



Going Plant-Based for Your Mental Health? Here Are Some Things to Keep in Mind

By Melissa Mondala, MD
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Major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for 15- to 44-year-olds and is the largest contributor to disability worldwide.

Personally, I've struggled seeing my loved ones with severe depression and tragically lost one young family member to suicide. As a physician, I also see the effects of depression in my professional community. Thirty percent of resident physicians experience depression or depressive symptoms, according to the New York American College of Emergency Physicians.

[Diet can play a role in mood changes](#). Sugary processed foods are neurotoxic to the brain and [research shows](#) how they can worsen mood, anxiety, and ability to concentrate. Animal-based products contain a pro-inflammatory compound, arachidonic acid, that can “[adversely impact mental health via a cascade of neuroinflammation](#),” leading to worse depression and increased risk of suicide.

For these reasons and more, I recommend my patients minimize animal-based foods and sugar-rich, highly processed foods, and instead opt for whole plant foods. Eating a healthy plant-based diet not only decreases your risk for depression, anxiety, and brain fog but it can decrease your risk for [diabetes](#), [high blood pressure](#), [high cholesterol](#), [heart disease](#), stroke, gastrointestinal disease, autoimmune disease, and other chronic diseases. Whole, intact plant foods are attached to fiber, vitamins, and minerals, while animal-based products are deficient in these mood-regulating nutrients.

5 P's to Improve Mental Health on a Plant-Based Diet

If you're looking to improve your mental health with a [plant-based diet](#), here are some things to keep in mind.

Process

When you're ready to go plant-based, embrace the process of learning a new way of eating (both at home and when [choosing prepared meals from restaurants](#)). You can challenge yourself to start with Meatless Mondays or making more homemade meals centered on

whole plant foods. The journey can be healing rather than overwhelming. Accept the ups and downs as part of a forward-moving path. Remember, there will be pleasant, positive surprises and your future self will thank you.

Planning

If you know that you will be in an environment that lacks plant-based foods, either at work, a social gathering, or [on the road](#), prepare snacks and meals ahead of time. Do your research and check out the local grocery stores and vegan-friendly eateries. If you'll be attending an important meeting with limited options, fill your stomach with fiber-rich foods at home; these will help you feel full longer. Try to set specific and realistic goals. Track your goals. Be proud of your progress.

If you know your weaknesses are dairy-packed desserts, prepare a sweet, healthy treat such as [nice cream](#) to have ready to go in your freezer.

Patience

Be patient with yourself when transitioning to a plant-based diet. It is not easy to rewire your brain after decades of negative habits. It's natural to crave unhealthy foods, [especially cheese](#). Cravings are part of the withdrawal process since your brain has become dependent on these unhealthy substances. You can learn to substitute with hydration (aim to drink 2 to 3 liters of water per day) or with a nature walk that can also elevate your mood hormones. And if you do slip up, don't beat yourself up.

Purpose

It is important to identify your motivation for living, whether it's for the sake of building meaningful memories with loved ones, helping others, traveling and completing your bucket list, or something else. Your purpose is your guiding light. It will drive you forward, aligning you with your long-term goals, encouraging you to grow, learn, and stay hopeful. It will make it easier for you to nourish healthy habits.

(continued)

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Passing it On

Once you [build new healthy habits](#), you have the potential to pass them on to your family members. Parents, grandparents, children, people of all ages—anyone you know could benefit from your journey. Don't be afraid to share your health transformation story to your social sphere. Share your plant-based dishes for a tasting opportunity. You may find more individuals than expected who are interested in eating more plant-based. Don't be surprised if your friends and family start to ask you for recipe suggestions (which is a big confidence boost). From my experience, the person who seems like your biggest critic—someone who keeps asking you why you're doing this, what you can eat, etc.—may actually be the one contemplating the diet the most. By sharing your plant-based lifestyle with others, you're helping pave the way for healthier generations and a more sustainable environment.

Get Help

If you're currently struggling with depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation, please know that you are not alone and that asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of strength. You can call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-213-8255 anytime and visit the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) for more resources.