

The mind-food connection

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GOOD food is generally linked to a healthy body, but food also plays an important role in mental health. Simply put, what we eat affects our mental well-being.



The World Health Organisation estimates that at least 970 million individuals globally suffer from poor mental health, with anxiety and depression being the most common.

While there are many contributing factors to this phenomenon, the role of nutrition in supporting mental well-being often receives little attention.

IMU University professor of nutrition and dietetics Dr Winnie Chee explains that 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.

She adds that in light of ongoing research, we are seeing more and more evidence that our dietary habits can be linked to mental health.

To date, several large cohort studies have clearly established a connection between nutrition and mental health disorders. Some have also established connections between nutrition and the development of neurocognitive disorders like dementia and Alzheimer's,

owing to deficiencies in certain nutrients. "Our mood and behaviour are influenced by what we eat, and 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."

Chee adds that the foundations of good nutrition begin during pregnancy and children adopt the eating habits of their parents, for better or worse.

Meanwhile, the elderly may face various challenges, from functional issues such as difficulty in accessing

or cooking nutritious food for themselves to poor appetite, and higher prevalence of chronic conditions and cognitive disorders.

“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.”

Chee stresses that it always comes down to eating a greater variety of whole or minimally processed foods. This means more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and fish.

“We can’t run away from the basis of what it means to have a healthy diet.”

However, the 2023 National Health and Morbidity Survey indicates that 95 per cent of Malaysians do not eat the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

Furthermore, 50 per cent of adults lead a sedentary lifestyle and 84 per cent are not active in sports, fitness or leisure activities.

Chee says five portions per day is not a lot — it is as simple as one and a half cups of vegetables with your meals, and two slices of fruit like papaya or pineapple.

But we are not even doing that, even though local fruits and vegetables are plentiful in Malaysia. Chee encourages a holistic approach towards healthy eating and mental health, as they are interconnected.

“We need a great deal of education for Malaysians to take an active and responsible approach to what they consume,” she says.

A healthy diet with a variety of nutrients, together with physical activity, is essential to support mental health and well-being, besides lowering our risk for many serious health conditions.

THINK LOCAL

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 Mediterranean Sea, the cost of these ingredients can be too prohibitive for many people.

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 as the foundation of healthy eating begins with an active lifestyle, which helps to boost endorphins and support mental well-being.

Thereafter, the primary food category is plant-based, prioritising wholegrains, beans, pulses and nuts. These include chickpeas, sunflower seeds, peanuts and soyabeans, which are high in fibre and support the good bacteria in your gut microbiome.

Chee says gut health is inextricably linked to 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.