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Think and Thrive Part 3:

Food for Thought

by Sonia Herasymowych, PhD

"Couple a consistent moderate exercise program with the Zone Diet and you have a formidable tool to maximize brain function."

— Barry Sears, *The Anti-Aging Zone* (1999)

If someone offered to sell you a product that was guaranteed to improve your thinking, enhance your performance, and help you live longer, would you buy it? Chances are that you would jump at such an opportunity. Ironically, this product is as near as your own kitchen. We call it food — the energy source that keeps our bodymind functioning.

However, before you head for the refrigerator, you might need to reframe how you think about food. Unless you are counting calories or watching your fat intake, you probably don't pay any attention to what you are eating. Food does more than get you through the day; it plays a critical role in keeping your

mental abilities at their peak. Your brain runs on oxygen and a simple sugar called glucose. Glucose comes from the carbohydrates you eat. Carbohydrates are simply chains of glucose molecules strung together, playfully called *G-strings* by biochemists. These G-strings are broken down during digestion, and go into the blood as glucose. You need a constant steady level of glucose in the bloodstream to keep mentally sharp. Keeping this level constant is the job of a hormone called insulin.

If the hormone serotonin is the policeman of our moods (*InfoMine*, Vol. 6, No. 2), then insulin is the traffic cop who tells our nutrients where to go and when. In the bloodstream, insulin drives the proteins, carbohydrates, and fat that you eat into their storage sites for future use. If you have too much insulin, glucose is diverted to the liver and muscles, and your brain becomes depleted of blood sugar. When this occurs, you have a hard time staying awake, and your mental capacity drops dramatically.

At the same time, you become more at risk for heart disease and a depressed immune system. At the other extreme, if insulin is too low, your cells starve.

So, how do you maintain your mental sharpness and still stay healthy? The answer is to keep insulin in an optimum range — not too high and not too low. This is the basic premise of the *Zone Diet*, as presented by Barry Sears, a PhD biochemist, researcher, and best-selling author of *Enter the Zone* and its sequel, *Mastering the Zone*.

According to Sears, *food is a drug* and should be treated "with the same respect as any prescription drug by understanding food from a hormonal perspective." It is precisely when we think of food as a drug, and understand how it works, that we can take advantage of it. He says, "The core of the *Zone Diet* is the realization that this is the way we were genetically designed to eat. In the final analysis, the *Zone Diet* is about hormonal thinking, which is different than caloric thinking. The food

doesn't change, it is only how you perceive food that changes."

Sears presents a great deal of empirical research to back up his claims. He argues that our tendency to look for a *magic bullet* or *quick fix* has compromised our view of the body as a system. This is particularly true of our fixation on fat as the main culprit responsible for major diseases. According to Sears, we have been brainwashed by nutritional experts to believe that fat is the villain, and that eating a high carbohydrate diet is the key to a healthier lifestyle. For the last 15 years, North Americans have taken this advice. In the process, we have become the most overweight people on earth, and the most unhealthy. In comparison, the French use lots of fats in their sauces, and seldom exercise. Despite this lifestyle, they have the lowest heart disease rate in Europe, and half the heart disease rate of North America.

Barry Sears explains this apparent contradiction: "In reality, the French are Zoners. They eat a balance of protein to carbohydrate at every meal. They eat primarily fruits and vegetables, they eat in moderation, and they are not afraid of fats, especially in the form of sauces." By having protein, carbohydrate, and fat at every meal, the French have the ideal recipe for the Zone Diet, with gourmet flavour as an added bonus. They even drink wine, which acts as a carbohydrate, and chase it with cheese, thereby keeping the proportions still Zone-friendly.

I'm all for eating like the French, but should we? According to Sears the answer is an emphatic yes! He maintains that we are genetically programmed to **eat a balance of protein, fat, and carbohydrates**

every time we eat. Keep in mind that eating fat alone cannot make you overweight; **it is insulin that controls the process that makes you overweight and keeps you that way.**

Sears says, "If dietary fat alone doesn't make you fat (besides not causing heart disease and cancer) then what does? The answer is excess levels of the hormone insulin. The power of the Zone is that this hormone can be controlled by the diet. Staying in the Zone keeps insulin in a range or zone — not too high, not too low. Not only can keeping insulin in a tight zone prevent you from gaining weight and help you to lose it, but also maintaining insulin in this same zone produces the following benefits:

- Thinking better
- Performing better
- Looking better
- Living better (and longer)

Who doesn't want to experience these benefits?"

Are we designed to eat gourmet French meals and drink our wine with cheese as a chaser? According to *Biological Evolutionary Theory*, our biology is still that of hunter-gatherers. We are genetically programmed to eat low-fat protein like game, non-refined carbohydrates like fruits and vegetables, and fats from nuts and animal brains. If you are not sure what category the food you are eating is in, just remember that *protein runs around while carbohydrates grow in the ground.*

Fat is important for many reasons. Fat slows the insulin response to high amounts of carbohydrates, and helps keep you in the Zone. It provides essential fatty acids for the production of important metabolic hormones, as well as forming neuron connections in the brain and body. It makes food taste good. In addition, just like having to prime a pump to get the water to flow, **it takes fat to burn**

fat! Knowing this, and being aware of what you are eating, you can go ahead and have cheesecake for dessert.

If I seem overly enthusiastic about the Zone, I am not alone. Since I started advocating the Zone as a way to feel and think better, I have been overwhelmed with the positive response from many individuals who have tried it. This is especially true for those with autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, and rheumatoid arthritis, as well as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. The success stories I hear are testimony to how reframing to a hormonal and systems view of the bodymind can be lifesaving. If you suspect that you might carry the genetic makeup for any of these diseases, you owe it to yourself and your loved ones to look into the Zone further. The best way to understand how the Zone works is to read the books and/or visit the website at www.eicotech.com.

"I have come to realize that two things in life are visceral: our beliefs about nutrition and religion. Both generate passionate feelings, and neither responds well to challenge. Both have also been responsible for the deaths of more people than all the wars mankind has waged thus far. Diet and religion are fightin' words."

— Barry Sears, **Zone Perfect Meals in Minutes** (1997)

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