

Mood and food: The better your mood, the better you eat (w/ Video)

February 25 2014



This is an illustration of Food & Mood. New study reveals that thinking positively can make you eat healthier! Credit: Daniel Miller

Previous research has found that emotions affect eating, and that negative moods and positive moods may actually lead to preferences for different kinds of foods. For example, if given the choice between grapes or chocolate candies, someone in a good mood may choose the former while someone in a bad mood may choose the latter. The research reported in this article looks at the "why:" Why, when someone

is in a bad mood, will they choose to eat junk food and why, when someone is in a good mood, will they make healthier food choices?

To get at the "why," we married the theories of affective regulation (how people react to their moods and emotions) and temporal construal (the perspective of time) to explain [food choice](#). Conceptually, when people feel uncomfortable or are in a bad mood, they know something is wrong and focus on what is close in the here and now. We hypothesized and demonstrated that this kind of thinking gets us to focus on the sensory qualities of our foods – not things that are more abstract like how nutritious the food is. Analogously, we hypothesized and demonstrated that when people are in a good mood, things seem okay and they can take a big picture perspective. This kind of thinking allows people to focus on the more abstract aspects of food, including how healthy it is.

We studied these hypotheses in four laboratory experiments. In the first study, we investigated the effect of a [positive mood](#) on evaluations of indulgent and health foods by examining 211 individuals from local parent-teacher associations (PTAs). Next we studied whether individuals in a negative mood – who had read a sad story— evaluated indulgent foods more positively and whether those who were in a [positive mood](#) indicated a desire to remain healthy into their old age. 315 undergraduate students participated in this study. In the third study, involving 151 undergraduate students, we altered participants' focus on the present versus the future along with their mood and measured how much healthy and indulgent food they consumed. To get more direct insight into the underlying process, the fourth study, involving 110 university students, focused specifically on the thoughts related to [food choice](#) and differentiated concrete taste versus nutrition benefits.

Ultimately, the findings of all the studies combined demonstrated that individuals select healthy or indulgent foods depending on whether they are in a good or a bad mood, respectively. The findings also indicate the

integral aspect of the time horizon, showing that individuals in positive moods who make healthier [food](#) choices are often thinking more about future health benefits than those in negative moods, who focus more on the immediate taste and sensory experience. Finally we found that individuals in negative moods will still make [food](#) choices influenced by temporal construal which suggests that trying to focus on something other than the present can reduce the consumption of indulgent foods.

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

Citation: Mood and food: The better your mood, the better you eat (w/ Video) (2014, February 25) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-mood-food-video.html>

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