

Chicken soup for the soul: Comfort food fights loneliness

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Mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, meatloaf...they may be bad for your arteries, but according to an upcoming study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, they're good for your heart and emotions. The study focuses on "comfort food" and how it makes people feel.

"For me personally, food has always been big in my family," says Jordan Troisi, a graduate student at the University of Buffalo. The study came out of the research program of his co-author Shira Gabriel, which has looked at social surrogates—things that make people feel like they belong. Some people counteract loneliness by bonding with their favorite TV show, building virtual relationships with a celebrity or a movie character, or looking at pictures and mementos of loved ones. Troisi and Gabriel wondered if food could have the same effect by making people think of their nearest and dearest.

In one experiment, the researchers tried to make some participants feel lonely by having them write for six minutes about a fight with someone close to them. Others were given an emotionally neutral writing assignment. Then, some people in each group wrote about the experience of eating a comfort food and others wrote about eating a new food. Finally, the researchers used a questionnaire to measure loneliness.

Writing about a fight with a close person made people feel lonely. But people who were generally secure in their relationships—something that was assessed before the experiment—were able to rescue themselves

from loneliness by writing about a comfort food. "What we found is that people have the capacity to create a comfort food for themselves by having it be something that's consistently associated with their close others," says Troisi. In their essays on comfort food, many people wrote about the experience of eating food with family and friends.

In another experiment, eating chicken soup in the lab made people think more about relationships if they considered chicken soup to be a comfort food. They'd been asked about that a long time before the experiment, along with a lot of other questions, so they wouldn't remember it.

"Throughout everyone's daily lives they experience stress, often associated with our connections with others," Troisi says. "This is sort of a ready-made easy resource for remedying a sense of [loneliness](#). It seems like it almost doesn't take very much to regain those feelings and feel like we're connected with others."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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