

Community-Supported Agriculture

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Brain plasticity is a two-way street. The brain is amazingly malleable; the brain is amazingly vulnerable. Every decision we make every day either supports brain health or compromises it. Every decision. All our thoughts, our feelings and our behaviors either contribute to cell stability and new growth or cell damage and atrophy. Sleep habits, food habits, exercise habits, emotional controls, levels of productivity and social connectedness as well as our survival and adapting skills contribute approximately seventy-five percent to whether we remain healthy or succumb to one or more long-term chronic diseases. (Our genes account for only twenty-five percent of our predisposition toward brain health or brain disease.)

After half a century of a food supply increasingly dominated by processing and flavor plants, we are beginning to realize that much of what lingers on our supermarket shelves, and our drugstores and gas stations and food courts, bears little resemblance to real food. Fifty years ago, we thought the brain was a fixed, hard-wired organ over which we had little impact. Today, thanks to technology, we know differently. Since up to thirty percent of our calories go to fueling our brain, it makes sense to eat as though our life depends on it, for it truly does.

Tomatoes are the latest recall of a food that we are currently experiencing in this country because of the risk of salmonella. This time, the food authorities are struggling to even identify the country of origin, much less the region or farms. As long as we continue to expect all foods in all seasons we will be importing much or most of what we eat. This means higher fuel costs, plant products modified to withstand travel time and foods on our tables not picked when optimally ripe and full of antioxidants and nutrients – not to mention the added risks of contamination.

Do we have an alternative? Absolutely. In this country, CSA's (community supported agriculture) are a relatively new idea in farming. Begun in Switzerland and Japan during the 1960's, CSA's were created out of consumer concern for safe food and the farmers' concern for stable markets. In simple terms, a CSA is a community supported farm made up of individuals who pledge their support in advance and in return receive a share of the farms products - fruits, vegetables, meat and/or dairy products. CSA's began in the United States in 1984 when Jan Vander Tuin introduced the European concept. Beginning slowly with one farm on the west coast, the first season offered only apples, cider and vinegar. By the second season an array of produce was offered and coast to coast farms were begun in Kimberton, PA and Wilton, N.H. Today, there are between 2,000 – 3,000 CSA's available throughout our country, including in our own backyard.

Although CSA's take many forms, all share a community commitment to building a more local and equitable agricultural system. Growers can focus on maintaining productive and profitable small local farms and consumers have a steady source of locally grown, often organic or biodynamically farmed, products through the purchase of "shares." Here is how one local CSA, Landisdale Farm, works. By purchasing a half share (serves 1- 2) for \$345.00 I pick up a box of produce at the farm once a week on Wednesday afternoon for a growing season of 22 weeks. I do not know ahead of time what I will be getting but the box will have approximately seven – eight items. If there is something I do not like, I can substitute a different item or double up on a favorite. All of their fruits and vegetables are certified organic. Grass fed beef, organic and raw milk, organic eggs, and farmstead cheeses are also available for purchase.

So far, I have received strawberries, spinach, green onions, rhubarb, Chinese cabbage, kale, Swiss chard, garlic tops, snap peas and red and green leaf lettuces. I have also purchased some additional baby squashes, eggs and

meats. I have been challenged to find some new recipes as I have eaten some of these greens for the very first time – Toscana soup with sweet sausage and kale, spinach and green chili quiche, Swiss chard and risoni soup with fresh basil, green mango and cucumber salad, and cold strawberry rhubarb soup. It has been fun; it has been healthy (not to mention delicious); and I feel connected to one Lebanon County farm and the people who live in it.

The knowledge that I know the people growing or raising most of food is comforting. The freshness (Most everything is harvested the day I pick up.) is obvious and the curiosity about what I am getting each week is also good for my brain, knowing I will inevitably be trying out, creating or sharing new recipes with other community supporters. We are in the season of leafy greens right now and early fruits and vegetables. A little later, I can anticipate herbs, tomatoes, melons, yams, broccoli and much more. The reduction of pollutants, the lack of pesticides, the ripeness and freshness of these plant foods and the social connectedness of meeting with the family weekly are all important components to my brain health.

Lebanon County is blessed with a strong agricultural tradition. We have many farm stands available throughout the county and possibly one or two other CSA's that I could not locate through the internet. Neighboring counties such as Lancaster, York and Adams also offer a wide variety of locally produced food. If you would like more information about CSA's, or Landisdale Farm, you may go to our website www.mhaleb.org or contact the farm directly at 865-6220. We also have links to a berry farm in Adams County, a fruit farm where you can pick your own, or settle in for a local peach festival with live country music, as well as some of the mentioned recipes. This summer commit to eating as though your life depends on it, for it does.

By Janet Frick, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County