

Proper nutrition and exercise: The uncanny super-weapons for academic excellence

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AMRIN TASNIM RAFA

Allow me to tell you who the villains in your life are. It's the people who tell you excessive sugar is "brain food," playing sports or working out is a waste of time in exam season, and the worst of all: the fast food advertisers who tell you to order in and "fuel up" for an all-nighter the night before exams.

All of these things are very, very bad for your brain function and mental health, two things you

need to be functioning optimally for those life-altering admission tests.

A huge struggle during the admission season is to keep our nerves and mental well-being in check. If we are feeling hopeless, depressed, anxious, and overwhelmed considering the magnitude of competition that is to befall us, it is

going to negatively impact our preparation. The last thing we should do is to put additional stress on our nervous system with overly greasy, sugary, and processed foods.

We have a limited amount of mental energy at any point in time. We could keep stress and sadness at bay by making healthy food choices, which could allow us to apportion a larger chunk of our mental energy for our preparation, and save some to be able to recall and manipulate information

during the exam.

There is a whole new academic field called nutritional psychiatry growing to examine this phenomenon. It is still in the works, but what we know so far is pretty promising. You may be wondering how what we eat has anything to do with our brain or mind, as our brains just need energy to function, and it shouldn't matter where it comes from. However, there is a direct stomach-to-brain connection, thus, what you eat affects your brain so much so that many nowadays call the gut "the second brain."

"The gut has a direct line of communication to the brain via the vagus nerve, which runs from the brainstem to the large intestine. Mood-regulating neurotransmitters, including feel-good serotonin, are made in the gut. And once the gut pumps them out, the vagus nerve acts like a two-way text messaging system that allows neurotransmitters to go back and forth, up and down, all the time," explained Dr Uma Naidoo, director of nutritional and lifestyle psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital and author of *Calm Your Mind with Food*, to *The Times*.

The food you eat needs to be broken down to release the nutrients and minerals in it to make these happy hormones. This is done by the trillions of bacteria that live in your stomach. Healthy foods nurture these bacteria, whilst consistently eating unhealthy, overly processed foods kills them. Thus, the nutrients and minerals in the food you eat are no longer efficiently broken down. Your body faces a lot of trouble dealing with the foods entering your system, you feel sadder, more stressed, face digestive issues causing discomfort, acid reflux, and brain fog. Thus, a lot of your available energy is used up to merely digest your meals, and little is left for you to study, remember what you studied, and ace those exams.

Thus, what should you be eating? Firstly, a famous brain-friendly nutrient is omega-3 fatty acids. Its fame is justified, ingestion of omega-3 fatty acids increases learning, memory, cognitive well-being, and blood flow in the brain. The biggest source of it is fish. Luckily, we live in the land of rivers. *Pangash*, *Tilapia*, *Ruhi*, *Mola*, and *Ilish* are just some of the many, many options of fish you could choose from to eat a few times a week to fill your omega-3 requirements. Fish also has protein (so does eggs, meat, legumes, and milk), which helps hold sustained levels of concentration during study sessions or exams.

Omega-3 is also available in nuts, seeds, and mustard oil. Thus, making the switch from soybean oil to *shorishar tel* to cook your food is a very brain and gut-friendly choice you could ask your family to make.

Then, there are vegetables and leafy greens; such as cauliflower, cabbage, and *shaak*; fermented foods such as sour yoghurt; spices such as cinnamon, turmeric, cayenne pepper, black pepper; and beans and lentils, such as the various locally available *daals*.

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I did extensive research on foreign sites to present you with the best foods you could eat to boost your brainpower in these trying times and came to the conclusion that the answer lies in the nice homemade meals of *bhaat*, *maach*, *daal*, and *shaak* that our moms have been pestering us to eat all along.

Alongside good food, regular, short bouts of exercise also go a long way toward making those study sessions count. Any type of physical activity that raises your heartbeat causes blood to flow to the brain. This in turn fires up your neurons and promotes cell growth, particularly in the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain that holds short-term memories and transfers them to long-term storage. Exercise also raises the levels of feel-good chemicals known as endorphins. An abundance of studies suggest that as little as 20 minutes of exercise before studying can improve your concentration, motivation, and retention of information.

According to a study done by Dartmouth College, exercising right before performing a mental task significantly boosts your performance. Thus, on the morning of the exam, taking a small step such as walking to your exam hall may help you perform to your full potential during the exam.

I know you got this. In the little time left, try to avoid last-minute cramming as much as possible, what you know so far is plenty. Now is the time to rest up and treat your body well, to be able to show up to the exam hall energised, refreshed, and relaxed, and fully show them what you got.

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ILLUSTRATION: AMRIN TASNIM RAFA

Enjoying a girls' day out on a budget

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When it comes to enjoying a day out with all your favourite girls, there is no need to break the bank. After all, when you are surrounded by your closest gal-pals, every moment can be enjoyable.

Here's how you can host an unforgettable day for your closest girls without breaking the bank.

A cottagecore picnic

If you and your friends are enamoured by nature, consider organising a dreamy spring-themed picnic at Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed Park, Ramna Park, or even your own rooftop. Gather your best girl pals, pack some homemade treats, blankets, and board games, and head to your favourite scenic location. Enjoy some quality time under the sky, maybe carry a polaroid camera, and indulge in a memorable budget-friendly outing.

Street food day out

For a more adventurous outing, indulge in a day out dedicated to the street food found near places like Dhanmondi Lake or Salimullah Road in Mohammadpur. Explore the vibrant culinary scene around the areas without burning a hole in your pocket. From mouthwatering *fuchka* to savoury *chaap* and *luchi*, the options are endless. Take delight in the local flavours while strolling around or taking rickshaw rides around the streets in colourful sarees, living out your main-character vibes to the fullest.

A literary soiree at Ekushey Boi Mela

If you and your friends are huge bibliophiles, a visit to the Ekushey Boi Mela is a must. Amidst the bustling stalls,

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you can immerse yourselves in the discovery of hidden treasures, engage in lively discussions, and swap stories about beloved characters. Gifting each other books is one of the most intimate forms of expressing yourselves; exchanging books ranging from timeless classics to modern masterpieces may just be the perfect expression of appreciation for your loved ones.

A self-care day-in

If everything else feels overwhelming, wrap yourselves up with an intimate at-home pampering session, complete with comfort snacks and a movie night.

Create a DIY spa ambience with scented candles, soothing music, and luxurious face masks. Indulge in self-care rituals, swap beauty tips, and unwind with your favourite chick flicks. The goal is to relax, recharge, and celebrate the comfort of being around your favourite people.

Enjoying a girls' day out is more than just a trend; it's a heartfelt celebration of female camaraderie and solidarity.

The best

part is that you can spend quality time without overspending, with just a little thought and designing the perfect day for your girls to your liking.

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