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The Hungry Brain: Outsmarting The Instincts That Make Us Overeat

THE HUNGRY BRAIN



Outsmarting the
Instincts That
Make Us Overeat

Stephan J. Guyenet, Ph.D.

Read by Aaron Abano



Synopsis

From an obesity and neuroscience researcher with a knack for engaging, humorous storytelling, *The Hungry Brain* uses cutting-edge science to answer the questions: Why do we overeat, and what can we do about it? No one wants to overeat. And certainly no one wants to overeat for years, become overweight, and end up with a high risk of diabetes or heart disease - yet two thirds of Americans do precisely that. Even though we know better, we often eat too much. Why does our behavior betray our own intentions to be lean and healthy? The problem, argues obesity and neuroscience researcher Stephan J. Guyenet, is not necessarily a lack of willpower or an incorrect understanding of what to eat. Rather, our appetites and food choices are led astray by ancient, instinctive brain circuits that play by the rules of a survival game that no longer exists. And these circuits don't care about how you look in a bathing suit next summer. To make the case, *The Hungry Brain* takes listeners on an eye-opening journey through cutting-edge neuroscience that has never before been available to a general audience. *The Hungry Brain* delivers profound insights into why the brain undermines our weight goals and transforms these insights into practical guidelines for eating well and staying slim. Along the way it explores how the human brain works, revealing how this mysterious organ makes us who we are.

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Customer Reviews

I am a long-time fan of Stephan's blog, Whole Health Source, so I was super excited about this book. And, if we're being completely honest, I wondered how he was going to top his already thorough, engaging, and meticulously crafted blog posts. Well,

let's just say it did not disappoint! If Whole Health Source is a little treasure trove of ancestrally-motivated diet and lifestyle advice built on nuggets of rigorous science, then this book is the full gold mine. It also brings neuroscience front and center, whereas on the blog I feel like the inner workings of the brain make important but only occasional appearances. And the material goes deep. For a neuroscience beginner like me, the amount of information borders on overwhelming, mitigated only by the fact that our author writes in almost obsessively clear prose. I am looking forward to digging through the book again, this time with Wikipedia open in the next tab. For those not already familiar with the material, it definitely gives you enough for a few pass-throughs. As for the inevitable question: Will this book help you lose weight? It is not a diet book. That said, it does contain a lot of advice for weight control that is rather different than the usual stuff out there. In particular, it focuses on "neural quirks" that persuade your body to naturally want less food, no willpower required. Best of all, you'll know exactly why each tip works. Absolutely recommend! Please write more stuff, Stephan! :)

If you follow nutrition researchers online (not diet gurus, but actual researchers), you may already know of Stephan Guyenet. He's written about some of the most compelling nutrition topics over the past decade or so, and this book fleshes out one of the most interesting: why the non-conscious brain plays such a big part in overeating, and how we can address that. The "we" includes you, your family/friends, clinicians, and public health decision-makers. Here are some reasons why this book is especially good:

- 1) It's written clearly. Some well-meaning scientists write books that are overly long, repeating themselves over and over and not having a central thesis or practical recommendations. Stephan has always been a clear writer, and this book reflects that. Plus the language isn't too technical for a layperson. For example: "The hypothalamus doesn't care what you look like in a bathing suit next summer, and it doesn't care about your risk of developing diabetes in ten years. Its job is to keep your energy balance sheet in the black, and it takes that task very seriously because it was essential for survival and reproduction in the time of our distant ancestors"
- 2) It discusses actual experiments, in-depth. You cannot truly understand a topic this complex without knowing the history of evidence behind it. This book covers a range of evidence, from bench science experiments, to randomized trials in the US, to observational evidence in indigenous cultures, like the Yanomamo of the Amazon and !Kung San of the Kalahari desert.
- 3) It has pictures! The illustrations are actually really well-done and useful. Overall, this is a great read. If you're a nutrition nerd, I'd highly recommend taking a gander.

"I'd do anything to be healthy, except eat right and exercise," said the comedian. Why do people gorge themselves into ill health and painful, life-shortening diseases, year after year? Is eating for nutrition really so unpleasant that more and more of us prefer a lifetime of diabetes, obesity, and constant pain? Guyenet combines neurological expertise with an accessible writing style to explain clearly why so many of us lack the ability to choose otherwise. In simple terms, our brains are finely tuned to an ancestral environment where food was hard to get and much less palatable than it is today. Extremely palatable foods combining sugar, salt, fat and similar ingredients simply didn't exist until recent generations, and consuming them wreaks havoc with our otherwise robust metabolisms. Instincts that normally prevent starvation drive us instead to chronically overeat. You'll learn about the various structures and chemicals in the brain that govern decision-making and learning in general, and how these apply to food. You'll read one of the most competent descriptions of the fat-storage hormone leptin, how it works and how we become resistant to its effects. Most valuably, you'll learn practical tips for controlling one of life's most difficult challenges: chronic hunger. Perhaps the most profound and useful insight is that just as overly stimulating foods inexorably drive fat gain, bland foods inexorably drive leanness. Guyenet makes the crucial point that it is not those who are accustomed to a bland diet who suffer from cravings and binges, but those who are accustomed to hyperpalatable foods. Those of us who are serious about controlling their body composition will find that this agrees with our experience, and will make the most of this insight, helped along by Guyenet's memorable explanations and recounting of key experiments. Guyenet unfortunately wastes a chapter on ill-conceived public policy recommendations. He suggests coercive measures such as increased taxation based on the premise that giving people correct information is not enough to result in healthy choices. He then segues without irony into a chapter of information that you, the reader, can use to make healthy choices. He also focuses on the brain to the exclusion of the enteric nervous system -- the gut -- and its resident microbiome, where all the neurotransmitters found in the brain are also produced, often in much greater quantity. This is a rapidly emerging field of study, and it is disappointing that he does not even mention the seminal experiments demonstrating obese mice spontaneously becoming lean when populated with gut flora from lean mice. Microbiology is not his specialty, but then neither is sleep science nor the psychology of stress control, topics which he ably summarizes. More detail on the neural effects of exercise on adiposity would have been welcome. Why, for example, are sprinters lean and muscular but distance runners skinny-fat? What about the hormones ghrelin and orexin and their effect on stimulating appetite? How about insulin resistance and its effect blunting fat metabolism and possible role in Alzheimer's? What about micronutrient deficiency and its roles in promoting hunger even when a satiating amount

of calories have been consumed? But it is not fair to expect him to cover all these topics, and in fact a credit to his skill that we wish he would. This book is not the final word on controlling adiposity, but represents a large and underappreciated piece of the puzzle.

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