



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

You are what (and where) you eat

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Dear Susan,

There is real tension in our office about whether people should be allowed to eat at their desks. We are in cubicles or partitioned offices and food smells travel. Takeout and fast foods are the worst. As department head, I'm the most senior person in the office but if I use my authority to impose a rule on the entire administrative group that might create even more conflict. Please comment.

- *The Sensitive Nose*

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Sensitive,

Lunch can be considered the Rorschach test of any office - with napkin stains replacing the inkblots. A mass exodus at noon to the cafeteria or a restaurant says as much about the collective psyche as the fast-food haze that hangs over those who won't leave their desks. Both extremes are signs of pathology, in my view.

As a psychologist, I urge you to consider the context and history of the office environment along with the symptoms: What is it, exactly, that glues your staff's backsides to their chairs for more than five hours at a stretch? And what prompts them to choose from that controversial menu, fast food?

What anyone eats is their business, but an office is a social hierarchy and diet can be a good marker of one's place in the pecking order. The latest research on some of our closest relatives - rhesus monkeys at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta - tells us that what we eat and how much we scarf down at one time point directly to our status and daily levels of stress.

Mark Wilson, the neuroscientist who tested the relationship between food and stress among the primates at Yerkes, found that higher-ranked females eat much more than the less-dominant girls - and are apparently unconcerned about what this does to their figures.

Even if females lower on the social ladder can eat as much as they want, the stress of currying favour with the grande-dames and popularity queens prompts them to secrete cortisol, a hormone that dampens their appetites, especially when twigs, grass and leaves are on the menu.

But consider this: When the low-status females are offered a high fat, highly sweetened banana-flavoured mix, their appetites are suddenly piqued. The possibility of eating the equivalent of chocolate bars or French fries drenched with ketchup, means the high- and low-status females switch places. Given a fast-food option, the lower-ranked monkeys down far more calories than their social superiors, and do so at all times of day.

Increased competition makes other kinds of mammals binge on high calories, too. Fatty foods are preferred when rodents are stressed out, as metabolizing fats lowers cortisol, probably one reason why mammals evolved to find these fatty foods so tasty in the first place.

In evolutionary history, the secretion of stress-related hormones instructed our bodies to lay in the high-octane supplies so as to prepare for worse times to come. Those with the capacity to seek out and chow down on those calorie-rich foods would have been readier for whatever disaster hit them, and more likely to survive.

And as females would have had that extra energy burden to carry - their offspring - it's no surprise that females in particular evolved to stockpile those extra calories when the going got rough.

What does all this monkey business have to do with you? Work-related stress is the issue, and any edicts about what and where to eat likely will be resented by your staff - taken as yet more proof that having to work means having no control.

As Toronto food writer Gina Mallet observes: "When you work at an office, you're under tremendous stress. You eat more when you eat alone at your desk, because eating is an emotional event."

But there are benefits to leaving one's desk to eat, other than calorie and stress reduction. Sharing a meal engenders a more natural level of collegiality, which Ms. Mallet recalls as *de rigueur* in the offices of the 1970s. "Henry Booth Luce at Time Magazine used to say: 'Why did I hire people with ideas if they can never exchange them?' "

Still, people can become hot-headed about food, so it is wise to acknowledge the dispute without imposing a dictum from on high. Instead, encourage employees to seek a change of scene midday.

Give them permission to take a real break - to do a few errands, get some exercise, or to eat their lunch together, whether at a restaurant, in the park, or at the fast food counter of their choice.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap.

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