Why do people find fatty or sugary foods comforting? [1]

Dear Alice,

Why do people find fatty or sugary foods comforting? I mean, what is it in these types of foods that causes the body / mind to see this type of food as comforting or pleasurable? Surely from the point of view of the body, it prefers foods that are high in nutrients? so why do people who turn to food for comfort always turn to fatty or sugary foods that don't offer the body anything? just wondering??? and I hope that made sense because I'm sorry it's quite badly worded!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Most physical and personality characteristics, including comfort food preferences, are determined through the combined influences of genetics and environment. When it comes to comfort foods, humans have genetically determined preferences for certain flavors and also have experiences that result in positive (as well as negative) feelings being associated with certain foods. The outcome of this interaction is that comfort food preferences exist and vary across cultures, with age, and between genders.

People are born with innate preferences for sweet and salty flavors, and these tendencies are likely to have had evolutionary benefits. There's scientific proof that the human body needs sodium and energy from sugars, but humans' pre-historic ancestors did not have this information. Instead, their taste buds led them to seek sweet flavors, which are indicative of carbohydrates and therefore energy, when found in nature. A taste for salt guarantees intake of this essential mineral, which is necessary for metabolic processes and maintenance of fluid balance within cells. It is logical to conclude that human ancestors, who had the ability to choose foods that contained essential nutrients, would have had better survival than their non-tasting counterparts. They would have borne more offspring, and their traits for tasting ability would have been propagated to future generations.

Though humans have inherent preferences for sweet and salty flavors, comfort food choices vary because people are influenced by individual psychological factors that result from life experiences. Even though everyone is born into a unique food environment that is dependent on climate, economy, and culture, studies have shown that women in the United States generally prefer sweet, snack-type foods. This may be the result of pleasant feelings being associated with foods that were served as dessert, as the reward for eating dinner, or for happy occasions, such as parties or holidays. Men tend to prefer salty, meal-type foods, such as mashed potatoes. Meal-type foods might have positive connotations for men because they
were lovingly prepared by their mothers and grandmothers. The identification of meal- over snack-type comfort food preferences increases in both genders as they age.

Our current food environment is different from that of distant human ancestors, whose survival depended on their tasting ability (e.g., bitterness might indicate presence of poison in foods, etc.). Modern agricultural practices and technology have created an abundant food supply. In addition, food production and marketing teams, armed with taste preference information, have specially formulated foods to generate high sales. This means that sweet and salty flavors are often paired with a generous helping of fat, which helps to carry flavor.

It's good to be mindful when eating comfort foods because it's easy to take in too much sugar, salt, and fat. As the current human population is faced with high rates of obesity and high blood pressure, which are just two examples of chronic health problems that are partially due to these dietary excesses. It is possible to manipulate the environmental part of the comfort food equation and decrease the intake of unneeded extra calories and fat. When people turn to food for comfort, nowadays, they have been choosing candy bars and ice cream, whereas human ancestors might have chosen one of nature's less-sweet, salty, fatty options, such as, perhaps, an apple. For those tasty foods that folks aren't willing to live without, the recipes can often be modified so that the need for comfort is fulfilled without giving the body unneeded extras. All this to say, working towards creating a stronger association between positive feelings and more healthful foods is key.

Take comfort in knowing that your comfort foods can be modified to healthier versions!

Alice!
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