



Your Brain on Food: How Chemicals Control Your Thoughts and Feelings

Gary L. Wenk

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Why is eating chocolate so pleasurable? Can the function of just one small group of chemicals really determine whether you are happy or sad? Does marijuana help to improve your memory in old age? Is it really best to drink coffee if you want to wake up and be alert? Why is a drug like PCP potentially lethal? Why does drinking alcohol make you drowsy? Do cigarettes help to relieve anxiety? What should you consume if you are having trouble staying in your chair and focusing enough to get your work done? Why do treatments for the common cold make us drowsy? Can eating less food preserve your brain? What are the possible side effects of pills that claim to make your smarter? Why is it so hard to stop smoking? Why did witches once believe that they could fly?

In this book, Gary Wenk demonstrates how, as a result of their effects on certain neurotransmitters concerned with behavior, everything we put into our bodies has very direct consequences for how we think, feel, and act. The chapters introduce each of the main neurotransmitters involved with behavior, discuss its role in the brain, present some background on how it is generally turned on and off, and explain ways to influence it through what we consume.

Your Brain on Food: How Chemicals Control Your Thoughts and Feelings Details

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Alyssa Shulman says

I may be a bit biased since this was written by one of my favorite professors, but this is a great read and a great supplement to his class! A lot of reviews say that the "title is misleading because it's REALLY about drugs", but A) Dr. Wenk LITERALLY SAYS IN THE BEGINNING that there is little to no difference between food and drugs, and B) HE DIDN'T GET TO CHOOSE THE TITLE. It's filled with interesting information and fun anecdotes, some of which Dr. Wenk has elaborated on or mentioned during lecture and office hours. Some reviews doubt the validity of the stories, but I can tell you that you wouldn't BELIEVE the weird sh*t that people admit to in lectures *flashes back to one guy telling the class about his pee for 5 minutes*. If you want to know how certain chemicals found in food/drugs affect your brain and body, read this.

Peg says

Actually I was hoping for more on how actual food effects my thoughts and feelings. Most of the chemicals he talked about were drugs of some sort, both legal and illegal. The stuff on coffee and chocolate were especially confirming! The author is a neuologist and the book is very interesting. He infuses his information with humor, some of it very subtle, so that makes it fun. IT's a pretty quick read.

Stephanie says

dull. also, too complex for beginners to neuroscience, yet not complex enough for those who have a background in neuroscience. I found he jumped around topics too much.

Deb says

Unexpected but worthwhile

While reading this book, I felt like I was a student who signed up for a class called "Your Brain on Food" but instead was somehow switched into one called "Your Brain on Drugs." Not that this was a undesirable switch...just an unexpected one.

And, it's no coincidence that I felt like I was in class while reading this book--the author is, after all, a college professor. The book's presentation, style, and content are rather lecture-like, but, nonetheless effectively accomplish the author's mission of showing how: "anything you consume--the drugs you take, the foods you eat--can affect how your neurons behave, and subsequently, how you think and feel." (p. X)

In the beginning of the book, the author/professor presents a clear overview of basic neurochemistry, nicely summarizing the path of neurotransmitter production, release, reuptake, and inactivation. (I've actually marked this section to revisit again whenever I need a quick neurochemistry refresher.) The rest of the book

focuses on how:

"Drugs and the contents of our diet can interact with any of these various processes and impair, or even sometimes enhance, the production of neurotransmitters, as well as impair their storage into synaptic vesicles, alter their release from neurons, modify their interaction with receptor proteins, slow their reuptake, and possibly even stop their enzymatic inactivation. Because your brain is the organ of the mind, drugs and food that do any of these things can have a profound influence on how you think, act, and feel." (pp. 14-15)

Sitting through this lecture, uh, I mean, reading this book, you'll learn the key responses associated with specific neurotransmitters, including: learning, memory, and attention with acetylcholine; arousal and euphoria with norepinephrine and dopamine; processing of sensory information and mood with serotonin; excitation and neuroplasticity with glutamate; inhibition with GABA; and euphoria and pain reduction with opiates.

And, receiving the full benefits of being taught by a professor, you'll be entertained with stories of his students who have vividly demonstrated the effects of drugs on various neurotransmitter systems. Let's see...there was the one student who became temporarily paralyzed after drinking alcohol at fraternity parties to the delight of others who would place his limbs in odd positions. And, then there was the student who would collect her boyfriend's urine after he used the stimulant mescaline, realizing she was able to experience the high, without the nasty GI side effects experienced when taken in its "pre-digested" form. And, then there was that other student who consumed an entire container of nutmeg dissolved in applesauce, but instead of being able to enjoy the sought-after aphrodisiac effects, he was stuck in the bathroom for the weekend. These stories might stick in your mind long after the more academic details of the drug-induced neurotransmitter responses have faded.

(True to lecture form, at the end of his teachings, the professor even provides you with a little quiz to see if you really were paying attention.)

Although the content and delivery of the book might not be what's expected, what it does provide is certainly worthwhile.

Hamideh Mohammadi says

Great book that introduces you to the effect of "chemicals" on your brain and consequently your life. Chemicals such as medicine, aspirin, acetaminophen, morphine, heroine, cocaine, crack, alcohol, and caffeine. If you are hoping to read about neuroscientific impact of eating pizza or broccoli (as featured on the cover) you'll be disappointed, as, contrary to its name and its cover, this book opens the door for you to find this information by familiarizing you with your brain.

Hjsmith79 says

There's very little attention paid to actual food and its effect on the brain. Instead, the title would best be changed to "Neurotransmitters Make Us Kooky". That aside, it's a great guide to how neuropeptides control our thinking, movement, mood, awareness and sometimes our personality.

Did you know that the Magi's gifts to Mary, frankincense and myrrh, were not only exotic, fancy-sounding substances one only mentions at Christmas, but both are fairly potent analgesics? Or that our brains manufacture its own versions of morphine and THC? Or that we share many of the same neurotransmitters as teeny, tiny one-celled organisms? It's pretty cool.

But if you want to know what type of vegetable to eat to get really high, this book doesn't address that. It talks about some great hallucinogenic plants used by other cultures to induce religious experiences, but you're on your own if you want to hunt mushrooms in the woods.

Alison Raman says

Although an interesting read, I was disappointed by Wenk's lack of depth throughout the book, overgeneralization, and all too frequent use of "correlation" or "may correlate." As correlation does not equal causation, I believe he misleads readers into the cause and effect of what we ingest and how it *might* affect our brains. Similarly, he repeatedly uses "recent study" and goes on to describe how said study demonstrated a particular effect, but the precise study is not referenced anywhere in the book. I also think some of his explanations are likely vastly oversimplified to reach a broad audience.

On a more positive side, his historical vignettes describing how ancient and modern humans have experimented with and used both plant and synthetic substances to affect states of consciousness, arousal, and pain levels are entertaining and interesting. His main thesis is that what we ingest, be it food or drugs, does impact our brain function, that he makes clear and presents compelling evidence that this matters. I am, however, wary of some of the conclusions/correlations he draws as the rigorous evidence to support such conclusions, to me, appears to be lacking, at least as presented in this book.

Ariadna73 says

I absolutely LOVED this book. I was for a very long time looking for some source that could explain to me in plain English what the h*ck happens in the brain when chemicals hit it, and this one did exactly that. Moreover, it went from food to hard drugs in a few pages, and I loved it. I will definitely read it a second time, and I have all its suggested readings in my queue now, because it is such a great and elegant explanation. I will very happily read other books and papers written by this same author if there are any.

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Autumn says

I absolutely loved this book! I finished it a few days ago, and I'm still looking at parts that were particularly interesting. I chose this as a food unit book, and in that aspect it failed slightly. There was a lot more on drugs, and less on food. Nevertheless, the psychological aspect in the text was intriguing! I would definitely recommend this book to anyone interested in psychology or how drugs (some found in foods) affect it. You should also read if you ever wonder what makes us eat what we do!!

Heather says

The title and the cover are completely misleading. Pretty much the only thing about foods (with the exception of coffee and chocolate) the author said was that the amounts of certain chemicals are not enough to produce significant effects, if any.

That said, I did learn a few things about how different drugs effect the brain. For instance, I never knew why so many medications prohibit you from drinking alcohol (it multiplies the effects and can be fatal). I also learned why teenagers are so wreckless:

Essentially, your frontal lobes tell you that it's a bad idea to drink alcohol and drive or to ignore the consequences of taking ecstasy. When your frontal lobes finally complete their process of myelination, they begin to work properly and you stop doing stupid things. Most importantly, you stop feeling immortal. Apparently, women finish this process by age 25 years and men finish by age 30. [...] This delay in brain maturation among males may explain the behavior of many members of college fraternities.

There are entire books that discuss each of the different sections in this book. This one is meant as an introduction, and there is a small suggested further reading section in the back.

Many books have been written about religion and brain chemistry, but I love this quote: "A recent investigation discovered that the tendency to display extravagant religious behaviors correlated significantly with atrophy (i.e., shrinkage) of the right hippocampus in patients with untreatable epilepsy."

Melanie says

This may be one of the most misleading book titles I've ever encountered. In the entire book, there are maybe a handful of sentences actually discussing food. Presumably "Your Brain on Drugs" was already claimed by those PSAs, but that would be the far more accurate title for the book. The vast majority of it discusses the effects of various drugs on the brain, particularly with regards to neurotransmitters. Additionally, the author doesn't seem entirely sure of who his audience is. The book is somewhat too advanced for a layperson audience, but a bit too simplified for an audience with a background in psych/neuro/brain science and several chunks of it come off as him trying to come across as the "cool professor." Many of the facts were fairly interesting, but all in all it was a strange read.

Matty Esco says

As a weightlifter, drug enthusiast, and psych nerd, this book was everything I could've asked for. I got through it in Barnes and Noble in an hour. It's nice to get some concise, scientifically supported answers to those old myth questions about coffee's benefit/harm ratio, or some stripped down non-propagandist perspectives on marijuana's neurological usefulness (or lack thereof). The insulin/leptin cycle bit was especially interesting, since I played around with intermittent fasting for a few months, but the most hard evidence I could find at the time was a dubious Israeli study with both a control and experimental group of obese cops. (as opposed to the other kind, right? heyo000)

It reinforced a lot of things I'd already read, but it was especially encouraging to hear them peer-reviewed and coming from a man as overeducated as Wenk, as opposed to from some clickbait Facebook link that redirects to an edgy black webpage with TESTOSTERONE in the url and a flashing banner trying to sell you Goku tanktops.

Natalie says

This book was not quite what I expected it to be. There wasn't actually much going on in the book concerning FOOD and how it controls your thoughts and feelings. I thought the neuroscience aspect of the book would have been a bit more in depth, but no. However, there was a section concerning psychedelic mushrooms, urine drinking and vikings that proved mildly interesting, not something I intend to try personally, but entertaining all the same.

Kara Bachman says

Well ... this didn't deliver on what it promised. This was mostly about hallucinogenic drugs, and actually contained very little about food.
