Well@Work Podcast
Episode 10: Eating to Promote Resilience

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast, Emily Smith from the Center on Trauma and Children discusses how healthy eating can increase your resilience at work and home.

Hi, my name is Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children, and I'm here to talk with you about eating to promote resilience. Many of us change our diets during stressful times. In fact, a 2014 survey from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard school of public health found stress had a major impact on our daily diet. Many of us seek comfort from foods high in sugar, fat, or refined carbohydrates during stressful times. These foods lead to a surge and crash cycle caused by spikes to our blood sugar and send stress hormones like adrenaline and epinephrine to very high levels. These changes increase our susceptibility to new stresses, both emotional and physical, by putting the body into an inflammatory state. Eating foods that aren't nutritious can also contribute to that inflammation. The result is that we feel sluggish, have an upset stomach, have trouble sleeping, and we may even gain weight. And with many triggers for daily stresses, we keep the cycle going. We feel stressed, so we eat less nutritious foods, which causes us to feel sluggish, and maybe gain weight, which stresses us out and the cycle begins again. By choosing foods that make our body feel good, we can beat the mid-shift sleepiness, keep energy levels high, and build resilience to daily stressors.

Many see the connection between food and mood, and suggest a nutrient-rich diet can help us manage stress and build resilience so that we can bounce back more quickly from those high stress days. I have a friend, Grace, who works in a busy emergency department. About two years ago she changed her eating patterns and found a healthy way to eat, giving her more energy during work and after her shifts. But then the hospital became increasingly busy as the COVID-19 response began and Grace lost her opportunity to take regular meal breaks. Add to that the meals and snacks sent by supporters daily and her regular eating pattern was completely lost. Grace felt she lost control and became more stressed as she struggled to return to her healthy habits. She made some small changes that helped her slowly move toward a state of health and resilience, she committed to eating one healthy meal a day and slowly returned to those healthy habits.

I would like to share some other tips for increasing your resilience to stress by making your body strong and fit. As healthcare workers are under the extreme conditions of a global pandemic, many regular habits are easy to lose. So, tip number one: get a routine. Experts recommend eating meals at regular intervals and staying mindful of portion size and how your body feels when you eat certain foods. Consider a food journal to help you track your choices and the impact they made on your mood. Remember that eating fuels the body and helps our body feel good. Make wise choices because you deserve to feel good!

My second tip is to boost resilience by choosing foods that are nutrient rich. Brightly colored fruits and vegetables are full of antioxidants and may help the body by delaying or preventing cellular damage and reduce inflammation. Foods like salmon and tuna, or flax and chia seeds are high in omega-3 fatty acids, clinically proven to reduce the body's response to inflammation, and they may help us

bounce back from stress more quickly. Choose whole grains like brown rice or quinoa more often than processed grains to keep blood sugar from spiking after a meal. Load up on legumes by snacking on hummus or opt for the black beans in your burrito.

Tip 3: give yourself a break. Build good dietary habits so that you have some flexibility on the days when you need it most. Focus on finding foods that make you feel your best and make those your comfort foods. Train yourself to respond to the good feelings that come from eating well over the long term, rather than the foods that give you a temporary sense of satisfaction. Consider everything that you eat and drink as fuel to power you through your day and when you feel most stressed you have those good habits to fall back on. Be kind to yourself, there will be days when there are not enough healthy options to choose from or you just can't stand the thought of another grain bowl, so you opt for a slice of pizza or two. Don't beat yourself up! Remember that your goal is to live a long and healthy life and eating is one component of that. Make the best choices that you can and remember everything in moderation, even moderation. For more information on how to stay resilient in stressful times, check out our website with more resources, programs, and tools. And remember to say well at work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.