

Eating to Be Happier: Re-thinking the Western Diet for Better Mental Health

Making healthier food choices is often driven by a desire to lose weight, improve our appearance or tone up for the beach. When we have these goals in mind, we often decide to choose fruit instead of cake, or a salad over a burger and fries.

Besides our physical appearance, diet also affects our state of mind. We're often tempted to reach for foods high in fat, carbohydrate or sugar when we're low because they give us a feeling of comfort or a short energy burst. Unfortunately, after the initial feel-good factor wears off, these foods can often leave us feeling lower than before.

But the impact of diet on our mental health is even more profound.

What diet can do to our mental health over time

A [2017 report from the Nutrition Society](#) extensively reviewed existing research on diet, nutrition and mental health. It concluded that research shows "diet quality may be a modifiable risk factor for mental illness". In other words, it may be possible to improve mental health, and even reduce the risk of depression, simply by changing the focus of what we eat. With depression currently contributing [30% of the global non-fatal disease burden](#), the potential benefit of that change is very significant indeed.

One key strategy for change is rethinking the conventional Western diet.

The problems with the Western diet

Closely following the Western diet, which is high in sugar, fat, salt, highly processed foods, red meat and high-fat dairy, appears to increase the risk for depression and anxiety for several reasons:

- the diet can negatively alter the balance of the trillions of microorganisms that live in our intestinal tract, which in turn can [impact our ability to think and](#)

[learn](#) due to the “gut-brain axis” which scientists have discovered link these parts of the body

- the creation of new brain cells has been linked to improved thinking, learning and mood, and diets high in fat, sugar and alcohol can [negatively affect that process](#)
- aspects of the Western diet can have an inflammatory effect on the body, and that has been associated with an [increase in depressive symptoms](#)
- regularly eating foods with a high glycemic index, such as sweetened beverages, refined foods and pastries creates surges and dips in blood sugar, and this has been linked to [increased odds of depression over the long term](#) in some people
- obesity, which is most prevalent in societies that eat the conventional Western diet, may contribute to “[lower subjective well-being](#)”, or lower satisfaction with life, due to how obese people feel about themselves

The Mediterranean diet and its benefits for mental health

Much of the research in nutritional psychiatry so far has focussed on comparing the Western diet with the Mediterranean diet. People who live in countries such as Spain, France, Italy and Greece eat a larger proportion of whole foods in their diet such as fruits and vegetables, legumes and fish. They also eat fewer processed foods and lower amounts of sugar, fat, red meat and alcohol.

The [Nutrition Society Report](#) indicated that following a Mediterranean diet can not only improve overall health but contribute to improved mental health. For example, [a study published in 2015](#) stated the benefit could be comparable to reducing brain ageing by as much as 5 years, which could be an essential finding for an ageing population.

In [another study published this year](#), highlighting recent findings in the field, researchers concluded that this way of eating has more substantial evidence for reducing the incidence of depression. In 2017, the aptly named [SMILES trial](#), a pioneering study on the impact of diet in depressed subjects, drew the same conclusion. It also showed 32% remission in people following the Mediterranean diet over 3 months.

Changing the focus of our food

There is an extra benefit of this way of eating for those who struggle with the idea of “dieting”. By changing focus to certain kinds of ingredients and preparation rather than enduring the highly restrictive approach of many fad diets and weight-loss plans, the diet is a far more sustainable way of eating in the long term.

This is good news for people who still want to enjoy dairy products or meaty treats because these foods simply make up a smaller proportion of the total diet.

What is in the Mediterranean diet?

The central feature of the diet is fresh produce, with the addition of some healthy fats, for example:

- A variety of fresh vegetables and fruit
- Whole grains and legumes
- Healthy fats from seeds, nuts and olive oil
- Moderate amounts of fish
- Moderate amounts of dairy
- A few eggs
- Small amounts of white or red meat
- Red wine in moderation
- Snacks of fresh and dried fruits, raw vegetables, nuts

As far as possible, these foods should be cooked or prepared whole (in their natural state) rather than processed or refined. For example, foods to minimize or avoid include:

- Processed foods
- Refined carbohydrates such as white bread and pasta
- Added sugars
- Processed meats
- Refined oils

As with any diet, it isn't a case of “one size fits all”. For example, some people may gain weight by consuming higher amounts of healthy oils and fats than they usually do. And including alcohol may not be appropriate for everyone. As with any health intervention, the best approach is to seek advice from a healthcare professional, such as a registered dietician.

Other diets that can positively affect mental health

Two other dietary approaches have been shown to offer benefits for mental health in the short term :

- Reducing the number of daily calories can positively impact mood and the symptoms of depression. For example, a [study conducted in 2015](#) demonstrated that a diet with 25% fewer daily calories over 6 months reduced depressive symptoms with no adverse effect on mood.
- Short-term therapeutic fasting [has been shown](#) to increase mental clarity, mood improvement and a general feeling of well-being.

Is there a “take-away” on diet and mental health?

What we eat affects our mood. But a large and growing body of research is showing that there are ways to adjust our diets for better mental health in the longer term.

Aspects of the conventional Western diet are shown to negatively impact mental health both in the short and long term, and may increase the risk of depression.

Conversely, the Mediterranean diet has consistently demonstrated positive results for improved mental health over time, reducing the risk of depression, and even reducing symptoms of depression.

By focusing on whole ingredients and reducing the number of processed foods, added sugar and unhealthy fats, the diet offers a simple and sustainable way to potentially improve our mental well-being.

It not only tastes good, it might also make us happier.