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Eating in a Crisis

When there is a crisis going on, lots of things change in people's daily routines. They may spend more time worrying about bills, their safety, or their health. Big adjustments like these stand out the most, as food, shelter, and safety become top priority. The way people eat changes too, causing a lot of other issues people might not be aware of. Eating habits, and the way they are affected during a crisis, make a big impact on people's lives.

Across all the different crises and major disruptions in life, lifestyles and daily habits are bound to change in one way or another. Financial hardship is the most predictable result from any kind of tragic event in society, and it makes a huge impact on people's lives each time. Making a living for yourself and your family becomes a challenge, causing stress and anxiety for everyone involved. People get so caught up with putting food on the table, that they forget about the importance of eating as a routine . They stop paying attention to when they are eating, what they're eating, and why that is so important. When the sole act of getting food on the table is an accomplishment, people most likely don't have the time to consider things like the nutritional benefits of their ingredients, but it doesn't change how big of an impact that change in eating has on their lifestyle as a whole.

Changes in people's grocery buying habits can alter their physical, as well as mental, well-being. Food shortages and prices spiking limits people's accessibility to not just healthy foods, but things they can normally afford. Public health then becomes a concern as "an increase

in food prices is strongly associated with an increase in the consumption of less expensive processed energy–dense foods,” (Crispim, “Financial Crisis Impacts”) leading more people to gain weight and lose a balanced diet. Consistently producing healthy meals for a group of people may not be possible under severe circumstances. Also, “ In addition to changes in food quality, the quantity of food available can also impact meal frequency, portion size and meal timing.” (Crispim) These details of eating habits are not usually a concern, as people normally abide to a schedule where they can fulfill their needs accordingly. When the current condition prevents those people from controlling what kinds of foods they eat, more often than not, they will develop unsound habits that could transfer over to other parts of their lives. Besides the physical health effects this diet change would produce, their mental health would also be a concern. Consuming energy-dense foods causes uneven disbursement of energy throughout the day, making people feel tired and down on a regular basis. Eating healthy foods also makes the consumers feel better, simply because they’re aware of the health benefits, so when that option isn’t available anymore, it’s natural that people feel less content with their life.

Although eating can seem like a simple task everyone needs to do everyday to stay alive, it has deep cultural roots and patterns that eventually become second nature. Eating has turned into a combination of patterns for many people, and countries. Whether it be the ingredients they use, or the formality of the meal, eating is an essential part of happiness in life. When big events change the eating habits of people, concerns grow over the reaction communities might have. As in the case of the communist regime in Romania, when food rations and supply shortages became the new normal, the government presented everyone with the new “scientific diet, which aimed at convincing Romanians that they were eating too much, and drastically reduced their allowed consumption of basic food products such as meat, wheat and flour, oil and fruit.” (Ghita,

“Romanian Communist Eating Habits”) The government knew that the only way Romanians would accept such drastic changes to the food, as well as the culture, is if they changed the metrics of a good diet. Imposing a new communist government is a drastic event on its own, and changing the dimensions of their diet proved to be a significant task as well. Recipe books were made based on the new “scientific diet” and produced a new style of Romanian cooking, made entirely by the change in access to available ingredients under the communist regime. The people were already going through major disruptions in their day-to-day life, but those changes in their food portions stuck for generations.

It’s also important to acknowledge that these changes in people’s diets and meal frequency don’t apply to everyone. Crises don’t have the same impact on people who can afford to adjust to price spikes or even move away. People in lower socio-economic statuses endure more of the changes that come with uncontrollable events. They are much more likely to experience a negative impact on their diet because “[they are] less likely to make food purchasing choices consistent with dietary guidelines recommendations but the actual price differences between recommended and regular choices.” (Bonaccio, “Challenges to the Mediterranean Diet”) Their choices become far more affected by the changes put onto everyone. Having a less than ideal amount of money to feed a family under regular circumstances requires stress-inducing decision making; adding a crisis only makes it worse. People begin prioritizing the bare necessities like food, shelter, and safety, and they no longer have the opportunity or means to appreciate a fresh, family meal together. It’s a small part of people’s days that’s easy to forget the significance of, when there's so many other things to be worrying about, like their family’s health and well-being.

Having the ability to cook at home and consider what foods are better for their diet is not a privilege that everyone has, especially during something like the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic. While some people have been afforded the opportunity to work from home on their computer, many essential workers, usually with lower income status, still have to work under conditions that put them and their families at risk. Dietary solutions like cooking from home don't apply to everyone as "the relationship between cooking more frequently and having a better diet only holds true for higher income households." (Oaklander, "Diets During Coronavirus") The families that still go out to work might not have the time to put together a healthy meal. They might not have the resources to consistently go grocery shopping for fresh ingredients as they cost more than sodium-rich foods with long shelf-lives. With a crisis like this pandemic, there are endless dynamics to consider when finding dietary solutions for the whole population.

This crisis has had very specific effects on the livelihoods of most people. This includes quarantining for weeks at a time, which has many negative health impacts. As stated by Fara Najah, "[t]he confinement to one's home has direct effects on one's lifestyle, including dietary habits, eating, and physical activity patterns." ("Nutrition Amid the Pandemic") People have been developing unhealthy eating habits while confined in one space, due to the lack of structure in schedule on a day to day basis. It's also not unusual to see people frequently snacking, losing track of how much they are consuming and eventually gaining weight as a result. A pandemic gives way for stress and anxiety unlike how other major events might, as people grow concerned over their health, their family's well-being, and how they'll be able to get past all of it. While people have different ways of dealing with these kinds of events, it's been found that "changes in food intake may be the "natural" response to stress and heightened emotional states through both psychological and physiological mechanisms." During a crisis, there are a lot of important topics

people need to constantly think about to continue their life in a healthy, and safe way, and how they eat is one of them. Paying attention to how their body and mind respond to the struggles they are facing, in relation to the way they eat, can shape their lifestyle in a large way, as well as keep their family in a healthy state.

Thinking about eating habits and diets is good practice for any time in life, but during a crisis, it could be life-changing. It's a daily occurrence that people take for granted under normal circumstances, because they eat so frequently and easily that it doesn't require any second thoughts on the matter. Only when it gets taken away do people start considering the importance of a social setting while they're eating, or what's getting put on the table and how it will affect them in the future, assuming they are in a safe position. In the Coronavirus pandemic that the world is currently facing, "sharing meals provides emotional benefits... and that because so many of us are working and eating in the same area or nearby, cooking and sharing a meal can help us draw boundaries to stave off work-creep into our personal lives." (Herrera, "Eating is Weird Now") Going out to restaurants with friends and family was a regular part of many people's lives that they never thought would have such a big emotional toll when it wasn't there anymore. With the new normal of spending most of the day inside at home, people have also been mixing their eating and working spaces, as well as times. It's healthy practice for people to separate activities in the day so their bodies get adjusted to a schedule and setting. They stay in a rhythm where their body knows what it needs, and when. People have been eating where they tend to work, which completely throws off the body's natural pattern recognition and makes people feel hungry when they don't actually need to eat, or the opposite effect as well. Keeping track of when and how people eat is as important as keeping their families healthy during the pandemic, because those unhealthy habits might last longer than than it.

How, when, and what people eat, gets forgotten in a lot of ways when there are concerns like public health and safety involved, but that shouldn't downplay its importance in their daily lives. It is an essential aspect of life, physically and also mentally in the way it takes on a role in people's social well-being. When life completely changes in a drastic way, it's not by chance that the way we eat drastically changes too. The way those changes occur in people's eating patterns create a large effect on their lives as a whole.

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