



# ADHD BRAIN FOOD

Nutrition for Brain Optimization

by Don Baker, MA, LMHC



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# Good nutrition can't cure your ADHD, but it's a huge part of optimizing your brain to serve you better.

When you're feeling mentally slow, foggy, unable to focus, and just plain tired, there's a good chance that what you have or haven't eaten is a big factor.

It's all too easy to be deficient in some of the nutrients the brain needs to work at top capacity – especially if we're dieting, under stress, taking medication, sleeping poorly, or eating on the go. Or if we've never experienced the benefits of eating more nutritious food and eating it consistently.

There's no doubt that nutritional deficiencies affect us mentally, leading to a number of cognitive challenges and even to states like anxiety, depression, and/or a magnification of your ADHD traits.

When you eat a brain-healthy diet, you'll notice:

- Better mood stability
- Stronger focus
- More stamina
- Less distractibility
- Less tiredness in the late morning and mid-afternoon
- Fewer cravings for sugary substances

**This book offers an action-oriented overview of nutritional strategies you can implement to move toward these benefits.** I've summarized the best, most current information I can find about foods and supplements that can help you optimize your brain. Please note that these recommendations should only be implemented as part of a complete treatment approach that includes other vital pieces of self-care.



Here's how we'll break the content down.

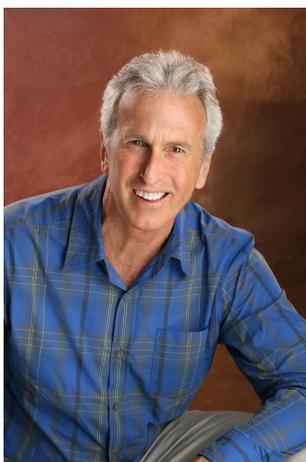
### 3 Steps to an Optimized Brain

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1. The WHY: What is Brain Optimization and Why Optimize?
2. The HOW: How Does Nutrition Actually Benefit Your Brain?
3. The WHAT: Your Best Brain Optimizing Nutritional Strategies

This framework has worked for me and for many of my clients. As with so many aspects of learning to live successfully with ADHD wiring, awareness is key. This book will introduce you to the benefits of brain-healthy eating. Over time, you'll gain greater insight into how what you eat affects your unique brain. Greater awareness will allow you to personalize your eating strategies and get stronger results.

Ultimately, eating more consciously can give you a whole new level of control over how your neurobiological tendencies show up in your day-to-day life. So please read on. I think you'll like the material that follows.



#### Enjoy the journey!

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# Essential Background

## Nutrition as part of unpacking ADHD

If you've read my free *5 Keys to Loving Your ADHD Brain* e-book, or taken any of the [Unpacking ADHD Core Series classes](#), you can skip this section and move on to "What is Brain Optimization?" on page 6. If not, please take a few moments now to understand how nutrition fits into the bigger picture of unpacking ADHD in your life and learning to live with your traits more successfully.

The first thing you need to know is that ADHD is real. It's a neurobiological syndrome with genetic, biological, and environmental components. You can live with many of the traits even if you don't have an ADHD diagnosis. In other words, **anybody who lives with a lot of ADHD traits can benefit from the Unpacking ADHD perspective – even if they don't fully identify as "having" ADHD.**

Your mix of traits is unique to you. Some traits, such as difficulty keeping track of time or getting started on tasks, can be very challenging. But other traits, like having lots of ideas and intuitively understanding complex concepts, can be incredible gifts.

Sometimes the same trait can be positive or challenging, depending on the situation. For example, a high capacity for empathy can make it possible for you to have profoundly intimate relationships. On the other hand, you may shut down in times of conflict or loss because you are easily overwhelmed by the emotions of those around you.

The Unpacking ADHD journey is not about "fixing" your ADHD. It's about making the most of the incredible brain you have. Unpacking the truth about

*The ultimate goal is to embrace who you truly are, connect with others in a more genuine way, and live the life you really want.*



how your brain works and charting a new course for your life journey is a personal, developmental process.

This process begins with understanding your own unique wiring, so you can value and address both the upsides and the downsides of the way your brain works. The ultimate goal is to embrace who you truly are, connect with others in a more genuine way, and live the life you really want.

**One of the most damaging myths about ADHD is that you can “get over it” if you just try hard enough.** Many children living with ADHD, especially if it’s undiagnosed, get the message that they should be able to push past their challenges by sheer willpower – or that they’re just not smart enough to do better. By the time they grow up, they have internalized a deep sense of failure and shame. If their ADHD is still unaddressed, daily frustrations build up and can lead to depression, anxiety, and other problems.

Overwhelming scientific evidence shows that these challenges are caused by real differences in the brain function of people living with traits of ADHD. Your challenges are based in biology. In *5 Keys*, I talk about the need to give yourself permission to accommodate your challenges. In other words, **the goal is to accept the way your brain works as a part of yourself and work with it – rather than fighting your natural wiring.**

Also in *5 Keys*, I outlined several areas where proactive strategies can be life changing for people with ADHD traits. One of these areas is Self Care. Nutrition is an essential piece of this larger category and one that you should not overlook. It is integral to maximizing or “optimizing” your brain.

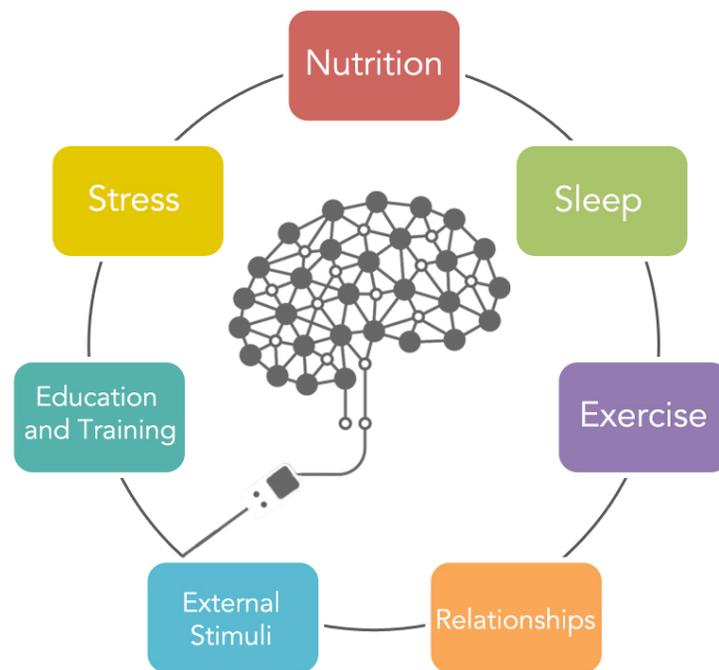
The most important task in both initial treatment and long-term management of ADHD traits is brain optimization, plain and simple. So, let’s explore what that means a little more deeply.



# What is Brain Optimization?

You have more control over your brain than you may think.

The diagram below summarizes key ways in which your brain interacts with the world around you. These factors influence your genetic expression from moment to moment, in both subtle and dramatic ways:



- **Nutrition** – foods you eat and supplements you take
- **Sleep** – the quantity, quality, and consistency of your sleep
- **Exercise** – your level of physical activity and overall fitness
- **Relationships** – your connections to friends, family members, and others
- **External stimuli** – what you see, smell, taste, feel, and hear around you
- **Education and training** – information and ideas you receive and absorb
- **Stress** – physical and emotional stress factors, from toxins to job loss



You can't control what's happened in your past. You can't eliminate every unhealthy input the world throws at you. But, you can do a great deal to influence the interactions your brain has now.

**Brain optimization is learning what your brain needs to perform at its best and bringing more of those things into your life.**

There are two main categories in the work of brain optimization:

**1. Care and feeding of your physical brain.**

This book offers an introduction to eating and supplementing your diet in order to boost your cognitive capabilities and positively impact the way your ADHD traits manifest. Medication, meditation, exercise, and adequate sleep are other examples of ways you can directly support and improve physical brain functioning.

**2. Managing and modulating your environment.**

Much of the other material on UnpackingADHD.com, including our Core Series of online classes, goes deep into this topic. By becoming a connoisseur of your attention and focus, you can learn to make better choices, control your level of stimulation, and otherwise navigate your ADHD traits more successfully.



# How Does Good Nutrition Benefit Your Brain?

## Remember, food is medicine too!

Your brain is roughly the size and shape of your two fists put together. It's amazingly soft, composed primarily of fat and water, along with over 100 billion brain cells, called neurons, that drive our thinking, learning, feeling and states of being. To function at their best, neurons require good fats, protein, complex carbohydrates, micronutrients (vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients) and water.

**Your brain cells need twice the energy required by other cells in your body.** Neurons have a high demand for energy because they're always in a state of metabolic activity – everything you do, think, or say requires them to communicate with each other. Even during sleep, neurons are still at work repairing and rebuilding their worn out structural components.

“*Your brain cells need twice the energy required by other cells in your body.*”

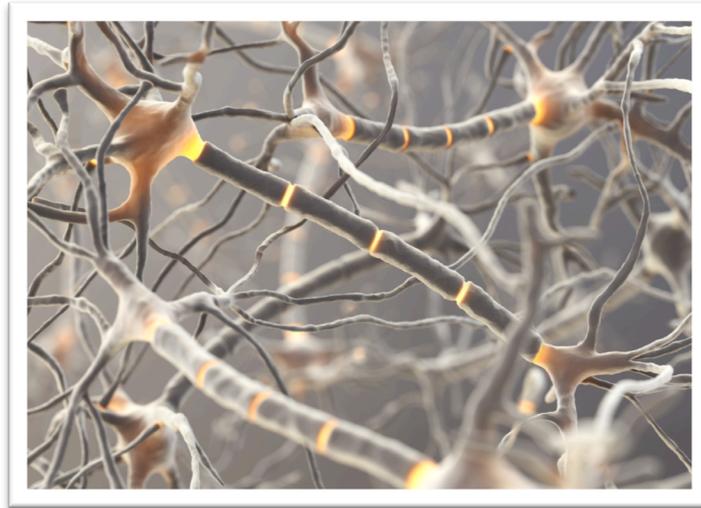
Neurons manufacture enzymes and neurotransmitters that must be transported out to the very ends of their nerve branches, sometimes several inches, or feet, away. Most demanding of a neuron's energy, however, are the bioelectric signals responsible for communication throughout the nervous system. This nerve transmission consumes one-half of all the brain's energy (nearly 10% of the whole body's energy).

### Neurons Connect

Neurons are shaped somewhat like an outstretched hand, with fingers spread. Dendrites (the fingers) receive information from other neurons, which is then sent through the axon (the arm) to another neuron. The connection between two cells is called a synapse, where the dendrite of one cell nearly touches the body or axon of



another cell. Neurons can connect multiple times with the same cell, grow extensions to connect with distant cells, and connect with many different cells at once by growing more dendrites.



Your brain is brilliantly dynamic, responsive, and efficient: new connections are made to record and integrate new information you learn. Old, unused connections are pruned away. The raw material for building and pruning of these connections comes from the food we eat.

### **A Biochemical Language**

As neurons connect, they communicate using a process called neurotransmission. When you move, think, or learn, electrical impulses trigger the release of messenger chemicals, called neurotransmitters, which travel across the synapse, transmitting information to the next cell. This cell-to-cell chemical communication forms the basis of learning.

Essential roles neurotransmitters play include:

- Connecting verbal, emotional, visual and kinesthetic memories.
- Connecting earlier learning to new learning.
- Influencing mood and behavior.
- Regulating learning states and levels of alertness.



There are over 100 different neurotransmitters, and all are essential for optimal brain function. Research also points to a direct connection between ADHD challenges and deficiency in certain neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and norepinephrine.

### Diet and Neurotransmitters

All neurotransmitters are manufactured in the brain with raw materials from the food we eat. Certain foods contain precursors (starting materials) that are essential for specific neurotransmitters. If a diet is deficient in these precursors, the brain will not be able to produce some neurotransmitters. Neurological and mental disorders may occur when the balance of neurotransmitters is upset.

#### Examples of Neurotransmitter Precursors

Precursor	Used to Make	Found In
Aspartic Acid	Aspartate	Peanuts, potatoes, eggs, grains
Choline	Acetylcholine	Eggs, liver, soybeans
Glutamic Acid	Glutamate	Flour, potatoes
Phenylalanine	Dopamine	Beets, soybeans, almonds, eggs, meat, grains
Tryptophan	Serotonin	Eggs, meat, skim milk, bananas, yogurt, milk, cheese
Tyrosine	Norepinephrine	Milk, meat, fish, legumes

### Energy and Protection

**Energy is generated from food, and regulates growth and change of cells.** Neurons are prone to damage from environmental toxins that make their way into our systems, as well as toxic by-products formed in the body. The first line of defense? Antioxidants from foods. Diets low in antioxidants have consistently been shown to cause and contribute to illness and disease. Your brain, due to its high fat content, is especially vulnerable to damage and requires high levels of antioxidants for protection.



# Success Stories

## The story that inspired me – and my own successful experiments with nutrition.

### Patti's Story

About three years ago, my client Patti told me she'd started an anti-inflammatory eating plan. I'd been working with Patti on and off for a couple of years, and I knew her to be someone who is forever learning and absorbing new information. She started the anti-inflammatory eating in an effort to lower her high blood pressure, lower her cholesterol numbers, and feel better physically. She also had a family history of Alzheimers and was committed to doing everything she could to reduce her risk.

After five weeks on the eating plan, Patti was euphoric – truly happy, not manic. All of her medical test numbers (blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose levels, etc.) had improved drastically. But what she didn't anticipate was how much better she felt mentally and emotionally.

I had heard and basically accepted the idea that what and how you eat can powerfully impact your sense of wellbeing. But I had never followed any particular plan, process, or school of thought. My food choices over the years had been somewhat nutritious, but inconsistently so.

**That day when Patti shared her exciting results, I made a connection that ultimately led to this e-book.** I had been reading a lot about how we ADHDers have an over-the-top sensory experience. We experience stimuli (sights, sounds, etc.) more intensely than the average person. This heightened sensory experience underlies impulsive choices, less-than-perfect behavior, etc. The idea popped into my head: "I bet I've been having similar heightened sensory responses, both positive and negative, to food."

I was inspired. I decided to try the Abascal Anti-inflammatory Diet that Patti had



touted. Simply put, the Abascal plan has you test your “inflammatory response(s)” to 5 food groups. I was going to run my own experiment! What if I could feel better? What if I could figure out what foods made me feel good and not so good? If I did, my theory was that those good or bad feelings might be heightened because of my ADHD wiring. In other words, I might feel really amazing if I ate the right foods.

### **Don’s Feed-the-Brain Success**

Here’s what I learned from that initial experiment and further experimentation over the past three years.

- I discovered that I have a moderate reaction to gluten. Once I eliminated most gluten from my diet, I found I could breathe clearly while I slept for the first time! I’ve lived with chronic sinus issues my entire life. I was amazed and a little skeptical to discover that sinus issues were triggered by something I eat.
- If I eat foods high in the amino acid L-tyrosine at dinnertime, I sleep soundly. I have a habit of waking up early most nights-2 or 3AM-and a hard time going back to sleep. My brain turns on and it’s hard to shut it off. I’ve learned L-tyrosine is an amino acid that converts into dopamine. Add an Omega-3 supplement to that, and the tyrosine becomes an even more powerful tool to soothe my brain.
- Along the same lines, I’ve struggled with hypoglycemia most of my life. If I don’t eat consistently, my blood sugar crashes. The physical or mental crash of low blood sugar (aka “bonking”) combined with my ADHD is a real problem. My friends have heard me wail, “I’m starving!” so many times, it’s become a “cry wolf” joke: “Throw Don a cracker. He’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

The challenge is that the intense feeling of crashing blood sugar sets up the bad habit of grabbing anything to make it away – usually some kind of carbohydrate or sugar. I’ve learned that this creates a yo-yo type of effect. Blood sugar goes down, craving goes up, blood sugar goes down. I’ve learned to address blood sugar fluctuations with certain combinations of food – usually



a handful of walnuts and half an avocado, or two spoonfuls of almond butter and an apple. The key is a nutritive boost of complex carbs and protein. The result is amazing! I can count on my mood and level of energy, motivation, and interest to stay more consistent.

- When I understand **why** I'm doing something, I'm much more inclined to remember to do it. The results of my eating experiment are so significant that now, even when I'm inclined to grab something on the fly, I usually pause to consider the implications of eating that particular food.
- My increased understanding has also increased my interest and curiosity about how I'm eating. Interest and curiosity are critical drivers of motivation for ADHDers – as we're prone to tune out the minute things start to get boring. I'm thinking about food in an entirely different way now, and it keeps me inspired to pay attention. The more I learn about and eat good food, the better I feel. A positive cycle!
- Because my food experiment has been so successful, I'm now paying more attention to other physical discomforts. What else have I learned to tolerate or ignore over the years?

My experiment is ongoing. I've developed willingness – even eagerness – to pay close attention to how foods impact my brain. What foods further improve my focus? What foods increase my sense of wellbeing? Which ones amp me up? Which relax and calm me? I am acutely aware of how what I eat affects the nerve chemicals that will be dominant in my brain, which then affects how I feel.



# Brain Optimizing Strategy #1

## Know the most valuable nutrients to include in your evolving nutrition plan

The graphic below offers a quick overview of what I'll be explaining in more detail in this section. It's worth your time to read more about each of these categories. The more you know, the more easily you can adjust to improve your results over time.



**go-to foods**

- avocados
- eggs
- salmon / fish
- leafy greens
- colorful veggies
- nuts + nut butters
- seeds
- fruit
- lean meat
- whole grains
- greek yogurt
- olive oil
- coconut oil

**1. Eat a variety of healthy macronutrients.**

- complex carbohydrates**  
avoid simple carbs in sweeteners and white flour
- lean protein**  
critical for amino acids that form neurotransmitters
- good fats**  
especially omega-3 fatty acids (including DHA)

**2. Consider supplementing key micronutrients.**

b-vitamins	magnesium
vitamin c	calcium
iron	zinc

**3. Drink plenty of water.**

even minor dehydration can slow brain function



## Macronutrients

Macronutrients are nutrients that provide calories or energy. Nutrients are substances needed for growth, metabolism, and for other body functions. Since “macro” means large, macronutrients are nutrients needed in large amounts. There are three macronutrients – Carbohydrates, Proteins, and Fats.

### Macronutrient #1 – Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are the body’s main source of fuel, easily used by the body for energy. Our brains in particular require carbohydrates, specifically glucose, for energy. Neurons cannot burn fat.

- All of the tissues and cells in our body can use glucose for energy.
- Carbohydrates are essential for the central nervous system, the kidneys, the brain, and the muscles (including the heart) to function properly.
- Carbohydrates can be stored in the muscles and liver and used later for energy.
- Carbohydrates are important in intestinal health and waste elimination.
- Carbohydrates can make you feel tired because they increase the brain’s level of the amino acid tryptophan, which in turn spurs the brain to make the calming neurotransmitter serotonin. Serotonin is important for normal sleep patterns, learning, blood pressure and appetite, among many other functions.

### Good Sources of Carbohydrates

Healthy carbohydrates are found mainly in starchy foods like grains and potatoes, as well as fruits, milk, and yogurt. Other foods, including vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds and cottage cheese, contain carbohydrates, but in lesser amounts.

### Complex vs. Simple Carbohydrates

- Complex Carbohydrates
  - Also known as starch and fiber, complex carbs have a larger structure.
  - They take a longer time to digest and absorb, creating a slow and steady increase in blood glucose and a slow and steady increase in insulin levels.



- Energy is produced slowly and lasts for a longer period of time.
- Fiber can be classified as soluble or insoluble.
  - Soluble fiber can be broken down and provides energy. Soluble fiber is found in many fruits and vegetables, including leafy greens, celery, carrots, apples, pears, and others.
  - Insoluble fiber – the kind of fiber found in whole grain cereals, bread and rice – cannot be digested and does not provide energy, but it has an important role in health by helping to move food through your gut and giving you a feeling of fullness.
- Simple Carbohydrates
  - Also known as simple sugars, these carbs have a smaller structure.
  - They are broken down rapidly and absorbed through the intestine into the blood stream. The rapid increase of glucose leads to a rapid release of insulin in order to transport the sugar into the cells.
  - Energy is produced rapidly, but only lasts for a short time.
  - Simple carbohydrates include sucrose (sugar found in candy, soda, juice, etc.) and lactose (sugar found in milk). They are found in most sweeteners (table sugar, honey, etc.) and processed/refined foods (donuts, sweetened drinks, candy bars, etc.)

## Macronutrient #2 – Protein

Why do we need protein?

- Growth – especially for children, teens and pregnant women
- Tissue repair
- Immune function
- Making essential hormones and enzymes
- Energy when carbohydrates are not available
- Preserving lean muscle mass

What happens when we eat protein?

- Protein provides amino acids, building blocks that are used to form neurotransmitters and support structures in neurons. Amino acids are also reassembled into powerful antioxidants used to protect DNA and other cell



components from damage.

- Proteins form receptors, structures embedded in membranes that aid in cell communication.

### Good Sources of Protein

- Lean meats, poultry, oily fish, shellfish
- Nuts, seeds, peanut butter, almond butter, etc.
- Beans/legumes
- Tofu and soy products
- Eggs
- Leafy green vegetables

### Specific Protein Associations for ADHDers

- Tyrosine > Dopamine & Norepinephrine - Eating protein raises the levels of an important amino acid called tyrosine. Almonds, avocados, bananas, and most meats contain tyrosine. Tyrosine prompts the brain to manufacture norepinephrine and dopamine, other kinds of chemical messengers in the brain. Dopamine is associated with interest, motivation and enthusiasm. Norepinephrine promotes alertness and activity.
- Tryptophan, found in turkey and milk, is used by the body to produce serotonin, a neurotransmitter that increases your feelings of wellbeing.

## Macronutrient #3 – Fats

Why do we need fats?

- Normal growth and development
- Energy (fat is the most concentrated source of energy)
- Absorbing certain vitamins (including vitamins A, D, E, K, and carotenoids)
- Providing cushioning for the organs
- Maintaining cell membranes
- Providing taste, consistency, and stability to foods

### Three Types of Good Fats

The top three dietary fats for brain health are:



- Polyunsaturated Fats contain the essential fatty acids (EFAs) omega-3 and omega-6. Our brains need these fats to function properly. Studies also show that eating high quantities of omega-3 fatty acids is linked to reduced rates of major depression. However, our bodies are unable to produce EFAs, so it's very important that we include them in our diets.
- DHA is a specific omega-3 fatty acid that has been shown to help brain functions like memory, speaking ability, and motor skills. Increasing dietary levels of omega-3s has been shown to help with ADHD, depression, and bipolar disorder.
- Saturated Fat is actually one of the main components of brain cells, and is therefore necessary for healthy brain function.

### Good Sources of Fats

- Salmon. Contains high amounts of omega-3 fatty acids.
- Avocado. The monounsaturated fats in avocados benefit brain function and promote healthy blood flow. A healthy flow of blood to the brain means a highly functional brain.
- Nuts. Great sources of unsaturated fats and vitamin E, both of which contribute to better brain functioning. Almonds, pecans and walnuts can also help protect against cognitive decline.
- Flax Seeds. Excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids.
- Whole Eggs. Eggs contain both saturated fat and choline, which can boost memory skills and overall brain health.
- Olive Oil. A healthy fat that can be added to almost any meal, olive oil can help to improve memory and protect against dementia and cognitive decline.
- Coconut Oil. In addition to containing Medium Chain Triglycerides (MCT), which support fat loss and build lean muscle tissue, coconut oil may help to regenerate and heal nerve function inside your brain.
- EFA supplements

### Bad Fats

Avoid rancid fats, hydrogenated fats, and trans-fatty acids found in margarine and hydrogenated oils. Bad fats impair optimum brain function and can actually cause brain damage.



## Micronutrients

### Warning

Before we dive into micronutrients, I want to strongly caution you to consult with a health care professional before starting any diet or nutritional supplement program, and especially before taking high doses of vitamins or minerals.

Small changes in diet can have large effects on your health, both positive and negative. "All natural" is not synonymous with "safe." Many herbs and supplements have side effects, may cause or worsen health problems, or may interfere with prescription medications. Also, for many supplements, there isn't a lot of research to determine a recommended daily dose.

It's also important to remember that many nutrients work synergistically with each other, and your body needs time to metabolize and absorb new supplements. You won't really know if a change is effective for at least two weeks.

### About Micronutrients

Micronutrients – vitamins and minerals – are the building blocks of our nervous system. When our bodies are deficient, nothing is going to work as well. Everyone, ADHD or not, is vulnerable to various consequences when they lack key micronutrients.

The brain requires a constant supply of micronutrients for energy, metabolism of neurons, neurotransmitter synthesis and action, nerve impulse propagation, and homocysteine metabolism. Micronutrient deficiencies, especially B vitamin deficiency, can have serious adverse effects on cognition.



## Key Micronutrients

Below is a summary of some of the most important minerals and vitamins for people with ADHD traits, including how they may help and where they're found.

Micronutrient	Important For	Sources & Notes
<p>B-Vitamins</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Thiamin (B1)</li> <li>▪ Niacin (B3)</li> <li>▪ Pyridoxine (B6)</li> <li>▪ Vitamin B12</li> </ul>	<p>Managing hyperactivity and behavior control.</p>	<p>B-vitamins are found together naturally in organ meat, fish, nuts, sunflower seeds, brewer's yeast, eggs, leafy greens, and other sources. Vitamin B-12 is found only in animal foods.</p> <p>B-complex supplements typically work better than individually isolated B-vitamins.</p>
<p>Vitamin C</p>	<p>Modulating dopamine in the synapses of the brain. (remember that ADHD Class 2 stimulant medications are effective because they increase dopamine levels in the brain.)</p>	<p>Many fruits and vegetables are high in vitamin C, including citrus, dark leafy greens, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, and tomatoes.</p> <p>Note: Do not take Vitamin C less than an hour before or after taking ADHD meds. It prevents absorption. Dr. Bill Dodson says short acting ADHD meds are most impacted.</p>
<p>Calcium and Magnesium</p>	<p>Important in regulating mental capacity, steady mood, and protection from tension headache. May help decrease anxiety and aid sleep. Magnesium deficiency may increase hyperactivity and restlessness.</p>	<p>Naturally found together. Good sources include nuts, seeds, sardines, salmon with bones, and leafy green vegetables. Ratio of calcium to magnesium is important and varies based on age and sex.</p>



Iron	Aids with irritability, attentiveness and memory.	Organ meats, red meat, egg yolks, nuts and beans are high in iron. It is generally not recommended to supplement with iron unless absolutely necessary. Consult your healthcare professional to determine if low iron is due to deficient intake or poor absorption. Eating vitamin-C rich foods can improve iron absorption. Cooking with cast iron can also help as some iron does get transferred to food.
Zinc	May reduce hyperactivity, impulsivity and irritability.	Oysters, red meat, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, and eggs are high in zinc. Be cautious about supplementation. High levels of zinc can be dangerous.

## Water

Drinking plenty of water is essential for optimal brain health and function.

- Water maintains the tone of membranes for normal neurotransmission.
- Water enhances circulation and aids in removing wastes. It keeps the brain from overheating, which can cause cognitive decline and even damage.
- Dehydration can lead to fatigue, dizziness, poor concentration and reduced cognitive abilities. Even mild levels of dehydration can impact performance.
- It's interesting to note that hydration has been found to affect exercise tolerance. Someone who is dehydrated tends to feel tired during exercise and avoid activity, a risk factor for obesity.



# Brain Optimizing Strategy #2

## Small Changes. Big Results.

We're not looking to reinvent the wheel, but to simply begin to make small, manageable changes in how we feed our brains. You may have headed down this road before only to have the same experience - strong start, slow or no finish. Do not despair!

Building new habits is challenging. There will always be distractions and temptations that make it all too easy to fall back into old, familiar ways. And, of course, the traits of ADHD can make building and maintaining good brain-feeding habits even more of a challenge. Still, it's entirely possible for you to make permanent changes – especially if you start small and take advantage of the most effective habit change strategies.

Below I've summarized proven recommendations backed by academic research on motivation, discipline and habit building. These are actionable steps that you can put into place immediately.

- **Don't Do It Alone!**

Positive reinforcement is priceless! If you really want to do something, connect with others who want to do the same thing. Groups create accountability and help you believe in your goal. My 8-week online Brain Food class (see page 30) is one group to consider. But sharing mutual encouragement with even one person – a partner, friend, co-worker, etc. – can make a big difference.

- **Connect New Habits to Existing Behavior Patterns**

It's much easier to make a new habit stick if it fits neatly into your current routines. Pick a regular part of your schedule and add the habit as a "link" in your existing behavior chain.



For example, instead of “I will eat healthier,” you could aim for, “When I make my morning coffee, I will make a smoothie for later,” and “When it’s time for my lunch break, I will drink the smoothie.”

In *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, writer Charles Duhigg explains that habits consist of a three-step loop. There’s a *cue* that triggers your brain to use the habit, the *routine* behavior itself (physical, mental, or emotional), and the *reward* that reinforces the loop for the future.



Say you have a habit of eating a sugary snack mid-morning. The *cue* might be the lack of focus that arises as your morning dose of caffeine wears off, the *routine* is grabbing a cookie from the office kitchen, and the *reward* is that the cookie tastes good and gives you a burst of energy. (Never mind that you’ll feel even worse in 30 minutes!)

To change that habit loop, you can take note of the cue, replace the cookie routine with a healthy snack that you prepare in advance (say a handful of nuts



and dried fruit), and notice that you still get the reward of energy and a tasty snack. Plus, the energy lasts longer and you feel better about yourself.

- **Limit Your Choices**

As books like *The Willpower Effect* have explored in detail, self-control is a lot easier if you don't have to make as many choices. Research has shown that making choices depletes mental energy – even if the choices are mundane and relatively pleasant.

To counteract this mental drain and keep your willpower strong, decide what areas of your life you consider relatively unimportant and “routinize” them as much as possible. Some possibilities: simplify your wardrobe so you don't have to invest as much mental energy in deciding what to wear, pack similar lunches every day, take the same route to work every day (avoiding the pastry shop), commit to a set block of time each day for preparing and eating dinner, etc.

Another simple way to reduce choices is to remove unhealthy foods from your environment. If the potato chips aren't there, you can't eat them – and you don't have to exert mental energy to choose something healthier.

- **Answer the Question: Why Do I Want This Change to Occur?**

Many people fantasize about building a certain habit without getting clear about why they really want the change to occur. Knowing exactly why you're doing what you're doing is critical to maintaining motivation over time.

However, excessive fantasizing about results is not helpful. The key is to set your motivation and then visualize the steps it will take you to get there.

For example, if you want to lose weight, don't dream about looking fabulous on the beach. Instead, visualize yourself moving successfully through the process of change (saying no to sugary treats, working out every day after work, etc.). You'll feel less anxiety by breaking the change down into manageable steps and your attention will stay focused on what you actually need to do to reach your goal.



- **Anticipate saying: “Screw this! It’s not worth the effort.”**

New habits are easy to break. To protect yourself from abandoning ship at the first slip-up, be alert to anything that triggers your “screw this!” response. Examine your habits and figure out exactly where things are breaking down.

Below author and 99U speaker Ramit Sethi explains how he improved his gym attendance with one simple change:

*When I sat down to analyze why I wasn’t going to the gym, I realized: my closet was in another room. That meant I had to walk out in the cold [to] put on my clothes. It was easier to just stay in bed. Once I realized this, I folded my clothes and shoes the night before. When I woke up the next morning, I would roll over and see my gym clothes sitting on the floor. The result? My gym attendance soared by over 300%.*

It helps to set up an “if-then” scenario. For example, *if* you get home from work late and are tempted to order pizza instead of cooking the healthy meal you had planned, *then* you will turn to a back-up stash of prepared meals, such as low-sodium canned soup with plenty of protein and vegetables.



# Brain Optimizing Strategy #3

## Keep it Simple! Meal Plans

Below is a bare bones plan for three days of healthy eating to support optimal brain performance. I encourage you to try any or all of these meal suggestions.

	<b>Breakfast and/or Snack</b>	<b>Lunch and/or Dinner</b>
<b>Day One</b>	<p>In a smoothie or bowl:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Greek yogurt (fat-free)</li><li>● Blueberries</li><li>● Almonds (raw)</li><li>● Vanilla Extract</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Grilled white fish, shrimp, or other lean protein</li><li>● Salad with olive oil &amp; vinegar dressing (use garden salad, kale, or super greens mix and top with any of your favorite veggies)</li></ul>
<b>Day Two</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Cottage cheese (low fat)</li><li>● Strawberries</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Salmon</li><li>● Brown Rice</li><li>● Asparagus</li></ul>
<b>Day Three</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Eggs</li><li>● Unsweetened oatmeal with cinnamon and vanilla extract</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Grilled chicken breast</li><li>● Sweet potato</li><li>● Corn</li></ul>



Whether you try the 3-day plan or not, keep your focus simple:

- **Quality protein.** Beans, eggs, nuts, cheese, meat
- **Essential Fatty Acids.** Tuna, salmon, walnuts, olive oil, brazil nuts
- **Reducing simple carbs.** Candy, honey, white flours, white rice, potatoes
- **Increasing complex carbs.** Veggies, fruits

A few practical tips:

- Smoothies are a great way to load up on the complex carbohydrates and nutrients in fruit and veggies, especially vitamin-rich dark leafy greens. Add a tablespoon of fish oil or flaxseeds for extra omega-3s.
- Salmon is loaded with heart healthy, omega-3 essential fats and should be eaten once or twice a week if possible. Leftover salmon is delicious over a crisp salad for lunch the next day.
- Try preparing fresh fruit and veggies every few days to make snacking and meal preparation easier. You're much more likely to eat raw broccoli dipped in nut butter as a snack if you have florets ready to go than if you have to deal with a whole head of broccoli. The same principle applies for celery sticks, carrot sticks, trimmed green beans, washed berries, sliced strawberries or kiwi, watermelon balls, etc.
- Shop more frequently and carefully. It's discouraging to come home to a refrigerator full of "great" stuff that you don't feel like cooking. And it's even worse when you open the fridge again and most of the great stuff has turned to mush! I struggled with this for a long time, but I eventually learned to make more considered choices and buy less at a time. If you're not going to eat it, don't buy it. Be excited about what you're going to put in your mouth. You're feeding your brain!



# What Now?

I hope you're feeling inspired to start making small, sustainable changes in what you eat. The payoff for the hard work of changing poor eating habits is so tremendous – it can fundamentally transform your life. If you commit to a brain-healthy diet, you will experience better focus, memory, attention, stamina, and mood stability. You will, quite simply, feel better and *think* better.



*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."*

*- Aristotle*

Now the question is, how will you start? I mean, REALLY start?

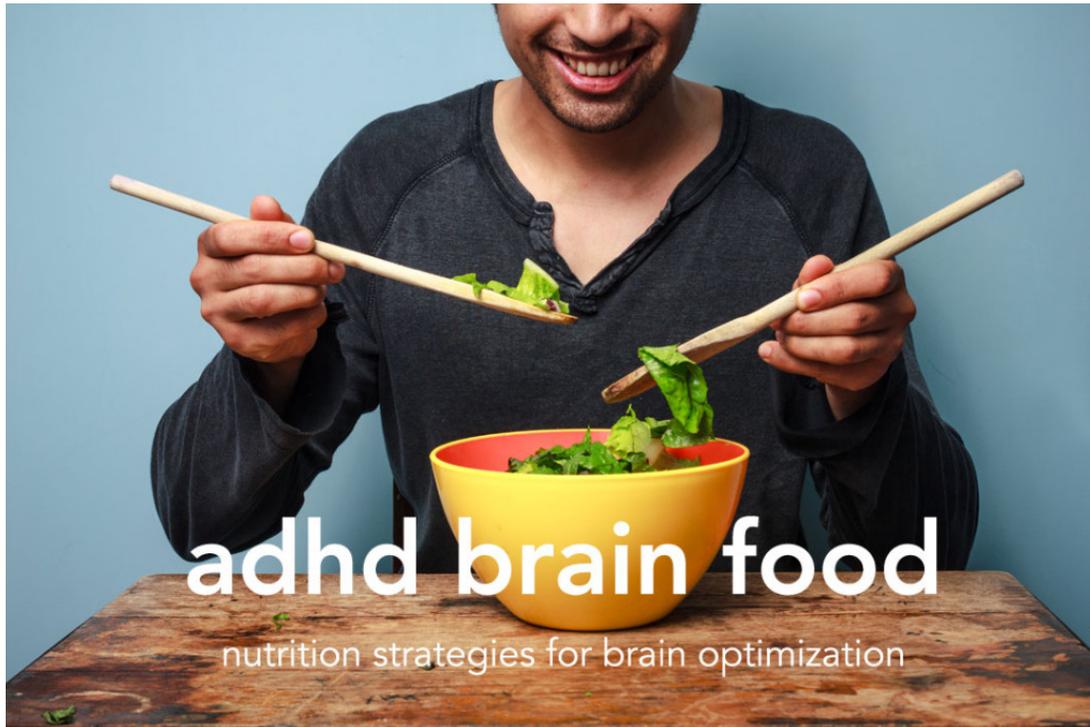
And how will you keep it going? How will you stay the course when you "fall off the wagon" – even if you have many false starts?

I invite you to consider joining my Brain Food class, an 8-week interactive course that will guide you through the initial steps of change and connect you with others who seek to better nourish their brains. If you've struggled to change your eating habits in the past, I encourage you to give it one more try – this time with the support of your ADHD tribemates!



# Take the Brain Food Class!

## 8 Weeks of Information & Support



The Brain Food class builds on the content in this e-book. You'll evaluate your current diet, explore how nutrition impacts *your* unique brain wiring, and identify simple, realistic ways to improve your life with food and supplements. A big part of this class is group support to make sustainable changes. You'll also discover great recipes, easy snacks, useful apps, and much more.

**REGISTER NOW**

<http://www.unpackingadhd.com/product/adhd-brain-food-class/>

Save \$10 off the cost of the class with the coupon code SMARTBRAIN



## Bonus!

Let me save you some web searching time. Browse my favorite links on these topics:

- Brain food recipes
- Mindful eating
- Understanding healthy fats
- Breaking sugar addiction
- Best high-protein foods
- Apps to support habit change

<http://www.unpackingadhd.com/brainfoodlinks/>

Password = feedmybrain

