

EAT WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Did you know, November 25 is National Eat with a Friend Day? This year, it is also Thanksgiving. Sitting down to enjoy a meal with friends or family supports our mental health and well-being, and should be done as much as possible, not just on special occasions.

Many studies have been done on the importance of the family meal. Benefits include promoting healthier eating habits and providing social support and connection. These benefits have a spillover effect that creates healthier lifestyles for everyone involved, not just children. Shared meals with friends and social groups, such as at a Senior Center, are also beneficial for all ages.

Sit-down meals with friends and family have been declining in recent years. People seem to be “on-the-go” and priorities have shifted from traditional home-cooked sit-down meals, to eating more pre-packaged food in their cars, at their desks, or in front of the television and not taking time to sit down to eat with others. People who eat alone often eat less nutritional foods and may stress or binge eat more than those who are eating in the company of others. By taking your time over your food, you will feel full more quickly, and you tend to eat far less than you would when eating a meal on your own.

While busy schedules may not allow for a sit-down meal with family or friends daily, there are simple ways to incorporate shared meals into your life. For example, plan a shared meal on the same day each week so it becomes routine for everyone who will attend. It doesn't have to be dinner; a shared breakfast or lunch may work better for some. For young children, it can form memories of family and friends that they will cherish when they're older and hopefully continue, as well as pass on to their children.

Cooking with your friends and family is also a fun way to enjoy a meal together. A potluck is also a good way to bring everyone together and also divides the workload when each person prepares a dish or contributes an element of the meal.

Another idea is to make large batches of meals with your friends and family and then package the food so each person can take home a few meals to eat during the next week. Be sure to label the meals with the date, and if they are not consumed within four days, they should be put in the freezer to ensure food safety. Soups and casseroles work well for this type of meal sharing.

Shared meals do not have to be cooked at home. There are also benefits when you share a meal with a friend at a restaurant. Be sure to focus on enjoying your food and the social conversation with your companions. Silence your phone and put it away. The mental health benefits of being “unplugged” to enjoy the in-person social connection are important.

Avoid conversational topics that will create tension at the table. Keep the conversation light-hearted and take a break from stressful events. It will be more enjoyable and also allow your food to digest better if you are relaxed while eating.

Bonding with others through good conversation and food actually causes the release of oxytocin which stimulates feelings of contentedness and well-being. The sense of connection with others creates a heightened feeling of bonding and benefits our overall mental health.

Eating with friends and family is a win-win in many ways. Make a goal to be intentional when planning meals and try to incorporate more bonding time at the table with those you care about. Your physical and mental health will improve and you will create positive memories with delicious food and important people.

Sources: <https://food.ubc.ca/4-reasons-to-eat-meals-with-friends/>
<https://brainworldmagazine.com/never-eat-alone-the-benefits-of-eating-with-others/>