

# Eating for mental well-being

**A** NICE physique and glowing skin are often associated with a healthy diet and lifestyle. However, food has an important role to play in mental health as well.

Mental health is more than just a buzz phrase. According to the World Health Organisation, at least 970 million individuals globally suffer from poor mental health, with anxiety and depression being the most common disorders.

While there are many factors contributing to this phenomenon and the connection between nutrition and mental health has long been studied, the role of nutrition in supporting mental well-being often receives little attention from the general public.

The brain needs nutrients to function – it uses glucose as its source of energy, proteins for neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin and fat to cover the sheath of nervous system tissues.

As our understanding grows and in light of ongoing research, we are seeing more and more evidence that our dietary habits can be linked with mental health. To date, several large cohort studies have clearly established a connection between nutrition and mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. Some studies have also established a connection between nutrition and the development of neurocognitive disorders such as dementia and Alzheimer's, owing to deficiencies in certain nutrients.

Here are three things we need to understand about this connection:

## Our relationship with food is complicated

Our mood and behaviour are influenced by what we eat. There are many behavioural aspects that affect our eating habits, such as emotional eating, situations that trigger cravings for foods high in fat and sugar as well as stress-induced triggers that cause us to eat more or less than we normally would.

Life cycle is also a factor. The foundations of good nutrition begin during pregnancy and children adopt the eating habits of their parents, for better or worse. Meanwhile, older persons may face various challenges, from functional issues such as difficulty accessing or cooking nutritious food for themselves, poor appetite and higher prevalence of chronic conditions and cognitive disorders.

In essence, the relationship between nutrition and mental well-being runs in both directions, with good nutrition supporting mental well-being, while those struggling with mental health issues are more likely to face challenges in this area.

## Local healthy food options are plentiful

When it comes to healthy eating and food pyramids, the Mediterranean diet is often praised for its benefits. However, as its recommendations are based on foods more commonly found in countries bordering the

➤ Watch your food intake to stay positive, keep moods in check



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— PICS FROM PEXELS



Mediterranean Sea (hence its name) such as Spain, Greece and Italy, the cost of these ingredients can be prohibitive for many.

Fortunately, its guiding principles can be easily adapted to a more local approach, known in some circles as the MediterrAsian diet.

To begin, the base of this pyramid is not food-based at all but activity-based – the foundation of healthy eating begins with an active lifestyle, which helps to boost endorphins and supports mental well-being.

Thereafter, the primary food category is plant-based,

prioritising wholegrains, beans, pulses and nuts. These include chickpeas, sunflower seeds, peanuts and soybeans, which are high in fibre and support the good bacteria in your gut microbiome. This, she emphasised, is an essential aspect of diet, as gut health is inextricably linked with mental health.

The next category is fish-based protein, such as sardines, which helps supply Omega-3. The smallest category is dairy such as low-fat yogurt and cheese, and meat-based protein like eggs and chicken to provide the amino acid tryptophan, which the brain needs

to produce serotonin.

## Practise mindful eating

It is important to practise mindfulness in how and what we eat. This is because studies link eating habits with factors such as urbanisation, changes in the food industry, overstimulation and lack of time, which contribute to higher consumption of high-calorie and processed foods.

Mindfulness is key to overcoming this, and you can start by taking note of your own eating habits or triggers so you can determine if you eat more when you are stressed, bored or sleepy. This

will allow you to recognise these triggers instead of succumbing to them.

To help, try simple changes such as planning meals ahead of time, having healthy snacks or fruits on hand such as bananas, which are easy to eat on-the-go, and using food tracking apps to help incorporate healthier food options into your regular meals.

It always comes back to eating a greater variety of whole or minimally processed foods. This means more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and fish – we cannot run away from the basis of what it means to have a healthy diet.

However, citing the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023, a whopping 95% of Malaysians do not eat the recommended five portions of fruits and vegetables every day. Furthermore, 50% of adults lead a sedentary lifestyle and 84% are not active in sports, fitness or leisure activities.

Five portions per day is not a lot – it is as simple as one and a half cups of vegetables and two slices of fruits such as papaya or pineapple. But we are not doing that, even though local fruits and vegetables are plentiful in Malaysia.

Moving forward, a holistic approach towards healthy eating and mental health is recommended, as they are interconnected.

*This article is contributed by IMU University Professor of Nutrition & Dietetics Prof Dr Winnie Chee.*