

Grad School Blues and Helpful Foods

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Summary: Many graduate students will likely experience anxiety, stress, and/or depression while writing their graduate thesis. A pilot study was conducted with 32 thesis writers with whom the author as worked. Three in four (75%) reported problems with anxiety and stress respectively, while 47% experienced difficulties with depression. Foods rich in Magnesium, Vitamins B and D, Omega oils and Tryptophan can be used as part of the toolbox for managing emotional health during the thesis or dissertation experience.



Many students attempting to write a graduate thesis will likely experience some form of anxiety, stress or depression. The Chronicle of Education published a paper entitled “Grad-School Blues” (Piper Fog, 2009)¹ in which the author describes graduate school as an “incubator for anxiety and depression” caused by social isolation, financial burdens, lack of structure, and the pressure to produce groundbreaking work. In a recent poll conducted among UC Berkeley graduate students, 67 percent reported feeling hopeless at some point during their degree program. These figures clearly suggest that graduate school is not a particularly healthy place for the majority of students. It is also

sobering to realize that over half of all PhD candidates will never complete their dissertation, while those who do finish take an average of eight years from start to finish.

Difficulties writing a thesis or dissertation are almost always accompanied by an inability to manage anxiety, depression and stress levels. Having experienced the almost unbearable perils of writing my own doctoral dissertation, I clearly recall the many seemingly odd strategies I used to survive what seemed like the insurmountable. One such strategy was eating a raw spinach salad every day. Although I earned a doctorate degree in public health, several years would pass before learning about the many benefits of spinach on mood.

Mounting research has made the connection between mental health and a variety of vitamins and nutrients. Although nutrition alone cannot “cure” depression or anxiety, a diet rich in mood-boosting nutrients can help. More than iron, spinach is loaded with manganese and magnesium which help to improve brain function and control emotional imbalances such as depression,

¹ Piper Fogg, Grad-School Blues, *The Chronicle Of Higher Education*, The Chronicle Review, February 20, 2009

irritability and stress. It is also a good source of tryptophan, an amino acid that when converted into serotonin (a neurotransmitter) is associated with positive mood.

In a small study I conducted with 32 graduate students who I have advised, 75% reported problems with anxiety and stress respectively while 47% experienced difficulties with depression. In fact, the average level of stress as measured by the DSS Scale was estimated at (M=18.3, SD= 9.4), nearly twice as high as the average stress experienced by the non-student populations of the same age at (M=9.3, SD= 8.0).² Nearly 2 in 3 (62%) reported eating foods they thought improved mood, however none of the respondents neither reported the actual foods consumed nor the frequency of consumption.

Generally, foods that are fried, processed, or contain artificial colors, preservatives and additives should be avoided at all cost. Heavy consumption of caffeine for stimulation and alcohol for sedation is also not wise. Foods packed with Vitamin B-12, Vitamin D, Omega Oils, Magnesium and Tryptophan should be placed on top of shopping list. Considered what you are eating as part of your toolbox for surviving stress related to your thesis or dissertation experience!

Foods that can HELP

Bananas: Rich in **magnesium and tryptophan**, bananas can reduce anxiety, stress, and improve sleep by increasing serotonin levels. Natural sugars and potassium also help the body's circulatory system deliver oxygen to the brain.



Blueberries: The fruit has age defying antioxidants linked with boosts in memory. The anti ageing function is so effective for depression.



Spinach and other dark leafy greens such as chard and kale, are high in **follic acid**, a nutrient found to help reduce depression and fatigue. These greens are also abundant in antioxidants which protect brain cells from mood and energy drain. Leafy greens are also rich in **magnesium** which aids sleep and helps manage stress.

Salmon: Full of **Omega-3** fats and vitamin **B12**. Several studies suggest the nutrients in Salmon and other oily fishes like mackerel, trout, tuna and sardines support production of the neurotransmitter serotonin which helps regulate mood, alleviate mild depression, and improve memory.



Turkey: Turkey is high in tryptophan which helps the mind relax, melatonin, which helps the body relax, and tyrosine which helps cope with stress, improves motivation and reaction time

² The short-form version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21): Construct validity and Normative data in a large non-clinical sample, Julie D. Henry¹ and John R. Crawford, School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Australia School of Psychology, King's College, University of Aberdeen, UK. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2005), 44, 227–239

Eggs: Eggs contain high protein which slows absorption of carbohydrates in the blood, and help keep you feeling alert and productive for longer periods of time. The egg yolk is rich in **vitamins D and B12** which help enhance memory and levels of serotonin.



Dark Chocolate: This is an indulgence with benefits. Antioxidants from chocolate with at least 70 percent cocoa can provide a natural brain booster. Dark chocolate increases levels of phenylalanine, which is believed to enhance production of dopamine in the brain. Beware - most milk chocolate candy bars do NOT contain 70% cocoa!

Nuts: The best nuts for depression include Brazil, Hazel and Cashew Nuts. The best nuts for stress are Almonds, Pecans and Brazil Nuts. For chronic fatigue try Brazil, Pecans and Walnuts. Almonds, sesame, sunflower, and pumpkin seeds are also beneficial.



Trade white for brown products can immediately elevate your energy levels and boost your mood. For example, try brown rice, raw brown sugar, whole grain bread and whole grain pasta.

Finally, it's imperative to believe that the stressors of writing a graduate thesis will come to an end. In the meanwhile, be smart and eat smart.

Author Biography: Dr. Liza Molina is a graduate of Cornell University and holds the MPH and ScD degrees in Behavioral Epidemiology from Harvard School of Public Health. She has taught at several colleges including Tufts Medical School and is the former director of the Integrative Health Department at Northern New Mexico College. She currently serves as an external thesis advisor to doctoral degree candidates nation-wide.