

The Benefits Of Sharing A Meal With Someone

We focus a great deal on what to eat, when to eat and how to eat. But do you know that eating with someone is just as important as what you eat? In our fast-paced, hectic world, families are finding fewer moments for meals together and they are missing out on an opportunity to feed the body both physically and emotionally.

Nutrients are just as important as the act of sharing a meal with family and friends provided the sharing is a congenial and supportive one. Arguments and conflicts at the dinner table create more than digestive problems. Stress on the body incubates problems that eventually shut down the immune system and this can lead to a whole host of health issues. Having a social meal with others is beneficial if it a) is an opportunity for relaxation; b) becomes an occasion for conversation; c) enhances the sense of sharing and bonding.

There are reasons why companionship bolsters the immune system. Studies have shown that loneliness is a risk factor for poor nutrition. Single people, especially seniors who live alone, tend to skip meals or eat poorly. Studies have shown that those who score highest on the "loneliness index" tend to consume meals that are lower in calories and calcium. For up to two years after the death of a spouse, widows and widowers tend to eat significantly poorer diets.

In fact, companionship is one of the two factors that emerged most prominently in a study on longevity. Sixteen researchers from different fields studied over a thousand healthy seniors. What they identified as two outstanding features in the lifestyles of these healthy seniors are a) physical activity throughout their lives and b) maintenance of social and intellectual connectedness. In fact, these two factors were even more significant than dietary patterns.

It has long been known that a happy marriage is a recipe for health. In a study of more than 4000 seniors age 55 or older, both men and women who were living with spouses consumed a better diet than those living alone. There is no doubt that emotional bonding and meaningful connectedness have a direct influence on health. These connections are often the source of positive feelings and a sense that all is right, despite challenging circumstances. In a 15 year study of close to 700 nuns who lived and taught in the United States, researchers found that those who most often used words such as "joy" or "happy" in their letters and diaries lived as much as ten years longer than those who expressed fewer positive emotions.

Positive feelings that come from being part of a partnership or group can act as a biological shield against stress. A Dutch study of 1000 people aged 65 to 85 found that 10 years later, the optimists in the group had a 55% lower risk of death from all causes and a 23% lower risk of heart disease.

What do all these studies mean for us? It does not hurt to make meals a happy sharing time. There were years when our boys were involved with music lessons, baseball, chess clubs and tennis and we could not find time to have meals together. But we made sure that Friday nights and Sunday dinners were sacrosanct and we kept those times as family dates.

Setting aside at least one day a week for family meals can do more than feed the body. For those who live alone, consider inviting a friend or neighbor over or joining a social group that meets for dinner twice a month. Even nurturing your sense of being connected with the spiritual universe is a strong antidote against stress. The sense that we are all interconnected is part of our emotional system and needs to be fed just as much as our bodies.

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About the Author

A runner for 27 years, retired schoolteacher and writer, Mary is helping people reclaim their bodies through nutrition, exercise, positive vision and creative engagement. You can visit her at <http://www.GreatBodyat50.com> or learn how she lost her weight at <http://www.greatbodyproteinpower.com>