



THE GUT + BRAIN EDITION

Your gut runs the *show*.

How the food you eat at lunch quietly decides whether you crash at 3 pm, snap at a coworker by 4, and still have something left for dinner. A plain-English guide to the gut-brain axis.



by *Julia Garrahan*

MASTER NUTRITION THERAPIST

10 MIN READ

Pour the coffee



Hi, I'm *Julia*.

I'm a Master Nutrition Therapist, and I built Wholara because I got tired of watching smart, capable people grind themselves into burnout while every wellness app told them to drink more water and meditate.

Water and meditation are great. They're also not the whole story.

This little book is about the part nobody talks about at work: how your gut quietly steers your focus, your motivation, and your mood every single day. The good news? You're already feeding it. You just might not know what it's been asking for.



Grab your coffee. This will take about as long as a meeting that should have been an email.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Five short *chapters*, ten honest minutes.

- 01** Your gut is talking to your brain right now p. 04
And it has opinions about your morning coffee.
-
- 02** Meet the four messengers p. 06
The chemicals running your workday, in plain English.
-
- 03** The 3 pm crash, explained p. 10
Why lunch decides whether you survive the afternoon.
-
- 04** What to actually eat p. 11
No 30-step protocol. Just real food, real often.
-
- 05** Start here on Monday p. 13
Five small moves that actually fit in a workweek.

CHAPTER 01

Your gut is talking to your *brain* right now.

There is a private phone line between your stomach and your skull. It is always open, it never sleeps, and it's having a very real conversation about whether you can focus on the spreadsheet in front of you.

Scientists call this the **gut-brain axis**. Picture it this way: your gut and your brain are coworkers on a Slack channel they cannot mute. Your gut sends messages up. Your brain sends instructions down. It all runs on the **vagus nerve**, basically the fiber-optic cable of your nervous system.

Here is the part that surprises most people. The lining of your gut produces around **90 percent of your body's serotonin**, the chemical we think of as the brain's "happy and steady" hormone. Not 9 percent. Ninety. Most of your mood chemistry is being mixed up south of your ribcage, then mailed upstairs.

90%

of your serotonin is made in your gut, not your brain.

100M+

neurons line your gut. It's called your "second brain."

The tiny tenants paying your rent.

You also have trillions of microbes living in your gut. Together they're called your **microbiome**, and they are not freeloaders. They digest things you can't, make vitamins, and help build the brain chemicals that get you through a Tuesday.

When your microbiome is diverse and well-fed, the research links it to better mood and sharper thinking. When it's out of whack, things drift the other way. More inflammation. More brain fog. A shorter fuse.

The food you eat is not just feeding you. It's feeding the tiny civilization that mixes most of your mood chemistry.

CHAPTER 02

Meet your *four* messengers.

Every move you make at work, the focus, the patience, the spark of motivation, runs on a handful of brain chemicals. Four of them really matter, and your gut has a hand in all four.

Think of these like the cast of a small ensemble show. Each one has a job. When one is missing or off-balance, the whole performance gets weird. Here's the cast.

● Serotonin

THE STEADY ONE

Mood, calm, even-keeled focus. The grown-up in the room.

*Built from **tryptophan**: eggs, turkey, oats, bananas, aged cheese.*

● Dopamine

THE MOTIVATOR

Drive, reward, the "let's do this" feeling. Crosses things off your list.

*Built from **tyrosine**: lean proteins, beans, nuts, seeds.*

● GABA

THE CALM DOWN BUTTON

Quiets a racing brain. Helps you stop spiraling at 2 am.

*Boosted by **fermented foods**: yogurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut.*

● Norepinephrine

THE ALARM CLOCK

Alertness, attention, the spike that wakes you up for the big meeting.

*Also built from **tyrosine**, like dopamine's cousin.*

Let's spend a page on each one. Quick, no jargon walls.



MESSENGER ONE · SEROTONIN

The reason you didn't *snap* at the email.

Serotonin is the chemical your body makes when you want to feel like a person who handles things. Stable. Even. Not weepy at 4 pm, not coiled like a spring at 9 am. It's not a buzz. It's a baseline.

Remember that wild stat from the last chapter? About 90 percent of it is made in your gut, by special cells in your intestinal lining. Those cells get help from gut bacteria, specifically a group called **spore-forming bacteria**, which basically nudge your gut to keep production running.

To build serotonin, your body needs an amino acid called **tryptophan**. You can't make tryptophan yourself. You have to eat it. Which is why the foods on the list to the right matter more than they sound like they should.

Serotonin's grocery list **TRYPTOPHAN**

Real foods that give your gut what it needs to keep the steady-mood factory open for business:

Eggs

Turkey

Oats

Bananas

Aged cheese

Salmon

Pumpkin seeds

Tofu

When the microbiome is hurting (too much processed food, too little fiber, a lot of alcohol, chronic stress), that gentle nudge to make serotonin gets weaker. Less serotonin tends to show up as low mood, more reactivity, and a brain that struggles to settle into deep focus.

If you feel like you're holding it together by your fingernails, your gut may simply be running low on raw materials. Sometimes the answer is breakfast.

A quick honesty note: a lot of this research started in mice, and human studies are still catching up. We're not promising bananas will fix your week. We're saying the science is real and the food is cheap.

MESSENGER TWO · DOPAMINE



The little voice that says *"let's go."*

Dopamine is the chemistry of getting something done. Not the burnout-grind kind. The healthy kind. The "I started the project and now I want to finish it" feeling. It rewards your brain for moving toward goals, which is why a really productive morning feels so satisfying.

Your body builds dopamine from an amino acid called **tyrosine**, and there's a small but interesting catch: certain gut bacteria can compete with you for tyrosine. If the wrong populations are dominant, less of it reaches your brain. Translation? A gut that's out of balance can quietly siphon off your get-up-and-go.

Dopamine's grocery list **TYROSINE**

Foods that supply the precursor your brain uses to build motivation chemistry:

Chicken

Lean beef

Fish

Eggs

Lentils

Almonds

Pumpkin seeds

Soy

Avocado

Omega-3s, the unsung helpers.

There's solid evidence that omega-3 fatty acids, the kind in fatty fish like salmon and sardines, support dopamine activity in the brain. They also calm inflammation, which the brain quietly loves. If fish isn't your thing, walnuts, flax, chia, and algae oil can stand in.

TRY THIS

If motivation has felt off lately, look at your breakfast. A sad muffin and coffee gives your body very little tyrosine. Two eggs with avocado and a handful of berries gives your body real materials to work with.

MESSENGERS THREE & FOUR

The *calm* button and the *alarm* clock.

GABA · The Calm Down Button

GABA is your brain's way of saying "okay, that's enough." It quiets activity, slows racing thoughts, and helps you actually feel done at the end of the workday. Low GABA tends to look like 2 am ceiling-staring, jittery energy, and a brain that won't stop rehearsing the meeting you already had.

Here's the cool part: certain bacteria in your gut, especially *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, can actually make GABA themselves. In one famous study, mice given a *Lactobacillus* strain became measurably calmer. When researchers cut the vagus nerve, the effect disappeared. That's how we know the gut-to-brain phone line is real.

GABA's grocery list

FERMENTED + PREBIOTIC

Foods that either contain helpful bacteria or feed the ones you already have:

Yogurt

Kefir

Kimchi

Sauerkraut

Miso

Garlic

Onions

Leeks

Asparagus

Norepinephrine · The Alarm Clock

Norepinephrine wakes you up, sharpens your attention, and powers the "okay, focus" mode you need for the hard hour of work. It's helpful in small doses and exhausting in large ones. Chronic stress and a beat-up gut can keep norepinephrine cranked up too high for too long, which is a one-way ticket to burnout city.

It's built from tyrosine (same as dopamine), so the food list overlaps. The bigger lever here isn't really food, it's whether your gut is calm enough to let your stress hormones come back down between fires.

Your stress response was designed for occasional tigers, not a fourteen-hour day of small ones. Your gut is one of the things that helps you climb back down.

CHAPTER 03

The 3 pm crash, *explained.*

If you have ever felt like a coherent human at noon and a slightly damp dishrag by 3, it's not your fault and it's not (just) your workload. It's mostly your blood sugar.

Here's what happens. You eat something with a lot of fast carbs and not much else. A sandwich on white bread, a granola bar, a sugary latte, whatever. Your blood sugar shoots up. Your pancreas panics a little and dumps insulin. Insulin does its job too well. Blood sugar nosedives. Your brain, which lives on glucose, suddenly feels like the lights flickered.

That's the crash. Foggy thinking. Irritability. The sudden, undeniable need for a cookie or a third coffee or a nap under your desk.

The trick isn't avoiding carbs. It's slowing them down.

When you pair carbs with **protein, fat, and fiber**, blood sugar rises more gently and comes down more slowly. No nosedive. No 3 pm cliff. Your brain stays online.

Same sandwich, totally different afternoon: white bread becomes whole grain, turkey gets added, avocado and lettuce show up, and now lunch is a steady release of fuel for four hours instead of a sugar firework that ends in tears.

THE 3 PM RULE

If you can answer yes to "is there protein, fat, and fiber on my plate?" you've already beaten 80 percent of the afternoon crash. That's the whole trick.

One more thing worth mentioning honestly: ultra-processed foods and a lot of alcohol can damage the gut lining over time. A leaky, inflamed gut makes neurotransmitter production harder. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to not let "convenient" become "all the time."



CHAPTER 04

What to actually *eat*.

No protocols. No 47-step morning routine. Just five categories of food that do a lot of quiet heavy lifting for your gut and brain. Aim to have something from each one most days.

1 Tryptophan foods (for steady mood)

Eggs, turkey, oats, bananas, salmon, aged cheese, tofu, pumpkin seeds. These are the building blocks of serotonin. Try to include at least one at breakfast and one at lunch.

2 Tyrosine foods (for focus and drive)

Chicken, fish, lean beef, eggs, lentils, almonds, soy, avocado. These feed dopamine and norepinephrine. Front-load these earlier in the day when you need to do hard thinking.

3 Fermented foods (for calm)

Yogurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut, miso, real sourdough. A small spoonful with a meal counts. These deliver living bacteria that help your microbiome stay diverse, which downstream supports GABA.

4 Prebiotic fiber (for your microbes' lunch)

Garlic, onions, leeks, asparagus, oats, apples, beans, slightly under-ripe bananas. Probiotics get all the press, but your existing gut bacteria need to eat too. This is their food.

5 Omega-3 fats (for a calmer brain)

Salmon, sardines, anchovies, walnuts, flax, chia, algae oil. Anti-inflammatory and brain-loving. Two or three servings a week of fatty fish is the sweet spot for most people.

You don't need to overhaul your kitchen. You need to add a few things and let them do their work.

AND WHAT TO EASE UP ON

A few things your gut quietly *resents*.

This isn't a list of bans. Food isn't moral. But your gut bacteria have preferences, and these things make their lives harder if they show up too often.

01 Ultra-processed foods, on repeat

A bag of chips once a week is fine. A diet built around shelf-stable snack foods slowly thins out your microbiome diversity, which is the foundation of everything we've talked about.

02 Heavy alcohol

Alcohol irritates the gut lining and disrupts the microbiome. Even moderate amounts can affect sleep, which is when your gut does a lot of its repair work. A glass of wine isn't the enemy. Five of them on a Tuesday is rougher on you than you might think.

03 Sugary drinks and "energy" everything

The blood sugar spike and crash from a sugary energy drink basically programs the 3 pm slump we just spent a page talking about. If you need caffeine, drink coffee or tea. They're better behaved.

04 Skipping meals, then crashing later

Running on fumes until 4 pm and then eating everything in sight is a classic recipe for blood sugar chaos, which your brain feels first. Three real meals beats two desperate ones.

None of this requires giving anything up forever. Just don't let convenience become the whole plan.

CHAPTER 05



Five small things to *start* on Monday.

If you do nothing else from this book, do these. They're small, they're cheap, and they're the highest-return moves I can give you.

1 Eat protein at breakfast.

Eggs, Greek yogurt, smoked salmon, leftover chicken, a protein smoothie. Anything. This single move sets up steadier blood sugar and more dopamine for the rest of the day. If breakfast is currently coffee and a vibe, this is the upgrade with the biggest payoff.

2 Get one fermented thing in, daily.

A spoonful of sauerkraut next to your lunch. A small bowl of yogurt with breakfast. A glass of kefir. It doesn't have to be a lot. Consistency wins.

3 Feed your microbes with fiber.

Aim for one prebiotic food a day: garlic in dinner, onions in your salad, a slightly under-ripe banana in your smoothie, oats for breakfast, asparagus on the side. Your bacteria eat what you eat.

4 Pair your carbs.

Never eat a carb naked. Bread? Add avocado and turkey. Apple? Add nut butter. Pasta? Add a real portion of protein and vegetables. This single habit kills the 3 pm crash.

5 Drink water before coffee.

Boring, free, weirdly effective. You wake up dehydrated. Caffeine on a dry tank makes you more jittery and less focused. A full glass of water before your first cup of coffee is one of the easiest wins in this whole book.



One last *thing*.

I want you to walk away from this knowing two things.

First, you are not broken. Your gut has been quietly telling you what it needs. The afternoon crash, the brain fog, the short fuse, those are signals, not character flaws.

Second, you don't have to fix it all at once. Pick one thing from the last chapter. Do it for two weeks. See how you feel. Then add the next one.



If you want help building this into a plan that actually fits your life, that's exactly what Wholara is for.

Take care of yourself, friend.

Julia

Wholara

PERSONALIZED NUTRITION · REAL SCIENCE

Your health shouldn't be a *luxury.*

Wholara was built by a Master Nutrition Therapist who believes wellness shouldn't be reserved for people with time and money to spare. Every recommendation we make is rooted in clinical science, personalized to your life, and accessible from wherever you are right now.

This little guide is just the start. When you're ready for nutrition that actually fits your week, come find us.

VISIT WHOLARA.ORG