

Healthy diet could boost mental health, say experts

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MORE AWARENESS about the connection between the brain and gut can help decrease the number of Filipinos experiencing mental health concerns, including anxiety, according to health experts.



One's gut health and mental health go together, said Beverly T. Ongson, a certified professional life coach and registered psychologist from Dear Future Self PH, a provider of mental health services.

"When we think or worry excessively, our stomach works double time to do its job, which is to release acid to supposedly break down food," she said in an e-mail. "This 'false alarm' can cause ulcer, heart burn or acid reflux."

Research has found that irritation in the gastrointestinal system may send signals to the central nervous system that trigger mood changes.

A 2021 Clinical Psychology Review study also found that people with anxiety and depression are more likely to have bacteria in their digestive tracts that promote inflammation.

"As our patients adjusted their nutrition, their acidity eased, thus lessening one of the causes of their anxiety," Ms. Ongson said. "At the same time, as we addressed their anxiety, their gut health became healthier."

"I have patients who have had problems with their moods," said Dexter M. Macalintal, a registered nutritionist and lifestyle physician. "With proper food along with some medications given by their psychiatrists, their mental state improved."

The pandemic triggered a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide, the World Health Organization said in March 2022.

In the Philippines, about 3.6 million Filipinos battle mental health issues. Close to one of five Filipinos aged 15 to 24 have considered suicide, a 2021 study by the University of the Philippines Population Institute found.

Mr. Macalintal described human bodies as a well-oiled factory with different departments working harmoniously.

The nutrients found in food are raw materials that allow our bodies to create energy, he told BusinessWorld in a separate e-mail. “In the process, we produce waste and eliminate them properly if our systems are in homeostasis or in a state of equilibrium.”

“What we eat can affect the way we think,” he said. “If we eat properly, we will have a steady source of raw materials needed to produce a balanced level of hormones and neurotransmitters that will keep a healthy mental state.”

Processed foods do not promote mental wellness, Mr. Macalintal said.

Ms. Ongson said people with anxiety and acidity problems should avoid certain types of food, including caffeine, refined white sugar and alcohol.

“If you want to drink coffee, you can choose the alkaline ones or decaf, or just a cup in the morning,” she said. “For tea — including milk tea — go with decaf.”