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The Secret Recipe to Bar Prep: Meal Prep?

The stressors of bar prep really show what we're made of—and what we're putting in our bodies can bring out our best or worst.

By **Angela Morris** | May 31, 2018

Cheez-Its, Milk Duds and Pepsi are staple foods for third-year law student Katie Wilson during final exams.

“When I study, I’m a really bad snacker,” admitted Wilson, who graduated in May from South Texas College of Law Houston, and is already forming a strategy for healthful eating while studying for the bar exam.



Wilson, president of South Texas’s student bar association, said that during law school, she would try to eat healthy, and often succeeded at shopping, meal planning and cooking—but only for a week or two. Juggling her school schedule and part-time job often made her too busy, and she’d resort to fast food, a more likely outcome during the intensive study periods preceding exams.

“The day before the final, I would order food. Sometimes it would be healthy, and sometimes it wouldn’t, depending on how I felt that day,” she said, explaining that stress created cravings for Taco Bell or Whataburger. “I joke that my metabolism hasn’t caught up with me yet.”

Everyone knows that eating fast food, candy and sugary drinks can cause weight gain, but aside from the battle against the bulge, there’s another great reason for law graduates to strive toward more healthful eating while studying for the Texas bar exam. Science has shown that a good diet can boost brain health and mental functioning, helping good eaters to acquire knowledge, retain memories and better process mood and emotions. Even though it’s difficult to find the time, there are strategies that law students can use to change their eating habits for the better, whether they cook at home or dine out.

Students often face the same challenges when it comes to diet, said Ann Afflerbach, a registered and licensed dietitian who teaches nutrition at the University of North Texas.

“They are either strapped for time or strapped for cash. That affects what they choose,” Afflerbach said.

She teaches students how to incorporate healthier options within those limits. For example, if a student won’t give up ramen noodles—just \$0.07 per package—there are still ways to make it more healthy. Even when ordering from a fast food restaurant’s dollar menu, a student could limit her order to one item, and then incorporate fresher foods to round out a meal.

“It does make a huge difference in brain function and how they study and sleep and how they take exams,” she said.

Proof in the Pudding

Academic researchers who have studied how nutrition impacts the brain have found a cornucopia of evidence that good eating helps with learning, memory and mood.

The brain is always “on” and requires a constant supply of fuel in the form of food, Dr. Eva Selhub wrote in the Harvard Health Blog. High-quality foods with ample vitamins, minerals and antioxidants nourish the brain the best. Diets high in processed foods and refined sugars are harmful to the brain, causing impaired brain function and worsening of mood disorders like depression, wrote Selhub, a physician who writes, speaks and consults about alternative approaches to health.

Cognitive ability is influenced by gut hormones that tell your body you’re hungry or full, and regulate the digestive process, according to a 2008 article, “Brain foods: the effects of nutrients on brain function,” in Nature Reviews Neuroscience, a highly regarded scholarly journal. The author, Fernando Gomez-Pinilla of the University of California at Los Angeles, wrote that it’s critical to understand how food impacts cognition, in order to manipulate diet to increase and promote mental fitness.

Diets rich in omega-3 fatty acids can support cognition—both the mental process to acquire knowledge and handle emotions, wrote Gomez-Pinilla, who didn’t return a message seeking comment. Previous research studies showed that school children who took omega-3 got better at reading, spelling, verbal intelligence, learning and memory. Good sources of omega-3’s include fish—especially salmon—flax and chia seeds, kiwi fruit and walnuts.

Other nutrients shown to boost cognition include turmeric and curcumin, both curry spices, and flavonoids such as cocoa, green tea, citrus fruits, red wine and dark chocolate. Choline in egg yolks, soy, lettuce and a variety of meats also help with memory and cognition.

On the other hand, some foods can reduce the body’s support for brain functions. These bad brain foods include saturated fats, found in butter, lard, coconut oil, dairy products like cream or cheese, and fatty meats. Previous studies on rodents showed that junk food high in saturated fat and sugar caused cognitive decline and worse performance on learning tasks.

“Dietary manipulations are a viable strategy for enhancing cognitive abilities and protecting the brain from damage,” wrote Gomez-Pinilla.

What’s on the plate

Afflerbach, the North Texas nutrition lecturer, explained that when a student eats foods high in simple carbohydrates—think white bread, sugary snacks or sweet coffee drinks—it provides energy and alertness only for a short time because the body quickly metabolizes the food, leaving the student tired once it burns off that initial energy.

“When you are tired, you cannot think straight,” she said.

The basics of a healthy diet is to focus on eating a ton of fruits and vegetables. Aim for pasta, rice and whole grain foods, rather than white bread. Beans, nuts and seeds are always good, Afflerbach said. When it comes to meat and dairy, it’s best to pick low-fat options.

Not having enough time for meal preparation is a common culprit for failing to eat veggies. Afflerbach tells students not to shy away from frozen vegetables, which are a snap to cook, and have just as much nutrients as fresh produce.

One simple meal prep strategy is to make a weekly batch of healthy grains—like rice, quinoa or pasta—for the fridge. Then at dinner time, measure out a serving of grains, open a can of beans to add protein—or some lean meat left over in the fridge—and pour on some frozen vegetables. Another quick solution for dinner is to buy a prepared salad kit from the grocery store, and then throw on a handful of nuts or seeds and another measure of dried fruit.

“They are easy meals,” she said.

Knowing that some students just won’t cook at home, or that there are some fast-food cravings that can’t be weaned, Afflerbach said there are still strategies to eat healthier. For example, on pizza night, stick to thin crust and get veggie toppings, and then throw

a side salad on the plate. At other restaurants, steer clear of fried foods and heavy gravy and sauces. For example, at an Italian joint, order pasta with red sauce rather than Alfredo.

“Eat half, and have a salad on the side. Take the other half home,” she said.

Meals to study

Patton Ritter, who graduated in late April from Texas A&M University School of Law, said he doesn't count himself as a healthy eater. He loves barbecue, with a typical order of a chopped beef sandwich and fries for lunch, or a two-meat plate with beans and fries for dinner. You won't find cole slaw or potato salad on his plate.

“I don't eat green food—I don't know why, I just never do it,” said Ritter, A&M's student bar association president. “I do have time if I wanted to cook and do healthier stuff, but I'd rather spend time hanging out with my friends, and food is the easiest way to do that.”

Ritter does not plan to change his eating habits while studying for the bar. During such a high-stress time, he said it doesn't make sense to become incredibly concerned with counting calories and carbs.

“I think people do better when they are happier and if they would allow themselves in finals to eat more of that comfort food they probably would do better,” he said.

On the other hand, Wilson, the South Texas student with a penchant for Pepsi, has already formed a strategy to eat better while she's studying for the bar. She and her sister, who graduated from law school 10 years ago but never took the bar exam, will be living and studying together. Wilson's sister already eats well and exercises routinely, leading Wilson to hope those good habits rub off.

“We are going to do a whole meal plan,” Wilson said. “She's working on a long list of healthy foods we could make that would be easy and good for us. Hopefully, that all pans out.”

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