



# Secrets of Serotonin: The Natural Hormone That Curbs Food and Alcohol Cravings, Elevates Your Mood, Reduces Pain, and Boosts Energy

By Carol Hart

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**Secrets of Serotonin: The Natural Hormone That Curbs Food and Alcohol Cravings, Elevates Your Mood, Reduces Pain, and Boosts Energy** By Carol Hart

The Natural Solution to weight control and mood enhancement.

Serotonin--a completely natural hormone manufactured by your own body--can dramatically transform your mood, reduce your appetite, and improve your life. Serotonin has a powerful effect on the brain: enough and you feel great; too little and you may binge on food or alcohol, get a migraine, or even feel suicidal. In fact, millions of people take Prozac every day to compensate for low serotonin levels without knowing that changes in diet and lifestyle may be all they need.

Now this breakthrough book helps you take charge of your own health and healing. It shows you how to boost your serotonin levels, safely and without drugs. You'll discover fast and easy-to-do daily serotonin-balancing routines and food choices that can:

- Reduce weight by natural appetite suppression
- Fight depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Curb migraines and chronic headache
- Relieve PMS
- Energize your body and eliminate fatigue

Includes a complete eating and activity program to keep your mood up, your energy high, and your appetite curbed.

Plus:

learn the pros and cons of the new serotonin-active drugs.

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

**Carol Hart, Ph.D.**, is a respected biomedical writer, editor, and researcher. She is co-author of *Natural Healing with Chinese Medicine*.

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### Secrets of Serotonin

#### Part One

#### Moods, Impulses, Appetites, Aches

##### 1

##### **Are You Glad, Sad, or Mad?**

Low moods, low energy, headaches, upset stomach, sleep problems, overeating, heavy drinking ... we all have our patterns for responding to the stress and strain of busy schedules and lives. One person may be creative, energetic, and productive for much of the year, yet sag through most of the winter, overeating and oversleeping, like a hibernating bear or a dormant plant. Another may have daily ebbs of energy and mood that can be relieved with a fast-food fix. Someone else may cope well with work and family pressures throughout the week, then get blinding migraines as soon as the weekend comes around.

For most, these mood and energy swings and stress-response patterns aren't disabling or disturbing enough to send us to a doctor or counselor for help. We may see them as inevitable, as just the way we are. Or as an inescapable by-product of high-pressure jobs and family responsibilities. *In fact, these chronic, stress-induced problems can be minimized or even eliminated by relatively simple changes in how you eat, exercise, and organize your day.*

Have you ever noticed how often these common complaints seem to be linked? A low or anxious mood is almost always accompanied by changes in eating and sleeping patterns. Stress or changes in your eating and sleeping schedule can trigger a headache. Sometimes it isn't stress but the calendar, the weather, or the time of day that brings a sudden shift in energy, spirits, and motivation. Vast numbers of people hit their lows in the early morning or late afternoon, on cloudy days, during much of the winter, or, for women, during premenstrual days.

Although stress, weather, and season can all bring on a low mood, a headache, or an eating binge, the ultimate cause is internal and chemical. An essential natural substance called serotonin is one of the body's most powerful modulators of mood, appetite, sleep, and pain awareness. It is produced in the brains and nervous systems of humans and animals from specific nutrients in the foods we eat. Avoidable fluctuations in its availability to the brain can bring on depression, anxiety, binge eating, insomnia, headaches, and a host of other common everyday problems.

Many mood-enhancing drugs, from the antidepressant Prozac to the abused drug Ecstasy (MDMA), achieve their effects by increasing the brain's supply of serotonin. You can take nutrition and lifestyle steps to enhance your serotonin supply *without drugs* to get your mood, appetite, energy, and headache problems under control. You don't need to run ten miles a day or live on raw vegetables and skim milk. This is not a case of "the cure is worse than the disease." You can learn how to ward off your mood and energy lows by scheduling your meals and snacks and choosing mood-enhancing foods. Relaxing, low-impact exercise (for example, walking or cycling) can also help control or avoid stress reactions, such as anxiety and binge eating.

Interested? Read on! The first step is understanding why moods go up and down, and why negative moods so often bring on troubling changes in your sleeping and eating habits.

### **When Our Moods Just Don't Make Sense**

Moods are different from emotions. We feel good when good things happen, bad when we experience something bad. We can feel glad or sad in response to a book, a movie, a newspaper article, a joke, or an insult, or something that happened to a friend. We can even feel happy or unhappy because of our thoughts, laughing at something we simply imagine, or frowning over an unpleasant memory.

But our moods often seem to be much more arbitrary, to have little to do with the good and the bad in our day-to-day lives. Moods are almost an internal weather system. A storm front rolls in out of nowhere, and suddenly we walk under a cloud, sullen, slow, and hard to please. Or irritable and anxious, getting angry or worried over trifles. When our mood shifts downward, often our emotional responses become muted or distorted as well. We don't laugh at jokes, we lose interest in normal activities and pleasures, and the little hassles and annoyances of daily life can seem not so little, maybe even unbearable.

Bad moods can come out of nowhere, but often they are surprisingly predictable. You might tend to feel bad in the mornings ("I hate to get up") or the late afternoons ("I just drag"), on overcast days, or for much of the winter. And for many people bad moods are accompanied by binge eating or drinking, or other impulse control problems, such as compulsive shopping or gambling.

### **The Bingeing Blues-Mood Goes Down, Eating Goes Up**

Bingeing is not that wonderful dessert you can't pass up, or the four-star meal the company is paying for. Bingeing is out-of-control overeating and snacking--a compulsion to finish the box of cookies or half-gallon of ice cream when you only intended to have a bite or two. You aren't hungry, you know you've had enough, yet you can't stop. It may not be particularly good and you aren't really enjoying it, but for the minutes that you are working your mouth, chewing and swallowing, your stressed and depressed mood is miraculously better. Alcohol is also a common self-treatment for stress and anxiety. You hold yourself together all day, but need "more than a couple" to unwind in the evening.

Not everyone overeats or overdrinks in response to depression, anxiety, or stress. A substantial number of people lose their appetite along with their good humor, particularly if they are chronically depressed or anxious. They skip meals or push their food around their plate with little interest. However, in our "you can never be too thin" society, these individuals are less likely to complain or worry about the loss of weight they suffer during their depressed or stressed period. The association between negative mood and appetite is so common and so strong that a significant, unexplained weight loss or gain is considered one of the diagnostic signs and symptoms of depression.

### **The Stressed/Depressed Response**

A sad or anxious mood can come out of nowhere, or it can be a response to stress, either a loss or setback of some kind, or more than your fair share of daily pressure. In either case, this misery usually has company. In addition to eating more or eating less, we often sleep more or less when our mood is down, and our mental and physical functioning both seem to suffer.

### **Negative Mood**

Some people are very aware of their own moods; others don't realize that they've been irritable, uncooperative, or unresponsive until they are given that feedback. The range of feelings and behaviors that fit into the general category of "bad" or negative mood is fairly diverse: negativity about oneself or others; lack of pleasure and spontaneity; worry, anxiety, or fearfulness; obsessing about real or imaginary problems; irritability; and, of course, plain old depression.

### **Stressed/Depressed**

Many people are more comfortable with saying that they are stressed, which sounds busy and important, than acknowledging that they might be anxious or depressed, which is still unfairly associated with weakness and mental illness. In reality, there is often not a great deal of difference between the two. Prolonged stress of any sort--physical exhaustion, physical danger, illness, emotional distress, or environmental stressors like inescapable noise--will produce signs and symptoms of depression in animals and humans. Often anxiety

precedes or overlaps with the depression. Anxiety is a hyperalert response to threats and to stress, while depression is the body's way of shutting down in the presence of intolerable strain. For some people, the stress response seems to be more sensitive, more easily triggered--for reasons that have more to do with biology than personal character.

### **Mood Cycles**

Everyone has up days and down days, but for many of us they fall into fairly predictable patterns. Our moods, in fact, often follow the course of the sun and the moon. A great many, if not most, people will notice that their mood deteriorates over the course of a series of overcast or stormy days. Some people are very sensitive to the effects of prolonged bad weather and suffer from what is now a well-recognized problem: seasonal affective disorder (SAD). As the hours of daylight diminish in late November and December, sufferers from SAD experience chronic depression, fatigue, overeating, and oversleeping.

Less obviously, many people have a daily mood cycle that they may relate to workplace stress or unhappiness in their job. While stress can certainly contribute, there is often a clear pattern that correlates with time of day rather than with specific events. The cycle varies, but most often sufferers will feel tired and depressed in the morning, perk up toward noon, drag in the late afternoon, then feel better again after dinner. As for the lunar cycle, mood changes and food cravings are of course very common symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and some women can mark the exact days on the calendar when they will be troubled by monthly attacks of bingeing, angry or tearful moods, or migraine.

### **Sleep**

Everyone has been kept awake at night or has awakened in the middle of the night because of a nagging worry; it's annoying but natural and maybe even helpful. You might find a solution to your problem or at least make peace with it by mulling it over quietly. It's much more frustrating and puzzling to be kept awake or to wake up early when there is no specific worry or problem driving your insomnia. Some people find that stressed, depressed, or negative moods will make normal sleep almost unobtainable. They may get intolerably sleepy in the middle of the day,...

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