As amazing as your gut’s enteric nervous system is at turning food into energy for all cells in your body, your emotional brain can mess up nearly every single automatic function when you eat in a stressed out state. If your brain decides there is a threat to deal with, it will aim to take care of that threat by responding within milliseconds to put your body into a “fight or flight” mode. New research shows that eating while in this stressed out state can negatively change your microbiome, increase fat storage, damage the lining of the gut, increase inflammation, and even cause the stomach to reverse its process and empty its contents upward!

Needless to say, finding a way to relieve some stress before you eat is paramount in your overall health.

Did you know that your gut has its own nervous system? This system is so complex and intricate that it has capabilities that surpass all other organs and even rival your brain’s nervous system! This system is called the Enteric Nervous System, or ENS. The ENS is made up of hundreds of millions nerve cells – more than contained in your spinal cord – and the only organ that outnumbers it in number of nerve cells is your brain. For this reason, the ENS is often referred to as your “second brain.” The nickname goes beyond just the number of neurons, though. Because although the ENS is a part of the autonomic nervous, which is ultimately controlled by subconscious regions of the “first brain” like the hypothalamus, it can also operate independent of that system. In other words, its neurons aren’t just there to receive input from your central nervous system, they are there to send signals back into the brain itself! In fact, over 90% of your serotonin and over 50% of your dopamine, the neurotransmitters that you know for making your brain feel good – they are formed right there in the ENS. Providing even more evidence that when you take care of your gut, your brain and body also thrive!

As amazing as your gut’s enteric nervous system is at turning food into energy for all cells in your body, your emotional brain can mess up nearly every single automatic function when you eat in a stressed out state. If your brain decides there is a threat to deal with, it will aim to take care of that threat by responding within milliseconds to put your body into a “fight or flight” mode. New research shows that eating while in this stressed out state can negatively change your microbiome, increase fat storage, damage the lining of the gut, increase inflammation, and even cause the stomach to reverse its process and empty its contents upward!

Needless to say, finding a way to relieve some stress before you eat is paramount in your overall health.

But don’t forget, the Mind-Gut connection goes both ways. This month we are practicing to eat while calm, but also remember that eating a variety of whole foods, different colors of plant based foods, and healthy fats all play an extremely important role in improving short and long-term mental health!
Our strategy for this month is very simple: **Do not eat in a stressed out state.**

Find ways to eat your food while in a calm state. The research on this is clear: if you eat while you are stressed out, your body will not digest the food properly, you are more likely to store what it does digest as fat, your colon secretes more water and mucus, your gut wall begins to leak, and the amount of blood flowing through the lining of your stomach and intestines increases. Do you need any more reasons than those to find some calm before you eat??

Some of our favorite *Healthy Is Wellness* strategies for calming yourself before you eat:

- **Practice gratitude right before you eat.** If you’re eating a meal it means two great things: you’re alive **AND** you have food to keep yourself alive. Those are two great things to be thankful for! **Pause** before you eat, give thanks for the food in front of you, smile, and then enjoy your meal.

- **Take four deep breaths.** Expand your rib cage out so it feels like your ribs are opening up like an umbrella, hold your breath for just a two count, and then breathe out fully. Taking just four deep breaths before you eat lowers your stress significantly.

- **Sit down at a table and enjoy the process of eating.** This can be accomplished with friends or by yourself. But working, driving or rushing from one spot to another while you eat will only increase your stress. Consider meal time a break in your normal busy day, and sit down to enjoy this process.

- **Listen to music that calms you and makes you happy while you eat.** Restaurants have long used music to set the mood for your eating experience. You can utilize this strategy by turning on your own calming and enjoyable music at every meal.

- **Prepare the food yourself.** The act of preparing a meal has been shown to be as soothing as meditation. Plus, it’s a great social thing to do with friends and family. The Italians are well known for this, and they consistently are ranked as being one healthiest countries in the world. If possible, make the preparation of food part of your family or social eating experience.

Our checklist this month is very simple: **Yes or No, did you make it through all of your meals today in a calm state?**

Day 1: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 2: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 3: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 4: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 5: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 6: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 7: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 8: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 9: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 10: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 11: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 12: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 13: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 14: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 15: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 16: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 17: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 18: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 19: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 20: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 21: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 22: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 23: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 24: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 25: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 26: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 27: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 28: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 29: ___ Yes ___ No
Day 30: ___ Yes ___ No

Want to know more about more about the Mind-Gut Connection? Check out the excellent book by Dr. Emeran Mayer, MD, where a lot of this content came from!