate organisations develop healthier workplaces. To find an APD in your area, visit the DAA website [www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au) and look under ‘Find an Accredited Practising Dietitian’.