

# Mental Health and Diet

## The Missing Link

by Maeve Halpin, Social and Organisational Psychologist

**The profound connection between nutrition and mental and emotional health is now being recognised through a growing body of international research. We are familiar with relationship between poor diet and physical conditions such as heart disease, obesity and diabetes, but the origin of mental health problems seems shrouded in mystery. Psychiatric medication has contributed greatly to the alleviation of many mental health issues, but long-lasting improvement may be underpinned by dietary improvements and individually tailored and targeted nutritional supplementation.**

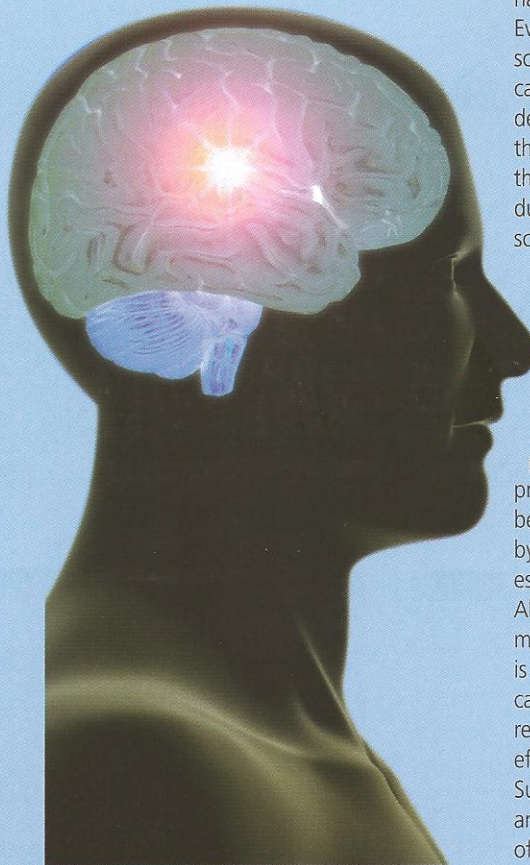
### The Depletion of Modern Food

The development of industrialised food production in the 20th century was initially hailed as the answer to food poverty and malnutrition. The invention of additives and preservatives facilitated long-term storage and transport of food, making it cheaper and more available. What was not foreseen was the loss of the essential nutrients in food that was not consumed fresh. The quantities of salt, sugar and fat added to our food has increased, and these stimulate the brain to give an artificial "high", leading to food addictions.

### The Importance of Nutrition for the Brain

Essential nutrients for brain and nervous system functioning include omega 3 fatty acids (found in fish oil and flaxseed oil) and the B vitamins (e.g. in wholegrains, lentils, beans and yeast). Processed food is seriously deficient in these elements, causing increased incidences of mood disorders. Research studies worldwide have shown fish oil supplementation to be effective in treating anxiety and depression in adolescents, university students, mothers with post-natal

depression, menopausal women, older people, and people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Consuming trans-fats, found in processed food and industrially-produced cakes and biscuits, is associated with higher incidences of depression.



Soaring rates of mental health problems among young people have been linked to the common teenage diet of fast food, fizzy drinks, crisps and chocolate, which is almost totally devoid of nutrients.

### Nutritional Intervention with Different Groups

Schoolchildren who eat a healthy breakfast show better concentration, less disruptive behaviour and lower anxiety. Childhood

conditions such as ADHD, autism and dyspraxia can sometimes respond to diet supplementation, if treated early, with improvements in behaviour and sleep patterns. Removing synthetic food colourings from the diet of children with hyperactivity has been shown to have a positive effect. Even serious psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, psychosis and bi-polar disorder can be related to significant nutritional deficiencies in some sufferers. Studies from the Netherlands and China demonstrate that those exposed to nutrient deficiencies during famine have an increased risk of schizophrenia.

The Minnesota Starvation Experiment (1944-45) demonstrated that depression, hysteria and emotional distress could be induced by prolonged semi-starvation. These symptoms are similar to those experienced by people with eating disorders. Numerous prison studies have shown that antisocial behaviours, including violence, are reduced by the addition of vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids to the inmates diet. Alcohol and drug addiction can result in malnutrition, especially if the addict's diet is poor. Correcting nutritional imbalances can dramatically reduce cravings, assisting recovery. Some smokers will quit almost effortlessly with the right supplementation. Sugar and caffeine can cause mood swings, and should be avoided in the early stages of recovery. "The Mood Cure" by Julia Ross details her successful nutritional interventions with recovering addicts in the US.

In Ireland, Dr Edmond O'Flaherty, Mount Merrion, (01-2881425) specialises in the nutritional treatment of psychiatric illness. See [www.omega3.20megsfree.com](http://www.omega3.20megsfree.com)

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