

Cooking is therapy: Making meals helps to reduce stress, heal a broken heart, among other benefits

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It can soothe jangled nerves, heal broken hearts and cure boredom, insomnia and anxiety.

Cooking is therapy and, fattening or not, it's effective.

It worked for Julie Powell, who set out to whip up every recipe in legendary chef Julia Child's cookbook when she felt stymied by her own problems. The blog and book that resulted, "Julie & Julia," are portrayed in a new film starring Meryl Streep and Amy Adams.

Just why cooking is so soothing may be because it encourages creativity.

"Cooking is a great destresser because it serves as a creative outlet," says Debbie Mandel, author of "Addicted to Stress." "And while stress can numb your senses, cooking activates them. It's a sensory experience with aroma, taste, touch, visual delight and even sizzling sound."

Psychiatrist Carole Lieberman says cooking makes people feel good because it's a way for them to nurture others.

"If you're cooking for people you care about, you get nurtured by their appreciation," she says. "Cooking is like giving birth because you are mixing things together to create something new and wonderful."

For Brigita Jones of Carroll Gardens, cooking offers a way to feel better about life because it offers immediate gratification.

"For the most part, it's very manual," she says. "What I like about it is that it's honest work."

Jones, who has a corporate day job, liked cooking so much that she not only joined a monthly supper club, but took a part-time job working in the Chocolate Room in Cobble Hill. Now she looks forward to each delicious shift.

Making desserts clears her mind and makes her feel like she's more in touch with reality.

"These days, it's here's your degree, here's your computer, here's your email address and good luck with that," Jones says. "But with cooking, you can imagine someone cooking 200 years ago, minus the KitchenAid. I mean, dough is dough."

Debbie Mandel explains that cooking ensures such an intense involvement with an activity that it's possible to forget, at least for a little while, about less than pleasant aspects of life.

"You are in the moment," Mandel says. "And this shifts your attention from a brain locked into worries to a recipe for living."

Lucy Saunders, author of three cookbooks on beer and food and editor of Beercook.com, uses cooking to mend her broken heart.

"I've cooked my way through heartbreak several times," she explains. "You can start from scratch and have something fresh and new. It's creativity with some measure of pleasure, and you can enjoy the results right away. And it's a wonderful way to engage the senses, even without a spark of romance."

Home cook Danielle Cyr frequently takes classes in cookie and cake decorating just to take her mind off her work.

Some of my best client ideas come from being in the kitchen, when I'm relaxed," she says. "Cooking clears all work

and stress related matters out of my mind so I can focus on something relaxing and enjoyable. It triggers ideas for work."

Julie Powell, who is played in "Julie & Julia" by Amy Adams, was a frustrated writer in a dead end secretarial job when she decided to write and blog about the dishes in "Mastering the Art of French Cooking."

And when making Child's stuffed chicken, she felt better.

Which is why Nikki Cascone, chef/owner of 24 Prince, said she never skipped a beat in her cooking when her father died two years ago.

"It was the first time I had experienced the loss of someone close to me, and I didn't want to deal with it," she says. "Cooking was comforting then and now. Even today, when I get lost in the dough, I almost start meditating. For me, cooking is just so rewarding."