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**HEALTH & SAFETY
NEWSLETTER**

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OCTOBER 2021

3 ways food affects your mood

Researchers who study the link between diet and your brain say changing what you eat can change how you feel.

Much of the pioneering work has come from Australia's Professor Felice Jacka, director of the Food and Mood Centre and author of *Brainchanger: the Good Mental Health Diet*.

Her team's research found that swapping a diet high in refined and processed foods for one with plenty of wholegrains, vegetables and fish reduced levels of moderate to severe depression over 12 weeks.

How does a change in diet do this? Here are three important ways:

1. Lower inflammation.

We know that inflammation is connected to cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Studies show raised inflammation is also linked to an increased risk of depression, says Professor Jacka.

A typical Western diet – one high in refined and processed foods and low in

fruit, vegetables and healthy fats such as olive oil – is one of the key contributors to inflammation. By contrast, people who eat an anti-inflammatory diet, rich in wholegrains, fruit and vegetables, are about 30 per cent less likely to develop depression.

2. Richer brain fertiliser.

There's a part of the brain called the hippocampus that's critical to our ability to learn and remember as well as regulate our emotions. People with depression often have a smaller hippocampus, but it doesn't need to stay this way.

Professor Jacka describes how a protein called BDNF (brain derived neurotrophic factor) acts like a fertilizer for brain cells, helping to protect existing ones and grow new ones. "Research is discovering that there are things we can do ourselves to help boost production of BDNF," she explains.

"Building more muscle with exercise is one and a healthier diet is another."

3. Friendly gut bugs.

A diet rich in different types of fibre and probiotics (such as yoghurt, kefir and kombucha) supports your friendly gut bacteria.

"We are increasingly certain that gut bugs play an important role not just in many aspects of our physical health, but also in our mental and brain health," says Professor Jacka.

The gut microbiome appears to impact our immune functioning, stress-response, brain health and brain plasticity.

And we can change the health of our gut very quickly. Studies show that in as little as two weeks you can improve the diversity of your gut microbiome by switching your diet to one rich in fibre from wholegrains, fruit and vegetables. ✕



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10 October is World Mental Health Day, a day to raise awareness of mental health issues around the world and mobilise efforts in support of mental health. This year's theme is Mental Health in an Unequal World, highlighting the fact that access to mental health services remains unequal. For more information visit wfmh.global

“BMI doesn’t account for people who are overweight and healthy, or of low weight and unhealthy,” says Langer.

Should we stop giving so much **weight** to BMI?

Are you a healthy weight? To get an answer, you’re likely to measure your body mass index or BMI. But how helpful is this?

Your health can be gauged by a simple formula we’re told. Divide your weight in kilograms by your height in metres squared (kg/m^2) and you have your BMI.

This can be then used by your doctor, nutritionist, or your fitness instructor to assess if your weight is ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ for your height or whether you are hovering close to being classified as ‘overweight’, ‘obese’ or ‘underweight’.

BMI is used around the world to measure obesity and give an estimate of our overall disease risk. There is an assumption that a normal BMI equates to good health, while scores in the ranges above or below suggest your health is at risk.

Is there a link between BMI and health?

BMI does have value. Being quick, simple and cheap, it can quickly identify people who may be at risk of conditions such as type 2 diabetes or heart disease and be a useful starting point for further investigations.

But many health professionals, backed by a growing body of evidence, are now questioning the reliability of BMI as a marker of health.

A 2016 study published in the *International*

Journal of Obesity looked at BMI as an indicator of heart health. The research team checked individual BMI results against other indicators, including cholesterol levels, blood pressure and insulin resistance. What they found was surprising:

- 30 per cent of people in the normal BMI range were at above-average risk of heart disease.
- 48 per cent of ‘overweight’ and 29 per cent of ‘obese’ people were heart-healthy.

What else can’t BMI tell you?

• The amount of fat on your body

In adults who have stopped growing, an increase in BMI is usually caused by an increase in body fat, but there are many exceptions to this.

“Having a high ratio of muscle to fat is liable to put you into the ‘overweight’ category,” says Canadian dietician Abby Langer. “Muscle weighs more than fat, and if you’re solid and muscular – think athletes or weightlifters – BMI won’t recognise that; it will just categorise you as overweight when you’re not.”

Body composition, including your per cent body fat or muscle mass, can also vary by race and ethnic group.

• Where that fat is stored

Where you store your fat is critical to your health. Body fat stored around the abdomen (an ‘apple’ shape) is more dangerous than fat on your hips or thighs,

but BMI won’t tell you where your fat is located. The ‘apple’ shape is associated with an increased risk of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, and you can have a BMI in the ‘normal’ range but carry risky amounts of belly fat.

• Your individual risk

Your risk of disease doesn’t automatically increase with weight. The normal ranges don’t work so well for predicting health risks in older adults, who don’t appear to have a greater risk of death when their BMI is in the ‘overweight’ category. ✕

What are the alternatives?

Your waist circumference is a better predictor of health risk than BMI, because it can indicate how much fat is stored around your abdomen, where it is potentially more dangerous.

Both waist circumference and BMI can be good starting points, but other measurements will give a fuller picture of health risk. Lifestyle factors such as smoking, activity levels, diet and stress, along with blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels should all be considered.

What's the big deal about a **strong core**?

When you've only got limited time in your day to exercise, it can be tempting to go straight for the stress-busting cardio or heavy weights and skip your core muscles. Find out why you need a strong core to thrive in your everyday life.

What are core muscles?

Your core is a group of muscles which wraps all the way around your torso, both front and back. Muscles include the transverse abdominis, multifidus, internal and external obliques, erector spinae, diaphragm, pelvic floor muscles, and the rectus abdominis – your 'abs'.

Why you need strong core muscles

We often don't realise how important our core is until it causes problems.

You might have experienced this if you've had sore abs after a workout, or if you've had an operation such as a c-section.

We use our core to do basic things like stand up or sit up. When you bend over to pick up a wrapper from the ground, or reach up to get a mug from a high shelf, you're using your core muscles. Even sitting in an office chair requires core muscle activation. In fact, you need your core (especially your transverse abdominal muscles) every time you move a leg or an arm.

What happens when core muscles are weak

If you get back pain from standing too long or find yourself all hunched over when working on the computer, you may find that a weak core is exacerbating the problem.

When your core muscles aren't strong enough, you can often find your overall posture suffers. It can be difficult to keep a straight spine, whether you're sitting or standing. It can even affect how well you can use your hands for tasks like writing, typing or using hand-tools.

It can even cause shortness of breath, especially if you're standing for long periods of time.

The connection with back pain

According to Bodycare Workplace Solutions, a growing amount of evidence suggests back pain may be partly caused by weak core abdominal muscles over time.

At least 84 percent of us will experience back pain at some stage in our lives. By strengthening your core muscles, you can help protect and strengthen your back, and potentially reduce the risk of back pain. ✕

How to strengthen your core

Forget the old sit-ups that your school Physical Education teacher made you do. There's no single core exercise that's ideal for everyone because we all have different issues and needs.

A good starting point is the plank. Or at least, to work up to the plank. It doesn't require equipment and you can do it pretty much anywhere.

Here's an easy explanation from [Greatist.com](https://www.greatist.com/fitness/fitness-tips/4-ways-to-strengthen-your-core)

1. Plant hands directly under shoulders (slightly wider than shoulder width) like you're about to do a push-up. A variation is placing your forearms on the floor instead, with your elbows aligned below shoulders and your arms parallel to your body.
2. Ground your toes into the floor and squeeze your glutes to stabilise your body. Your legs should be working, too — be careful not to lock your knees.
3. Neutralise your neck and spine by looking at a spot on the floor about a foot beyond your hands. Your head should be in line with your back.
4. Hold the position for 20 seconds. As you get more comfortable with the move, hold your plank for as long as possible without compromising your form or breath.



The secret to protecting your mind

What if you had a way to protect your mind? A way to armour your mental health?
And what if it didn't cost anything, and was available to you anywhere?

What is this mysterious medicine?

Sleep.

You're most likely aware of the many benefits of sleep. It's important for your mental, emotional and physical health. You probably know it helps reduce the risk of chronic disease such as heart disease and stroke, and it can make it easier to manage mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

Now, new research shows that sleep not only reduces the impact of the symptoms of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, but also protects against them.

Breaking the anxiety-insomnia cycle

When you're anxious, it can be hard to sleep.

Yet lack of sleep can make anxiety worse. It becomes a vicious cycle. The same applies to depression and other mental health issues.

Why?

Researchers at University of California Berkeley did a series of studies to find out.

In one study, one group slept in a laboratory overnight while another group stayed awake. In the morning, both groups watched an emotional video and self-measured their anxiety. The group who stayed awake reported 30% higher anxiety than the well-rested group.

Interestingly, even those who slept but had restless sleep found their anxiety levels were raised.

Further investigation showed that prefrontal cortex activity diminished in the group who stayed awake. Among other things, your prefrontal cortex is where your brain manages emotion.

Lead researcher, Eti Ben Simon, says these findings suggest that sleep problems may not be just a symptom of anxiety but a reason it persists.

It's possible that deep sleep resets the balance between the sympathetic nervous

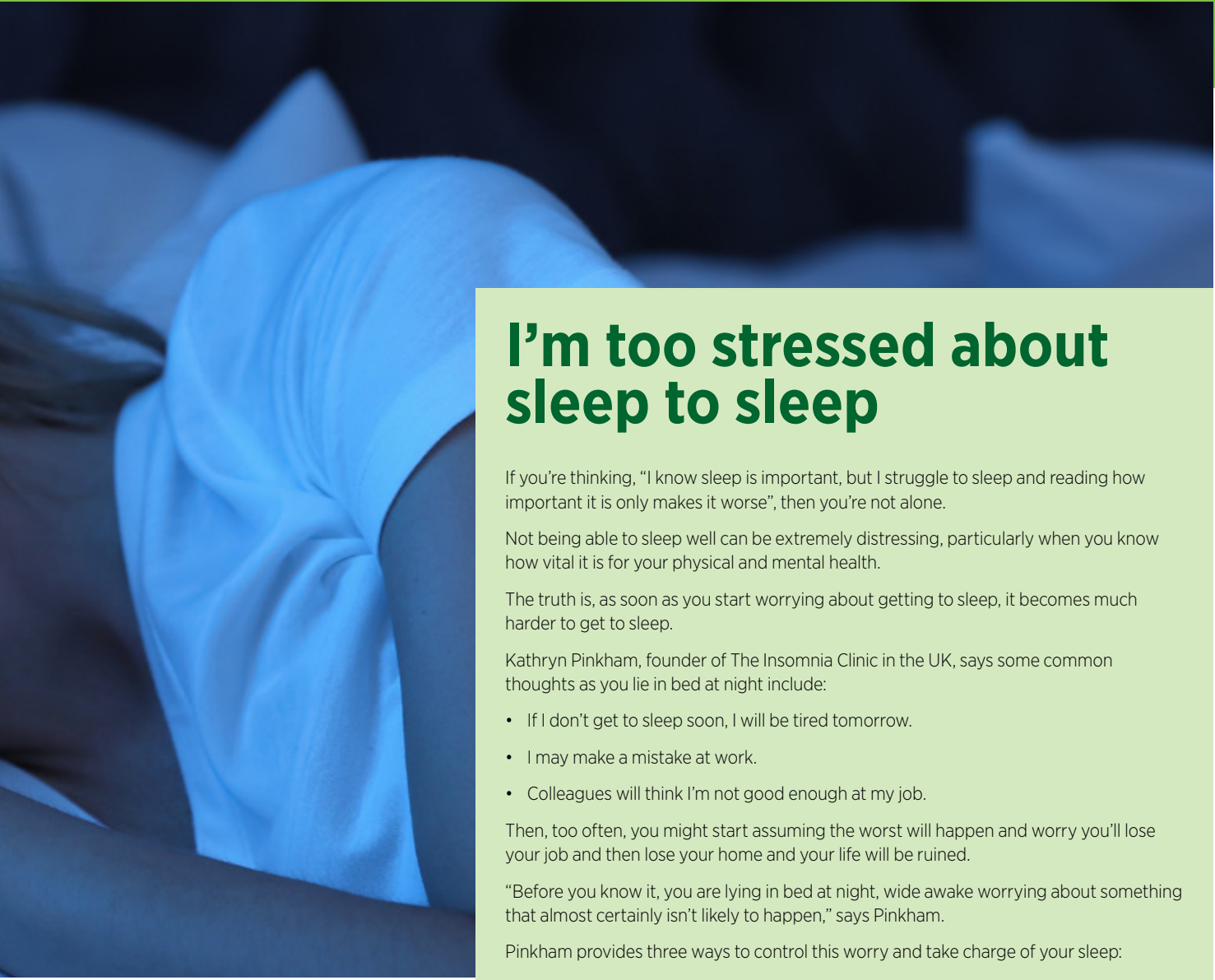
system (your stress response) and the parasympathetic nervous system (your calmer resting state). When you're awake, your sympathetic nervous system is activated by stress and anxiety, and when you're in deep sleep, your parasympathetic system comes into play.

Sleep: nature's anti-inflammatory

Other recent research has found that a good night's sleep can reduce brain inflammation.

Left unchecked, inflammation can contribute to chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, cancer, Alzheimer's disease and other conditions.

Scientists at the University of Pittsburgh found that people with sleep problems such as difficulty falling asleep, restless sleep, or loud snoring have a higher risk for metabolic syndrome, another condition linked to chronic inflammation. On the other hand, they found that blood markers for inflammation improved 'significantly' after a restful night's sleep.



I'm too stressed about sleep to sleep

If you're thinking, "I know sleep is important, but I struggle to sleep and reading how important it is only makes it worse", then you're not alone.

Not being able to sleep well can be extremely distressing, particularly when you know how vital it is for your physical and mental health.

The truth is, as soon as you start worrying about getting to sleep, it becomes much harder to get to sleep.

Kathryn Pinkham, founder of The Insomnia Clinic in the UK, says some common thoughts as you lie in bed at night include:

- If I don't get to sleep soon, I will be tired tomorrow.
- I may make a mistake at work.
- Colleagues will think I'm not good enough at my job.

Then, too often, you might start assuming the worst will happen and worry you'll lose your job and then lose your home and your life will be ruined.

"Before you know it, you are lying in bed at night, wide awake worrying about something that almost certainly isn't likely to happen," says Pinkham.

Pinkham provides three ways to control this worry and take charge of your sleep:

1. Write out your thoughts and see which ones are real.

Start by allocating a maximum of 20 minutes each day to write down what you are worried about. Separate your worries into 'real problems' and 'hypothetical problems'.

For example, a real problem would be 'I have lost my job and need to find a new one', whereas a hypothetical worry is 'what if I lose my job and have to find a new one?'.

2. Challenge your thoughts

If you're worried about a prediction such as "if I don't sleep well, I'll get cranky with the kids", challenge that assumption.

Ask yourself, does this always happen? Have you ever had a disrupted sleep and still coped OK? And have you ever had a good night's sleep and still felt cranky?

Then ask, if the worst happened, would you still be able to cope? This question can help you see if your thinking is getting too extreme or catastrophic.

"Don't put too much emphasis on sleep being the cure to all your problems," Pinkham warns.

3. Be mindful

"Disengage with your thoughts and treat them as visitors in your mind rather than being who you are," advises Pinkham.

"As your thoughts around sleep arrive in your head, notice them, acknowledge them, even write them down if you need to but then let them drift away and re-focus your attention on either your breathing or your surroundings, for example, smells or sounds."

October 10 is World Mental Health Day.

Their research is backed up by a different study by the University of California (UCLA). The UCLA Cousins Center research team found that losing sleep for even part of one night can trigger tissue-damaging inflammation.

Dr Michael Irwin, lead author of the study said, "Our findings suggest even modest sleep loss may play a role in common disorders that affect sweeping segments of the population."

The link between inflammation and mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety is still being studied. However we do know that people with depression have higher inflammatory markers, and it's thought that inflammation could be a cause of depression. Plus, new research indicates that when a person experiences high anxiety, their inflammation levels are also higher.

Sleep is one of the most powerful ways to protect your mind and reduce the risk and impact of anxiety and depression.

Clean air means clear lungs

Not all workplace hazards are visible. Dust, gas, fumes and vapours that you can't see may be harming your lungs.

During a day at work you will breathe in almost 8000 times. Every breath may be potentially damaging, putting you at risk of occupational lung diseases (OLD). These are conditions of the respiratory system caused by workplace exposure to hazardous chemicals and dusts, and include work-related asthma, asbestos-related conditions, silicosis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Who is at risk?

SafeWork Australia have identified four key industries most at risk of OLD:

- 1. Manufacturing workers:** can be exposed to invisible hazards in the air, such as fumes and dust.
- 2. Construction workers:** are often in contact with dust from concrete and fumes from welding.
- 3. Engineered stone workers:** are exposed to silica dust in all parts of their work process – from preparing and working on the slab, to cleaning up the workplace and disposing of waste.
- 4. Agricultural workers:** may come into contact with a range of hazards in the air, including pesticides, chemicals and fuels.

What can you do?

Workplace Health and Safety legislation means your employer must ensure that standards are in place to protect your lung health.

You can help by ensuring you use any PPE that is designed for the hazardous agent you're working with. You may need training in how to use it, as well as undergo fit-testing. The Lung Foundation Australia also recommends that you:

- Quit smoking. Smoking or vaping of any kind increases your risk of many lung diseases.
- Practise good hygiene. Wash your hands and face before eating and drinking and put work clothes in a separate wash basket.
- Talk to your doctor. Have regular check-ups with your doctor, even if you're not experiencing symptoms. ✕

Find out your risk of OLD

The Lung Foundation Australia have devised a short quiz as a tool to help you find if you may be at risk of occupational lung disease. Visit healthylungsatwork.lungfoundation.com.au for more information and to take the quiz.



Ask an expert about ...

Q Does drinking alcohol increase your risk of breast cancer?

Breast Cancer Network Australia replies:

Yes, drinking alcohol increases both your risk of breast cancer and breast cancer returning. According to Cancer Australia, approximately six per cent of breast cancer cases each year are due to alcohol consumption, yet research has found that very few people are aware of this link.

Alcohol appears to limit your liver's ability to control the levels of oestrogen

in your blood, which can increase your risk of breast cancer. It may also increase your risk by damaging DNA in cells.

The more you drink, the greater the risk. The alcohol intake guidelines in most countries suggest a limited amount of standard drinks per week in order to reduce overall alcohol-related harm. However, studies have suggested that even one standard drink (10 grams pure alcohol, as defined by the World Health Organization) per day increases the risk of breast cancer.

Tips to reduce alcohol intake:

- Ensure you have alcohol-free days in the week.
- Drink only with dinner. Rather than having a few drinks before dinner, wait until you're eating.
- Swap to no or low alcoholic drinks.
- Switch to a smaller glass – a full glass of wine has around 1.5 standard drinks.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month in many countries.

App of the month

Good on You

If you care about the impact the clothes you buy have on the environment, then get this app.

Good On You is a trusted source

of sustainability ratings for fashion, allowing you to easily check the impact of your favourite fashion brands on the issues you care about. Each brand receives a rating out of five and individual scores for its impact on people, the planet and animals. If your brand doesn't measure up, you'll be given alternative brands that do. You can also use Good on You to find sustainability tips, guides and style edits.

Available free on the [App Store](#) and [Google Play](#).

Good news for milk lovers

Do you love milk but are concerned about your cholesterol levels? There is no need to worry say researchers, who found drinking milk regularly was not associated with increased levels of cholesterol.

High cholesterol levels are linked with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, and for many years milk and dairy products were believed to raise blood cholesterol levels.

A study published in the *International Journal of Obesity* looked at three large population studies and found that people who regularly drank high amounts of milk had lower levels of both good and bad cholesterol than non-milk drinkers.

The lead researcher of the study, Professor of Nutrigenetics and Nutrigenomics at the University of Reading, Vimal Karani said, "The study certainly shows that milk consumption is not a significant issue for cardiovascular disease risk, even though there was a small rise in BMI and body fat among milk drinkers."

That doesn't mean all dairy products are off the hook. According to the Heart Foundation, butter, cream and ice cream should not be part of your heart healthy diet. ✕

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Published by: Healthworks®

Suite 3.06, 55 Miller Street Pyrmont NSW 2009 Australia
ACN 624 842 351 **Phone:** 1300 90 10 90

Website: www.healthworks.com.au

Editorial Team:

Editor: Jenny Boss MHumNutr

Deputy Editor: Kylie Singh

Subscriptions: Janelle Gibb

Email: well@healthworks.com.au

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News Bites



Yoga for men

Think yoga is just for women? Not so, says Exercise & Sports Science Australia. Despite the marketing for yoga classes mainly featuring women, it's becoming more popular for men, and for good reason. Yoga offers men:

- increased flexibility (men are usually not as flexible as women).
Myth buster: you don't have to be flexible to do yoga!
- improved balance
- increased strength through range of motion
- relief of chronic pain, particularly of the lower back
- improved breathing
- stress relief

If you want to try yoga, many gyms, fitness clubs or community centres offer free trials or sessions for beginners, or you can also do a free online class such as [Yoga with Adriene](#), available on YouTube. ✕

Exercise might compensate for poor sleep

When you've had a bad night's sleep and are struggling to get through the day, the last thing on your mind is to pull on your walking shoes and get some exercise.

But that's just what you should do, found researchers from the University of Sydney.

Their study, published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, found that poor sleepers had a higher risk of negative health impacts, and a lack of exercise exacerbated that risk. But when poor sleepers met the physical activity recommendations, that seemed to partly compensate for sleep-related health risks.

"It doesn't undo them, but it does attenuate them quite considerably," says senior author of the study, Professor Emmanuel Stamatakis from the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney.

So even though you may feel like hitting the snooze button, your best option might be to get moving.

1

THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



Talk to a stranger

Over the pandemic, with lockdowns and border closures we've learned to value our family and friends. But what about the people we have weaker ties with? The people we meet on the train or bus, in the lift, fellow exercisers at the park, or the barista who makes us coffee?

Casual connections like these "are as vital to our well-being, growth, and day-to-day existence as family and close friends," says Karen Fingerma, professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin. Together with science writer Melinda Blau, she wrote the book: *Consequential Strangers: The power of people who don't seem to matter ... but really do.*

"They are vital connections – people who help you get through the day and make life more interesting," she says.

University of Chicago behavioural scientist Nick Epsley has found we often underestimate the positive impact of connecting with others. When his team carried out an experiment on commuters, those randomly assigned to talk to their fellow travellers had the most pleasant commute.

Connection benefits others too

But how will others react if we strike up a conversation? A lot better than we anticipate, says Epsley. "We found that not only did the people we encouraged to talk have a more pleasant experience, but so did the person they were asked to talk to."

The next time you'd like to have a chat with someone, but are worried about how they might react, give it a try. As humans we are happier and healthier when we have social contact.

EAT SMARTER

Red cabbage

It's cheap and readily available. So it can't be a superfood can it?

No food is actually a 'superfood' as this is purely a marketing term, but if one food does punch above its weight in terms of nutritional benefits, it's the humble red cabbage.

Red cabbage is one of the cruciferous vegetables, which also include rocket, bok choy, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, radish and turnips. All these vegetables are low in kilojoules, and rich in folate, vitamins C, E, and K, and fibre.

They also all contain phytonutrients, plant-based compounds that may help lower inflammation, and research suggests may reduce the risk of developing cancer.

Choose red cabbage and you'll get added value in the form of phytonutrients called anthocyanins. These are the pigments the give red, purple and blue plants their rich colouring. They act as strong antioxidants in your body. Research indicates anthocyanins may protect against many chronic conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, certain cancers and heart disease.

What to do with red cabbage:

- Shred and use as a base for a coleslaw with grated carrot, shredded baby spinach or kale and chopped walnuts.
- Make a warm side dish. Braise a small shredded red cabbage for 10 minutes with 2 Tbsp olive oil, sliced red onion, peeled grated apple, ½ tsp ground cinnamon, and ¼ cup apple juice.

Whenever you cook with red cabbage, add an acidic liquid such as vinegar, apple juice or wine, otherwise the cabbage will lose its colour and turn blue.



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