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Eating Through Trauma

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Abstract

Ever skipped a meal because you didn't feel hungry? This is likely because the body was not in a state of rest and digest. When our bodies are overloaded with cortisol (stress hormones), and adrenaline we are not able to effectively digest food, leaving us in a heightened state that is deeply disruptive to the nervous system.

Avoiding situations where you will be eating or skipping meals altogether is a simple protection mechanism that the body uses in the event it needs to fight or flight. When the body has been conditioned to be hypervigilant in the event of a perceived threat it will naturally bypass other needs to remain safe.

The downfall of this protection mechanism is that it disrupts blood sugar which increases stress hormones, allowing the cycle to continue. Using the Eating Through Trauma guide you can begin to soothe the nervous system and eat gentle foods that can support you when navigating stressful situations. The goal here is simple consistent practices to create safety for the body and allow you to access a path to self-regulation.

Keywords: Mental Health, Coping Mechanisms, Self Empowerment, Nutrition, Trauma

Eating Through Trauma

As part of my Capstone Project for Boise State, I created a mental health resource called Eating Through Trauma. This resource focuses on providing tools and information that supports individuals in nourishing their bodies when their nervous system is in a state of fight or flight and they cannot access the body's natural rest and digest state.

I approached this project by creating a PDF guide that contained recipes, tools, tips, and inspiration to support individuals in eating through trauma. This project was built to answer the statement: *How might I provide a nutritional resource guide to support people battling anxiety, high levels of stress, going through grief, or dealing with traumatic life transitions?*

There are a variety of beliefs out there about best practices when it comes to mental health, some swear by pharmacological methods, others believe in counseling and positivity. Professionals may argue that the nervous system is in the gut and that hormones and mineral depletion are key players in how someone handles stress or trauma. All of these have a place and are true, but can be overwhelming to explore when suffering from symptoms of trauma, grief, and stressful life changes.

Additionally, expert providers, name-brand medications, and quality mental health professionals can be inaccessible to some populations. This resource acts as a bridge and bandaid to individuals struggling with the aforementioned challenges and symptoms. It allows readers to access tools available at their grocery stores and around their homes.

The current information available is fragmented and is not found in a centralized location. People that are battling symptoms that accompany trauma are left to Google what they are going through with the hope of finding relief, however, what they usually find is information overload.

The Eating Through Trauma guide is innovative in the sense that it will be digestible, applicable information that is provided in a relational way. The idea behind my concept is that this information is tribal knowledge that should be readily accessible and regularly known. Mental health is stigmatized and so are the coping skills that accompany healing.

As I am working on creating my guide I am using both personal and external experience to develop a tool that is adaptable to anyone in stressful/traumatic situations. I am demonstrating emotional intelligence by taking something that is very personal to me and evaluating it in a capacity that will support others. I am able to language the experiences that the body undergoes when in fight or flight without emotion. I am aware that I am not alone in my experiences and that there is a benefit to researching the nervous system and the impact of nutrition, hydration, and sleep.

When I think of the audience that this guide is for I envision people that are looking to do the best they can without needing to spend tons of time and money finding answers. I envision this guide as a gateway to personal responsibility for your health and nervous system. There is the possibility that my end reader is in a fragile, dysregulated state of mind. My hope is that this is a tool versus a destination. I believe this resource will attract individuals of all levels of emotional intelligence and potentially uncover

ways in which they can grow further in empowering themselves in becoming more emotionally explorative.

The research done and compiled for this project is valuable in the sense that it provides direction and accessible resources to the reader. The guide recommends specific practices, and habits while providing information on how these resources support the nervous system.

The bulk of my project is built on a creative framework. I am taking symptoms of mental health and offering a supportive solution through the use of mindful practices, food, and nutrition. My approach disseminates an abundance of information into actionable steps with photos and literature that can be easily applied to the reader's current situation. My concept is considered a creative approach to mental health as the preferred methods of treatment tend to lie in medication and talk therapy.

This guide is a one-stop shop for basic information regarding food and nutrition when the body is in a state of fight or flight. It helps the reader to feel a sense of normalcy in their situation and gain simple information to empower themselves to begin supporting the nervous system with food, tea, and simple breath, movement, and sleep exercises to create a robust self-care regime.

My project process has embodied research on the needs of the nervous system to navigate stress. As I have culled through peer-reviewed articles and other publishings there seems to be a lack of consensus on the best path to manage stress. I have realized that this lack of uniform approach is because the needs of each individual are not one size fits all. If we are to truly impact others and offer solutions we have to provide the

knowledge needed for a person to make their own informed decisions. This guide provides enough information to support the reader in recognizing base-level tools, resources, and information that they can use to support their nervous system through times of stress and change.

I would consider my solution more innovative than other approaches in the sense that it marries simple foods in conjunction with attainable practices to manage stressful situations. Traditional solutions consider one or the other when there is a needed relationship between all.

An approach to this solution that could have enhanced innovation would be the addition of expert opinions, vlogs, and incorporation of recipes from the community that is used to nourish families during stressful times. In my solution, I wanted to incorporate a mood of tribal knowledge about managing mental health that felt like you were sitting with a beloved family member and receiving sacred information. Conducting deeper primary research could have added to this innovative approach and created an insightful narrative.

After submitting my final project to stakeholders I received a variety of feedback from them on what they wished to see more of and the overall functionality of the guide. Although the guide wasn't as impactful as I had hoped I anticipated that it will be well received by viewers. The first stakeholder I sent this project to was a licensed counselor, she shared, "This is a great tool for community leaders and organizations serving heavy trauma populations. It has simple and effective information that anyone with a basic cooking skill set and basic groceries could execute. I think the only thing this resource is

missing is the explanation of who/what trauma is, because some may need this but not identify with the word "trauma." I also think there could be a bit more of an explanation of the relation of hormones (in general, even the good ones) and what we eat regarding these actions/emotions that someone may be having. Taking that concept to a deeper level would really help someone understand the importance of eating in ways that support their bodies and would be more likely to execute these recipes and tips for greater success." I struggled to go in-depth into the biological explanations of what contributes to mental health issues as I do not have the credentials to appropriately do that.

The second stakeholder I shared my project with was a functional medicine doctor, she shared. "I love how the introduction goes into the science behind being in a stressed-out state and how that impacts digestion. I would consider adding something about the importance of chewing your food well because when the body is stressed, you don't produce adequate enzymes to break your food down so it becomes even more important to mechanically break your food down as much as possible. The pictures are very nice and the cookbook flows well."

This project was successful for my stakeholders in the sense that it provided a PDF guide with digestible information that they could provide to clients. I chose to make a print deliverable because it could be added to in the future as I complete university and dive deeper into my passion for supporting mental health.

Through this project, I learned that writing a resource guide is a lot more work than anticipated and that it is vital that you have your target audience's best interest in mind. If I could go back, I would collect more primary research and tailor my deliverable

further. In this project, I acquired the ability to leverage graphic art with information in a tangible way, and I look forward to honing this skill further outside of college.

My approach to this project was a PDF resource guide to support individuals experiencing trauma or heightened states of stress. I wish I would have thought to add videos to the document and external links and resources to support the audience in conducting their own research.

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