



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 5: Healthy Eating to Promote Family Resilience

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. In this episode, Emily Smith discusses how building healthy eating habits can help build family resilience. And now, Emily Smith.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. I'm here to talk with you about how healthy eating can increase your family's resilience. Many of us change our diets during stressful times. 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. And recent research on eating habits during the COVID-19 pandemic show changes worldwide; many have gained weight from eating more highly processed foods, more sweets, and fewer fruits and vegetables. Foods high in sugar, fat, or refined carbohydrates lead to a surge and crash cycle caused by spikes to our blood sugar and sends 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 gain weight. Returning to our healthy diet and choosing foods that make our body feel good can help our families keep energy levels, high balance mood, 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.

While some were staying healthy at home during the pandemic, some of us found our regular mealtimes or healthy diets derailed. That happened to my friend Kay's family. They had a streak of almost 4,000 daily dinners, I know because they keep a tally on the fridge. But eventually the challenges and stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, and limited social contact took their toll and the family broke their streak. Kay admitted that she skipped meals and the kids often snacked all day, so dinner wasn't a family affair anymore. When Kay's dad came to stay with them in July, he made dinner and invited everyone to join him. It took a few days, but now Kay says they are on a streak of 94 dinners in a row. Returning to family dinner also helped the whole family return to their healthy habits, improving the family's health and resilience.

Here are some ways you can help your family develop the healthy habits you might have lost.

Tip one: get a routine. Kay's family routine meant dinner was at 6 pm every night. We know that children benefit from a meal time routine, research has found that it builds

family relationships, healthy eating habits, and leads to better mental health. But did you know that the adults at the table benefit, too? A 2018 study published in the journal *Preventive Medicine* found that adults who ate frequent family meals reported greater well-being, lower levels of stress and depressive symptoms, greater self-confidence, and stronger family functioning. Incorporating routine family dinners have also been shown to encourage healthy eating habits by discouraging between meals snacking and increasing the number of fruits and vegetables eaten daily.

Tip 2: choose nutrient-rich foods to boost resilience. Brightly colored fruits and vegetables are full of antioxidants and may help the body by delaying or preventing cellular damage and reducing inflammation. these foods may also help us support our immune system, helping us fight off everything from the common cold to COVID-19. Foods like salmon, tuna, and chia seeds are high in omega-3 fatty acids, clinically proven to reduce the body's response to inflammation which 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. Building good dietary habits takes time, focus on finding foods that make your family feel their best and make those your comfort foods. Model healthy eating habits to your family at frequent family meals, teach them that everything that they eat and drink is fuel to power them through their day. If they see that you fall back on those healthy habits even at your most stressed, they will too. Be kind to yourself, there will be days when you just can't stand the thought of cooking another meal so you order pizza for dinner. 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.

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, home, and school.