

Food for Thought  
By Sarah

I'm a real hype-girl for analogies, especially when they relate to food. I appreciate whoever first discovered the power of connecting the familiar to the complex. Kudos to you, Aristotle.

As March begins, educators, parents, and students have a lot on their plates. Third quarter is wrapping up, and spring sports are coming in hot. Influenza is likely adding to the mix. During busier seasons, it's difficult to convince ourselves that simplicity exists. Any solution must be extraordinary — because only going above and beyond could possibly make things easier, right? But then the [\*National Nutrition Month\*](#) campaign offered a timely reminder. Sometimes the simplest habits create the greatest impact. When life speeds up, one of the strongest supports for our immune system and mental health may be the most basic: how we eat.

Food is not merely a “digestive system thing.” Your gut talks to your brain, and your brain talks right back. Not only that, your gut and your brain play a critical role in your body's immune response. Research from neuroscience and microbiome studies even suggests that people who show higher stress resilience often have gut profiles linked to lower inflammation. Gut-brain communication occurs in the following ways:

- **Neurotransmitters:** Your gut responds to and produces many of the same neurotransmitters that influence mood and cognition, such as GABA, serotonin, norepinephrine, dopamine, acetylcholine and melatonin. In fact, most of the body's serotonin is produced in the gut.
- **Microbiome:** Trillions of microscopic organisms inhabit your gut. This unique ecosystem boasts a diverse resumé. They break down food, make vitamins, protect against infection, help regulate your metabolism, and communicate with every cell in your body.
- **Vagus Nerve:** The 10<sup>th</sup> cranial nerve is a bidirectional highway of communication between your brain and other vital organs, including the heart, lungs, spleen, liver, and small intestines. This nerve regulates the balance of the sympathetic fight-or-flight system and the parasympathetic rest-and-digest brake, promoting relaxation, digestion, and recovery.

Digestion, inflammation, immunity, mood — all deeply connected. Dr. Jaclyn Tolentino (2026), a Functional Medicine Family Physician, explains the connection this way. *“Chronic stress directly alters immune signaling. Elevated cortisol suppresses certain immune responses while increasing inflammation. Blood sugar becomes less stable. Sleep quality drops. Gut permeability increases. Over time, this creates an immune system that's overworked and under-supported.”* Chew on that. What immunity-boosting foods can we eat that nurture our microbiomes while supporting our mental health?

A diet rich in fiber, probiotics, and anti-inflammatory foods is key. Warm, cooked foods are often easier to digest when stress is higher. Soups, stews, roasted vegetables, slow-cooked proteins, and mineral-rich broths support both digestion and hydration. Limit processed foods with excess sugar and artificial additives that can disrupt gut health.

- Fermented foods: Yogurt, kefir, kimchi, miso, sauerkraut, and apple cider vinegar help replenish healthy gut bacteria. These foods are especially important if you've been sick, have recently taken antibiotics, or deal with chronic congestion patterns.
- Fiber-rich foods: Fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains promote microbiome diversity.
- Healthy fats: Omega-3 fatty acids from fish, flaxseeds, chia seeds, and walnuts reduce inflammation.
- Berries + citrus: Blueberries, raspberries, grapefruit, and oranges deliver polyphenols and vitamin C, powerful antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents.

Strengthening resilience doesn't require something extraordinary. It's built through ordinary meals, earlier bedtimes, and steady routines. The most powerful move we can make this March isn't going over the top — it's tending well to what's already on our plates. Slow down. Nourish yourself. Resilience starts at the table.

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## Short-Form Memory and Doomscrolling

By Nick

When asking a teenager about their hobbies, it is becoming extremely common to hear “scrolling TikTok”, “watching reels,” or “watching YouTube,” all meaning that they are staring at their phone and watching videos, often less than a minute in length. This extended exposure to short-form content has led to the popular belief that attention spans are getting shorter as a result. In short, yes, short-form content has been shown to have negative effects on attention spans. Like most problems, this occurs when moderation is not being practiced. Research has shown that multiple hours of short-form content use in a day exacerbates the issue of academic procrastination, sustained and selective attention times, not unlike any other kind of social media addiction. The main difference comes in how you are not maintaining a healthy comfort with boredom and training your brain to be constantly stimulated in far shorter bursts than normal social media.

To begin with, the average youth attention span is not all that long, only ranging from 12 to 48 minutes, increasing with each year a child gets older, up until the age of 18. If you are a teacher or a parent, the idea of a teenager being able to give 48 minutes of undivided attention without an interjection of “I’m bored,” or totally spacing out, still may seem completely alien. Some of this is, of course, just normal youth behavior or general health. Having a healthy attention span is a complex issue with many important factors that can lead to lowering your average sustained attention, like sleep, diet, and daily activity. It is already hard enough to find the time and energy to have the perfect healthy lifestyle, but with the addition of short-form content addiction, the prevalence of boredom proneness is seen to increase significantly. Chipping away at an already short 12-48 minutes of continuous attention in teenagers. Keeping a healthy attention span is especially important for those who are school-age and are expected to listen and learn for 7-hour school days with limited breaks.

On the more sinister side of short-form content addiction exists a phenomenon that a lot of us know all too well called “doomscrolling”. This is the act of scrolling through content that stirs up negative emotions for extended periods. Often, this is either the news or content that is specifically made to get a rise out of its viewers. You would think that it would be easy to turn away from this kind of content since it doesn’t elicit pleasant emotions, but our brains can just as easily become addicted to or entrenched in the negative content we scroll through. Addictions like this happen because your brain will still activate its reward system due to the high stimulation caused by scrolling short-form content, even if it upsets you. Content creators know that this content is addictive and are incentivized to create more infuriating content to keep viewership high and consistent. Compounding this is the algorithm kept by every app to feed you videos that you engage with the most. During long sessions of doomscrolling, apps will see that you spend the most time on videos that are on an upsetting topic and keep recommending and forcing videos of similar topics on your screen, creating this feedback loop: You watch videos, you get upset and comment or watch the whole video, the app thinks this is content you want to see, the app recommends similar videos, repeat. Obviously, this loop is damaging to mental health. Keeping yourself in a constant state of stress and anxiety will worsen not only your current mood but also could affect existing mental health diagnoses like depression and anxiety.

The good news is that symptoms caused by short-form content addiction are not permanent. Simply limiting use is a quick way to start making your way back towards having a healthier relationship with short-form content. Limiting use is often easier said than done. Below are a couple of strategies to try out if you or someone you know is struggling to stop scrolling. Delete the apps: Sometimes, telling yourself you won't scroll too long just doesn't work, and you need to just delete apps like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. This strategy relies on your willpower alone and trust that you will not seek to reuse or redownload apps that include short-form content.

**Using Wellness Apps:** If deleting these apps on your phone is not the balance you want in life, there are apps designed to limit the time you spend on apps. Creating barriers to entry is a simple and effective way to remind yourself that you have spent plenty of time already on social media.

**Keeping your phone at a distance:** Another easy way to limit your short-form content usage is to stop always having your phone within arm's reach. Part of the reason short-form content is especially addictive is that it is so easy to scroll, even with the smallest amount of free time available, and it is constantly with you on your phone. Separating even by a few feet has proven to be enough of a buffer to make you consider what other available options could be more fulfilling or productive.

**Keep Your Phone Away From Your Bed:** Most people keep their phone within arm's reach of their bed. This makes getting into the habit of scrolling right before bed and first thing in the morning very easy. These can be especially harmful to your overall mood. In the morning, you could get a torrent of upsetting videos, putting you in a bad mood at the start of your day. At night, you risk harming the quality of your sleep due to an excess of blue light. Keeping your phone out of reach from your bed could eliminate these problems entirely.

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## Prioritizing Sleep

By Tessah

As spring approaches and daylight grows longer, it's an important reminder to prioritize sleep. Daylight saving time and seasonal changes can disrupt our daily routines, making it easier to stay up later and harder to maintain consistent rest. With that in mind, let's explore the stages of sleep, why sleep matters, what happens in the body during sleep, and how to improve your sleep hygiene.

To understand why sleep is so essential, let's first review how it works. There are two types of sleep: non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. NREM sleep makes up the first three stages of the sleep cycle. Stage one occurs when a person first falls asleep and is brief. Stage two is characterized by physiological changes: brain waves slow down, body temperature drops, breathing becomes slower, heart rate decreases, and muscles relax. This stage makes up the majority of the night and serves as a transition between light sleep (stage one) and deep sleep (stage three). Stage three (AKA deep sleep or slow-wave sleep) is described as the restorative stage of sleep. During stage three, the body experiences physical repair, hormone and mood regulation, and immune support. Finally, stage four is when REM sleep occurs. REM sleep is characterized by heightened brain activity and dreaming. Depending on the duration of rest and the age of the individual, a person will experience three to six cycles, each lasting about 90 to 120 minutes. (Citations: [Sleep.com](#) and NIH 1)

These sleep stages begin to highlight why sleep is so critical for humans. Sleep is essential for physical recovery, hormone regulation, immune function, emotional well-being, and cognitive performance. When we consistently get sufficient, high-quality rest, both the body and mind function at their best.

Sleep is a critical time for our bodies to make physical repairs. During stage three, the body enters a deeply restorative state, repairing muscles, tissues, and bones. Numerous studies have suggested that roughly 70% of the Human Growth Hormone (hGH) is released during deep sleep. hGH is responsible for physical growth and muscle growth in adults. Inadequate sleep, particularly insufficient deep sleep, can increase susceptibility to injury and slow recovery time. (Citation: Cleveland Clinic 1)

Beyond physical repair to our musculoskeletal system, sleep allows our bodies to regulate hormones that fluctuate throughout the 24-hour day. During all stages of sleep, a series of hormonal processes occur. As described above, hGH is released to support musculoskeletal repairs and development. Cortisol levels decrease, helping reduce stress. Hunger hormones adjust to control appetite. Insulin secretion increases significantly to stabilize blood sugar levels. And melatonin is released to promote the onset of sleep and continues to help maintain the sleep-wake cycle. Without consistent high-quality sleep, the endocrine system can become disrupted, leading to or worsening a series of medical complications, including severe long-term conditions like diabetes and obesity. (Citation: NIL 1)

Sleep also plays a vital role in reinforcing immune health. During stage 3 sleep, the body produces and regulates proteins and antibodies that support immune function and cell growth.

Without adequate sleep, immune defenses weaken, increasing vulnerability to illness. For example, chronic sleep deprivation is linked to hypertension and cardiovascular disease. This is because disrupted sleep-wake cycles and/or the complete lack of sleep keep blood pressure elevated for longer periods, increase heart rate, and alter hunger hormones, leading to late-night cravings and poorer dietary choices. (Citations: Cleveland Clinic 1 and NIL 2)

In addition to physical health, sleep plays a crucial role in emotional health and well-being. REM sleep is critically important to emotional regulation. The relationship between sleep and mental health conditions, including anxiety disorders and depression, is bidirectional. Individuals with insomnia are at higher risk of developing depression and anxiety disorders. Conversely, those experiencing anxiety disorders and depression are more likely to have sleep cycle disturbance. Healthy sleep patterns are essential for emotional resilience and well-being. (Citation: Stanford)

Cognitively, sleep is essential for optimal brain function. During stage 3 sleep, the brain clears metabolic waste and toxic proteins. During REM sleep, the brain resets neurotransmitters, like serotonin. These processes explain why a good night's rest leaves you feeling refreshed and mentally clearer. Memory consolidation also depends on both NREM and REM sleep, with different stages supporting different types of memory and learning. These processes are still being studied. Together, these cognitive processes prepare us for higher-level cognitive tasks like learning new information, making decisions, focusing attention, and solving problems. Without sufficient sleep, these abilities decline significantly. For students, this means receiving a full night's rest is more beneficial than staying up all night to study. (Citation: Cleveland Clinic 1)

Throughout the lifespan, sleep is very important to function, but the duration of sleep needed varies. Infants, children, and teens require more sleep than adults; the amount of sleep required decreases with age. Per the CDC, children 3-5 years need 10-13 hours, teenagers 13-18 years need 8-10 hours, and adults need at least 7 hours. (Citation: CDC)

However, the quantity of rest is not sufficient if the quality of sleep is poor. Quality of sleep is reflected by how easily one falls asleep, how often they wake during the night, and if they feel well rested the following day. Frequently waking up or difficulty falling asleep can limit the restorative benefits of sleep. And developing proper sleep hygiene becomes essential to improve sleep quality.

Sleep hygiene refers to the set of practices and habits that promote consistent, high-quality sleep. Focusing on and making improvements to sleep hygiene can lead to optimal amounts of quality rest.

Harvard Medical School has recommended the following to improve sleep hygiene: Creating a comfortable and distraction-free sleep environment. Sleep machines that mask noise and dark curtains that eliminate light are helpful for falling asleep and staying asleep. Watching TV, using a cellphone, and using other devices emit blue light that suppresses the release of melatonin, and therefore, should not be used in a sleeping environment. Additionally, Harvard's research suggests that most individuals sleep better in a slightly cooler room, between 65°F and 68°F.

Establishing a calming nighttime routine signals to the body that it's time to wind down. Therefore, limiting screen time before bed is a must to allow melatonin to be produced. At a minimum, devices should be shut off 30 minutes prior to sleep. This might require students to prioritize completing homework earlier in the day instead of procrastinating homework until before bed.

Keeping a consistent sleep and wake schedule. This means going to bed and waking up at the same time every day, even on weekends.

Regulating food, beverage, and nicotine consumption during the afternoon and evening hours. Avoiding caffeine in the afternoons and evenings may help you fall asleep and stay asleep. Alcohol might make a person feel sleepy; however, alcohol severely disrupts the sleep cycle, causing frequent waking and reducing the restorative benefits of sleep described above. Additionally, it's best to avoid heavy meals late in the evening. Instead, meals should be consumed three hours before bed. Similar to coffee, nicotine is a stimulant and should be avoided before bed, if not altogether.

Completing physical activity during the day also prepares the body for better quality sleep. Exercise helps individuals fall asleep faster and increases the duration and quality of deep sleep. Per a Harvard-published article, there is some variability in when exercise should occur: some individuals exercise in the evening and do not experience issues falling asleep, while others do and need to exercise early in the day.

As daylight increases and schedules shift with the changing seasons, staying mindful of sleep habits can make a meaningful difference in your overall health, cognitive performance, and emotional well-being. Prioritizing sleep is a foundational component of long-term physical, cognitive, and mental health.

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