How Mindful Eating Can Supercharge Dynamic Thinking

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Entrepreneurs are ever in search of ways of reducing the number of decisions they make, in part to save brain space for the "big stuff." Some thought leaders pare down their wardrobe to a standard look (à la Steve Jobs), for example, while others optimize (and not necessarily healthfully) by eating the same thing every day.

A novel take on this efficiency principle came in the form of a Bay Area company that marketed a product called Soylent in 2013. Tired of wasting money and energy on food, one of its founders, Rob Rhinehart, invented a "super sludge" intended to supply the body's essential nutrients — a mixture of maltodextrin, amino acids, fiber, olive oil and other ingredients. According to a journalist from *Wired*, that original formula looked like pancake mix and tasted like chalk.

After reading that article, I could grasp why the concept could be regarded as potentially dystopian (its name inspiration, after all, a 1973 movie in which humans are forced to consume reprocessed human corpses), but Soylent is still going strong. The company, now based in Los Angeles, continues to grow and innovate (now offering tastier options like chocolate and strawberry). Its success supports the notion that busy professionals will spring for convenience when it comes to their appetites.

I'm a big proponent of simplifying as many tasks as possible. And while no stranger to the occasional lunch-replacement

smoothie, I’m not sold on outsourcing meals entirely. Luckily, for food-loving entrepreneurs, there are creative benefits to thinking more about and diversifying what and how we eat.

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Ingredients for creativity

As something of a counterpoint to Rhinehart-esque food practicality, a 2021 literature review written by a team of researchers and academicians offered evidence to suggest that people with a view of food as simply fuel miss out on the creative benefits of eating more mindfully. Engaging multiple senses during a meal (taste, smell, tactile qualities, etc.), they wrote, can boost creative thinking in various ways, and offered the experience of wine as an example: Those who enjoy it think about taste, smell, color and mouthfeel, and might come up with descriptive metaphors for each. Creative wheels start turning. It follows that engaging with food by paying attention to analogous qualities (and any metaphorical associations) may likewise boost inventiveness.

The authors also made a case for eating foods that result in genuine enjoyment. Creativity is enhanced, they suggest, when people *feel happy*, including being relaxed or moderately excited. So, to borrow a phrase from author Marie Kondo, consider foods that spark joy when you eat them. Maybe it’s your partner’s famous lasagna (which gets even better the next day as leftovers), a burrito from a favorite food truck or a big, colorful salad.

Eating something delicious and taking the time to appreciate it can prime the brain for exploration. Better yet, certain foods can actually boost the brain’s power.

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Nutrition that sharpens the mind

The first rule of thumb for choosing meals that give rise to sharp thinking is to *think about them beforehand*: to make choices *before* you're ravenous. Various studies make plain that humans are far better at resisting salt, calories and fat in the future than in the present.

Glucose, a type of sugar, is the main energy source for the body's cells, and it's worth keeping in mind that brain cells use the most energy. But when it comes to glucose, not all foods are created equal: Some release theirs quickly, leading to a sudden spike in energy (and an equally fast plummet). Members of this "simple carbohydrates" family include pizza, pasta, bread and sugary drinks. Others, termed "slow carb foods," release glucose gradually, among them starchy vegetables (sweet potato, squashes, beets), whole grains, beans and legumes.

Other foods are linked with memory and cognition. Research published in a 2014 edition of the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* revealed that the amino acid tyrosine (the precursor of the "feel good" hormone, dopamine) enhances cognitive performance, particularly in short-term stressful or cognitively demanding situations. So, load up on seaweed, bananas and almonds. Other research has found that the plant-based omega-3 fat, alpha-linolenic acid, which is abundant in walnuts and flaxseed, likewise improves memory and cognition, as do the antioxidants in berries. Foods high in choline and folate, like eggs, are linked to improved cognitive performance and memory. A 2014 study published in the *British Journal for Health Psychiatry* found that young adults who ate more fruits and vegetables reported boosted well-being, more intense feelings of curiosity and greater creativity.

The bad news is that, in the real world, we don't always have time to prepare balanced meals, but it's actually a cinch to

supplement whatever you're eating with nutrient-packed options. If I have pizza for lunch, for example, I'll add a handful of almonds for a snack. If there's a bagel for breakfast, some olive oil seaweed chips will be added later in the morning. The goal is balance. I also automate snack selection by programming delivery orders ahead of time. That way, when my stomach rumbles, I reach for brain-boosting dried fruits rather than a bag of M&Ms.

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As CEO of Jotform, and the author of a book on automation, I understand the inclination to optimize as many tasks as possible. If I want to carve out time for important creative work (aka "the big stuff") and reserve more hours to spend with my family, *something* has to hit the chopping block. But I also believe in the tangible and intangible benefits of being thoughtful about what I eat — I would rather invest time in identifying and automating busywork than skipping a lunch with colleagues or friends. If you are what you eat, after all, then wouldn't it simply be wise to make that food high-quality, enjoyable and creative?

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