- Health

Mind and bodv benefit from our diets

The Gold Coast Bulletin · 9 Feb 2023 · 14 · MEGAN LEE Dr Megan Lee is a psychologist and Senior Teaching Fellow at Bond University's Faculty of Society and Design

We all know that eating well is good for our bodies, but how does what we eat affect our minds? It turns out that the who, where and why of our dietary habits can play just as big a role as the food itself when it comes to our moods.



Having examined the connection between dietary patterns and depression, our research showed that what we eat can certainly have an impact. We found that a diet including fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains and legumes was linked to lower depressive symptoms, while those who ate ultra-processed foods, such as meat replacement products, chips, cakes and pastries had a higher rate of depressive symptoms.

This makes sense – looking at the optimal diet for mental health, it's the same as the optimal diet for good physical health and it's all tied to ingestion of fibre. Dietary fibre pushes food through our system, and it is massively good for health, it can reduce risk of cancer, diabetes and heart disease, and we're now finding that it improves mental health as well.

But we also discovered that it's not just the nutrients in what we eat that can impact our mental health. Who we eat with and where, our financial situation and our memories around food can all contribute to our psychological wellbeing.

This was the first research of its type to explore how 'meaning' and social context are attached to our food choices and how this might impact mood and mental health.

We analysed responses from 50 participants in a series of focus groups, and found their moods were affected by the context they were in – who they ate with and where they were – along with the feelings associated with preparing or eating foods from their childhood.

Participants talked about the power of food to unlock memories and emotions, both positive and negative. Cooking and eating foods from their
childhood gave people a sense of comfort and connection to loved ones and the past, or to valued cultural traditions. For others, certain foods triggered negative emotions from childhood.

The economics of eating was one area in which food became the source of negative feelings. Many people talked about the impact of financial and time constraints which influenced their food choices, and how these choices impacted their mood. Food insecurity, or the limited availability of nutritious foods, caused stress and uncertainty. The rising costs of food was a source of stress for many, particularly those in lower socioeconomic groups. The need to work longer hours to afford basic necessities limited the time available for grocery shopping and cooking which led to people choosing more processed and convenience foods.
These foods can also be more accessible and more affordable on a lower budget.
We also looked at the values people assigned to foods and found these were often more important than the nutrients they contained when it came to the impact on their moods.
There are many reasons to eat apart from sustenance: boredom, tiredness, distraction, stress, frustration, anxiety, depression or grief, and foods commonly eaten for these reasons are usually high in sugar and salt, are ultraprocessed
and tend to offer instant gratification.
This can also be true of positive moods – we reward ourselves or celebrate with indulgent foods that might not be high in nutritional value, but certainly make us feel good.
Essentially, food and mood are inextricably linked – they influence each other. Choosing high-quality, nutrient-rich foods can make an impact, but this research demonstrates that there is much more to food than just nutrition.