# THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS
## *of a balanced diet*

We've all heard the old adages "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" and "breakfast is the most important meal of the day," but can what we eat influence our emotional and mental well-being?

There is a growing trend looking at the role diet plays in mental health. While a balanced diet and good nutritional habits aren't meant to replace treatment, they can be helpful additions to the treatment recommendations of a mental health professional.

A big trend in nutrition and food is the clean-eating movement. Studies have shown that eating more "clean" foods and less processed foods not only affects your physical health, but also shows

positive benefits for your mental health. Research is showing that when we eat high-quality foods that contain lots of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, it nourishes our brain. If you deprive your brain (and your body) of good-quality nutrition, then those areas start to suffer the consequences.

How many of us have experienced feeling sad or depressed after eating a high-sugar food like ice cream or fatty food like pizza? People often eat to relieve stress or anxiety without realizing that the foods they are eating actually contribute to higher levels of stress and anxiety.

**Balance,** *page 2*

## COUNSELOR CORNER
**Gabby Hagen,** MS
*Village EAP Counselor*

**Q: I want to eat better, but it is so difficult. How can I make changes to my diet that might help my mental health?**

**A:** Have you ever heard the phrase, "you are what you eat"? What we fuel our bodies with has a huge impact on both our physical and mental health. Both macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) play a vital role in helping our bodies to function optimally.

## KEEP FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AVAILABLE FOR SNACKS.

Changing a few aspects of your diet may help to boost cognitive function and reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders.

Eating a diet rich in whole grains, lean proteins, Omega-3 fatty acids, and fruits and vegetables has been shown to improve your mood. When we eat real food that has actual nutrition, we provide our bodies with the tools to build enzymes, brain tissues, and all essential parts of our bodies.

We have shifted the focus of eating from fueling our bodies to eating for convenience or pleasure. According to The Center for Nutritional Psychology, "74% of calories consumed by Americans come from processed, sugary foods, e.g. soda, pizza, chips, donuts." Take into consideration that added sugar is hiding in 74% of packaged foods, which contributes to the 66 pounds of added sugar consumed by the average American every year. A big source of added sugar comes in the form of beverages, such as the soda or sports drinks we consume daily. A Venti white chocolate mocha with whipped cream from Starbucks has 73.8 grams of

sugar. That is more than a can of Coke, and way above the recommended guideline of no more than 25 grams (6 teaspoons) of sugar daily.

So what can you do to help steer eating habits in a more healthy direction? A simple step is to keep fruits and vegetables available for snacks. Take a little time to prep and wash everything so you can grab and go. Get your family involved! Plan meals and prepare them together. Model healthy eating habits for your children. If they see you reach for fruit instead of candy, they will start to model the same behaviors. When the weather gets nicer, visit a local farmers market. Teach your family (and yourself) about where your food comes from.

We are learning more every day about the connection between the foods we eat and our overall mental health. While the goal of a healthy diet is not to replace any mental health treatment you may already be accessing, it is worth thinking about the benefits healthier foods can provide.

*Article first published on* TheVillageFamily.org/Blog.

## COUNSELOR CORNER CONT.

It has been said that our gut can be referred to as the "second brain". Research shows that about 95% of serotonin is produced in the gut. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that helps to regulate sleep, appetite, and mood. These are just a few of the many reasons that our diet can play an important role in our mental health.

Although we know how important our diet can be to both our physical and mental health, that does not always make it easy to change. Here are a few tips to start making some healthy changes in your diet:

1. **Give yourself some credit:** All-or-nothing thinking can sabotage us big time. Instead of thinking, "I have to do this perfectly or I might as well not do it at all," focus on the progress you have made. Positive reinforcement is the biggest predictor of behavior change, so celebrate yourself when you make a healthy choice, big or small!

2. **Be mindful:** Our relationship with food is so important for implementing long-term changes. We tend to label foods as "good" and "bad" when dieting. This can cause us to have feelings of shame when eating certain foods we have labeled as "bad." Pay attention to how you feel both physically and mentally when eating. How do you feel physically when – and after – eating certain foods? What about emotionally? Be mindful about how the food you eat is impacting you.

3. **Engage your support system:** Whether it is friends, family, or providers, use your support! Support is always important to have, but it can be especially helpful when we are trying to implement change. Engaging your support system can increase accountability and help us to know that we are not alone.

A holistic approach to mental health includes looking at our diet. Our mind and body are connected, so how we care for ourselves physically can have a big impact on how we feel mentally and emotionally. There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to diet, but making food choices that are healthy for us supports our mental health.