THE CATALYST

# Why food affects mood (and how healthy nutrition can improve it)

*From the food choices we make, to what we put on our plate, our brain demands the most energy from our food. Dr. Bonnie J. Kaplan explains. She is a pioneer in nutritional psychology who is also a semi-retired professor at the University of Calgary, Cumming School of Medicine.*

By: Janelle Jordan | Posted: June 29, 2022

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We often associate hunger with our stomach.

Yet, what if I told you, it's your brain that's hungry?

From the food choices we make, to what we put on our plate, our brain demands the most energy from our food. Dr. Bonnie J. Kaplan explains. She is a pioneer in nutritional psychology who is also a semi-retired professor at the University of Calgary, Cumming School of Medicine.

"The brain is the greediest organ for micronutrients, or the vitamins and minerals from our food. While the brain is two per cent of our body weight, it absorbs 20 per cent of all the nutrients fed to our body."

But why is this statistic important for us to know?

**Because emerging research shows food does affect our mood, for better or worse.**

According to evidence-based research in nutritional psychiatry, several nutrition researchers claim there is a correlation between our dietary intake and mental health outcomes.

While books, shows, and articles in the media promote a healthy lifestyle, they mostly preach the same mantra: "eat more healthy, real foods".

Yet the stark reality is that more than half of what North Americans are putting into their mouths is not real food. Why?

**The unseen answer: the concept of "hidden brain hunger"**

More than 50 per cent of us are filling our bellies with ultra-processed 'foods', while at the same time, we are also keeping our brains hungry. How?

The concept is called "hidden brain hunger" – a negative consequence that our brain experiences when it becomes deficient in essential micronutrients, such as vitamins and minerals.

The brain's silent starvation becomes more intense when we consistently eat ultra-processed foods high in sugar, salt, and fat. These 'food-like substances' lack essential vitamins and minerals optimal for brain health and the absence of these key nutrients impact the brain's overall performance, especially when in crisis mode.

Dr. Kaplan compares this brain-nutrient phenomenon to pregnancy. "When a woman is pregnant, if she's not getting enough food, the food preferentially feeds the fetus, moving nutrients and oxygen to where it's most needed critically, in a crisis."

"Similarly in the brain, when handling a crisis and it involves fight or flight, our bodies preferentially move the nutrients to where we need to be activated…if you are not providing your body and brain enough nutrients, everything is preferentially diverted to handle the crisis, the stressful situation – parts of your brain and body are going to be deficient."

**Why nutrition is a key ingredient in the recipe towards better mental health**

Dr. Kaplan's life mission has been distilled into a cutting edge 368-page book called *The Better Brain: Overcome Anxiety, Combat Depression, and Reduce ADHD and Stress with Nutrition*.

Inside its pages, you will find evidence-based research, sage nuggets of nutritional insights, plus mood-boosting, whole food recipes scientifically proven to help nourish our brains.

For example, foods like leafy green vegetables, fatty fish, dark berries, nuts, and olive oil (found on the Mediterranean menu) have been linked to boosting our brain power: whether proactively as we age, or protectively, slowing down mental decline and improving cognitive function.

**And why should we think about what we put into our mouths, for our brain's sake?**

You may think, well, "I already know what to do" (in theory) when it comes to eating healthily: typically, the "how."

Yet where most of us usually stumble is in the application, or the "why."

Focusing on the why in creating and implementing change can be a powerful motivator to achieve better physical and mental health.

**Brain food for thought**

As an eminent researcher in nutritional sciences for more than 50 years, Dr. Kaplan aims to continue convincing skeptics within the medical profession that nutrition does indeed play a role in our psychological and emotional resilience.

"Every mental health clinic should be educating about the importance of whole foods and getting rid of the ultra-processed chemicals [and] about what nutrients do in the brain That should be step one," Dr. Kaplan states.

And step two? Pulling back the curtain on what eating whole foods could look like for patients, so they can replicate this healthy dietary lifestyle at home.

"It should be pre-treatment when a patient is first referred to any mental health setting before they're assigned for treatment of any kind, they should learn about how to eat a whole foods diet," Dr. Kaplan says. "And they should be asked to track the cost because people who track the

cost as they move to a healthier diet are amazed that they can save money – we have to teach them inexpensive ways to do it."

Another goal Dr. Kaplan shared with me is her desire to also influence us (thanks to her interest in the physiological basis of human behaviour) – to not only understand ***how*** to eat better, but also ***why*** we should eat better. And why it matters.

"People don't know why they should improve their eating habits," Dr. Kaplan says. "Probably the reason why is lack of education or knowledge…it's not enough to know how and what to eat when it comes to healthy nutrition. Nutrition is the foundation of our mental resilience."

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