

Nutrition and Your Mental Health

Is it true that we are what we eat? It is true. During the past decades, psychologists and other health specialists have been understanding more and more how what we eat impacts our mental health. Many thought that what we eat only influences our physical health. Today, research tells us that what we eat impacts our emotions, mood, outlook on life, and attitude.

In this article, I will be sharing information I gleaned from the document titled “We Are What We Eat” written by psychologist Zara Abrams, PhD. He states: “Research indicates that dietary changes focused on fruit, vegetables, and minimally processed foods are associated with positive mental health outcomes.”

Bahamians need to eat more fruits and vegetables. Parents are to blame for why their little children do not want to eat green vegetables, salads, beans, and peas. The poor nutrition is impacting depression, frustration, poor academic achievement, and even aggression.

Ellen G. White, co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, emphasized that nutrition, physical habits, and mental health are inextricably linked, viewing the body as a "temple of the Holy Spirit". She taught that a simple, plant-based diet—abundant in fruits, grains, and vegetables, and free of stimulating foods like flesh meats, tea, coffee, and alcohol—promotes calm nerves, clear thinking, and strong mental discipline. This was her teaching over 150 years ago. Why are we not listening?

Mrs. White’s very popular book on the topic is “Counsel on Diet and Foods.” She states in that book this most profound statement: "The brain and nerves are in sympathy with the stomach. Erroneous eating and drinking result in erroneous thinking and acting." If you think this statement is powerful, here are a few more found in “Counsel on Diet and Food” "It is impossible for the brain to do its best work when the digestive powers are abused. Many eat hurriedly of various kinds of food, which sets up a war in the stomach, and thus confuses the brain. . . A clogged stomach means a clogged brain." (Pages 564, 565)

Psychologist Zara Abram expands this point with these words: “The modern science of nutrition and mental health began with a simple observation: Countries that eat more fish then to have lower rates of depression. . . A growing evidence base—largely driven by research from the United Kingdom, Australia, and Brazil—has shown that nutrition, physical activity, and inflammatory processes are all critical for mental health.”

Do you think that the poor diet of many Bahamians is impacting not just the physical health of many, but also the ability to cope with suicidal ideations, depression, and the prevention of vitriolic arguments, angry outbursts, and violence? I strongly believe it does. Ironically, fast food restaurants are actually slowing us down and shorting our lives, especially in people’s daily lives, due to that diet. Fast food may have a place in society by providing a quick snack. However, when the high-calorie and poorly nutritious eatables become a daily staple, trouble is on the horizon. I have met children, teens, and even adults who “boast” of not eating

vegetables as though it is a grand achievement. They are not aware that they are actually shortening their lives one day at a time.

Let's get a little deeper. In the Journal of Affective Disorders, Vol 338, 2023, it shares research that shows the importance and benefits of having nutritional supplements (vitamin and mineral tablets). This is a very simple change that can be made. The journal states "Taking daily nutritional supplements can make a difference. . . Adults who took certain daily essential nutrients (a mixture of vitamins and minerals) had better improvement in depression and anxiety symptoms than those who took a placebo."

Hence, if people would at least add supplements to their diet, perhaps more Bahamians would be healthier mentally. They would be able to respond better to stress, anxiety, frustration, unexpected loss, tragedy, etc. The brain needs to be well nourished, too.

Here's a note for parents once more. Parents, the physical and mental health of your dependent children are in your hands. You are one hundred percent responsible. In the book Education, by Ellen White (pages 204, 205) states: "Many a puny child, incapable of vigorous effort of mind or body, is the victim of an impoverished diet. . . . Many a student is supposed to have broken down from overstudy, when the real cause was overeating. . . . It is the overcrowding of the stomach that wearies the body and weakens the mind."

What if we all adhered to these teachings by Ellen White, who wrote these principles about 150 years ago? What if we all adhered to the current scientific findings and suggestions from contemporary research on diet and mental health? Would we have a healthier society? Yes, I truly believe we would.

Just a point of interest. My research brought me to the question of which vitamins and nutrients can impact mental health. Wikipedia gives this information: "**B Vitamins** (B6, B9/Folate, B12): Crucial for brain function, nervous system regulation, and producing neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine. Deficiencies are frequently associated with anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline. **Vitamin D**: Often called the "sunshine vitamin" (or hormone), it reduces nervous system inflammation. Deficiency is widely linked to depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). **Vitamin C**: Acts as a potent antioxidant that safeguards brain cells from oxidative stress and lowers inflammation. **Magnesium**: Known as the "magic mineral," it helps regulate stress hormones, promotes relaxation, and supports central nervous system function. **Zinc**: Essential for brain signaling and enzyme function. Low zinc levels have been strongly linked to depression and cognitive impairment. **Selenium**: A trace mineral that supports cognitive health, mood regulation, and protects the brain from oxidative damage. **Iron**: Vital for oxygen transport; inadequate levels frequently result in fatigue and diminished cognitive function. **Omega-3 fatty acids**—specifically eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA)—are essential nutrients that play a fundamental role in brain development, structure, and emotional regulation. Because the human brain cannot produce enough of these fats on its own, getting them through diet or supplementation is critical for maintaining mental well-being."

Dear reader, make sure your diet is a good one that promotes mental health. Go and take your vitamins today.

Barrington H. Brennen is a marriage and family therapist and counseling psychologist. Send your questions or comments to question@soencouragement.org or call 1242 327 1980 or visit www.soencouragement.org