



FOOD, MOOD, AND MENTAL HEALTH: HOW NUTRITION SHAPES THE WAY WE FEEL

For decades, psychiatry largely focused on what happened “from the neck up,” treating the brain as separate from the rest of the body. But a growing field known as **nutritional psychiatry** is challenging this view, revealing that what we eat can profoundly influence our mental health. Professor **Felice Jacka**, a leading researcher in this area, has shown that dietary changes can reduce depression, improve mood, and even transform lives.

The Burden of Common Mental Disorders

Depression and anxiety are among the most widespread mental health conditions worldwide, contributing to significant disability and loss of quality of life. While psychological distress surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, stigma around mental illness has historically kept psychiatry apart from mainstream medicine. Today, however, the conversation is shifting, with increasing recognition that mental health is inseparable from physical health.

From Skepticism to Breakthroughs

When Jacka began her research, few studies examined the relationship between diet and mental health. Her early work demonstrated that diet quality was linked to depression risk, independent of income, education, or body weight. These findings, published in leading psychiatry journals, helped establish a new evidence base: across cultures and age groups, healthier diets consistently predicted lower rates of depression.

But correlation is not causation. To test whether diet could actively treat depression, Jacka launched the **SMILEs Trial**, a randomized controlled study. Participants with major depression were guided to adopt a Mediterranean-style diet rich in vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts, seeds, olive oil, and fish, while reducing processed foods. After just three months, **one-third of participants achieved full remission**, compared with only 8% in the control group. The degree of dietary change closely matched improvements in mood, and the healthier diet proved cheaper than the junk food-heavy baseline.

Why Food Affects Mood

The mechanisms behind these effects are complex but increasingly understood. The **gut-brain axis**—a communication network linking the digestive system and the brain—plays a central role. Trillions of gut microbes break down plant fibres and polyphenols, releasing molecules that influence immune function, stress responses, and neurotransmitter systems. Some bacteria even produce serotonin precursors, directly affecting mood regulation. While much of this evidence comes from animal studies, human research shows consistent differences in gut microbiota between people with depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia compared to healthy controls.

Anxiety, Eating Disorders, and Caution

The relationship between diet and anxiety is less straightforward. Observational data suggest a “reverse J-shaped curve”: moderate improvements in diet reduce anxiety, but excessive control over food can worsen it. This highlights the risk of **orthorexia**, an eating disorder where individuals restrict their diets to an unhealthy extreme. Nutritional psychiatry must therefore balance dietary guidance with sensitivity to eating disorder risks.

Practical Advice: What to Eat for Better Mental Health

Despite the complexity of microbiome science, the practical recommendations are simple and universal:

- **Increase plant foods:** vegetables, fruits, legumes, and whole grains.
- **Diversify your diet:** variety supports a resilient gut microbiome, much like biodiversity sustains a rainforest.
- **Avoid ultra-processed foods:** packaged products with additives and refined ingredients undermine gut and brain health.
- **Consider fermented foods:** yogurt, sauerkraut, kimchi, kefir, and tempeh may reduce inflammation and support gut health, though evidence is still emerging.
- **Moderation matters:** follow the “80-20 rule”—aim for mostly whole foods, but allow flexibility to avoid rigid or stigmatizing approaches.

Beyond Calories: Quality Over Quantity

Jacka emphasizes that mental health benefits are not about calorie restriction or weight loss. Instead, they stem from the **quality of food**. Public health messaging focused narrowly on obesity has often failed, stigmatized individuals, and overlooked the broader benefits of diet for mental wellbeing. Reframing food as fuel for mood—rather than just a source of calories—offers a more empowering perspective.

Wider Implications

The evidence from nutritional psychiatry is now reflected in more than 80 policy documents worldwide and has influenced clinical guidelines, including those of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. Lifestyle medicine—addressing diet, sleep, physical activity, and substance use—is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of mental health care.

Conclusion

Food is not just fuel for the body—it is medicine for the mind. By improving diet quality, individuals can reduce their risk of depression, support recovery, and enhance overall wellbeing. While challenges remain, from the influence of “Big Food” providing cheap unhealthy foods, and the need for personalized approaches (which are provided by Bags of Taste), the message is clear: **what we eat profoundly shapes how we feel.**