

Nutrition Support

For Anxiety & Mental Health

Nutrition considerations and
behavior change suggestions to
support mental wellness.



Mental Health Disorders

Stigma and Prevalence

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, "A mental illness is a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling or mood. Such conditions may affect someone's ability to relate to others and function each day. Each person will have different experiences, even people with the same diagnosis." Typically, less than half people with mental illness seek treatment, due to unnecessary stigma.

**We can discuss other organ related illness without stigma,
so why shouldn't we talk about brain related illness?**

Almost **7%** of Americans (>**16 million** people) experience **major depression**.

18% of Americans (**40 million**) experience **anxiety** each year,
with up to 1/3 experiencing anxiety in their lifetime.

There are many forms of anxiety, from generalized anxiety, to panic disorder, to PTSD and OCD.

Anxiety disorders impact **25%** of **teenage children**.

Rates of **PTSD** among **veterans** are **15x higher** than civilians.

Studies on Division I athletes have shown up to **1/3** of **females** were at risk of **anorexia nervosa**.

Eating disorder research is under-funded and symptoms are often overlooked;
therefore rates are likely underreported.



Why Me?

Causes of Mental Illness

It's not your fault and there's nothing "wrong" with you. At times, a significant life event such as the loss of a loved one, a big move, or pregnancy may trigger mental illness. Other times it builds up due to a variety of the below factors, and sometimes it seems there's no root cause at all.

Biological - People may produce too little or too much of a variety of chemicals, called "neurotransmitters", a group of hormones. Alterations may trigger mental illness.

Digestive - While this is technically biological, many people still don't recognize the connection between the gut and the brain, as over 90% of serotonin production is dependent on good gut health.

Cognitive - People who have developed overly negative thought patterns and low self-esteem, due to life events and upbringing, are more likely to develop mental illnesses.

Gender - More women experience mental illness than men, including depression, and varied forms of anxiety, including PTSD and social anxiety.

Co-occurrence - Mental illness is more likely to occur alongside chronic illnesses, such as cancer, heart disease, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, MS and more. Medication side effects are also a factor.

Genetic - Emerging evidence shows that genes are a strong risk factor. Environment and habits are likely to trigger genetic related mental health disorders.

Situational - Life events, including divorce, financial problems, or the death of a loved one, and pregnancy can contribute. ~6% of pregnant women and 10% of postpartum women develop anxiety.



The Role of Nutrition

Dietary Support of a Better Mood

Good nutrition isn't the magic pill to cure all mental illness, but it can contribute (along with other therapies) to improvements in symptoms and help you manage your mood on a more regular basis.

When anxiety, depression, or other feelings hit, it can be difficult to remember to eat (or stop eating), never-mind build a balanced meal. This is why it's so important to create a habit of prioritizing nutrition on your "good days". If you deliver adequate energy and nutrients to fuel the brain, while also doing a better job regulating blood sugar, you may improve hormone fluctuations.. This can translate into some improvements in mood.

Then, on a not so good day, it's more likely that eating adequately is a habit, or that pulling together a balanced meal or snack won't seem so daunting in your overwhelmed mind.

Eat Enough, Often Enough

The central nervous system (CNS) runs on carbohydrates, so when you aren't eating enough total energy, it makes sense that brain health suffers. Dieting or erratic eating patterns can lead to low total energy intake over the course of the day. When the chronically receives less than it needs. it certainly will feel stressed out. Release of extra stress hormones in someone who already is prone to mental health problems may add to the factors listed on page two, and act as a trigger.

If not eating often enough, these same stress hormones may be released in excess. For some people, after going awhile without eating their genetic wiring may prompt compulsive eating, leading to excessive intake of low nutrient dense foods in a sitting, to create metabolic disturbances, gastrointestinal discomfort, and more stress.

Eating 4-5 total times per day is a good goal to ensure a regular supply of energy is available for the CNS to function well, and for the body to metabolically trust you'll continue to give it what it needs.

Balance Your Meals and Snacks

Along with the carbohydrate energy your CNS needs, you also need energy from fat, structural components of protein, and fiber. All three of these nutrients aid in satiety and slow blood sugar responses after eating. This allows for a more steady and longer delivery of energy to the blood stream and body's cells. Brainstorm ways to get all 3 nutrients and both meals *and* snacks.

Plant food for a better mood

One thing every well-researched eating pattern agrees on is that higher intakes of whole plant foods are associated with better health outcomes - mental health included. One eating pattern that is often recommended is the Mediterranean Diet. A recent randomized control trial showed that just 3 weeks of a Mediterranean pattern lowered depression scores by roughly 30 percent and that scores remained lower 3 months after the study. It's also been well researched that a high intake of fruits and vegetables (7-8 servings per day) is associated with lower levels of stress, increased levels of happiness, and higher levels of self-confidence.

If you're far from the following, don't be overwhelmed! One serving of vegetables per day is better than zero, so work slowly to build habits of eating enough of the below food groups.

- 4-5 servings of vegetables
- 3 servings of whole grains
- 3 tbsp nuts and seeds
- 2-3 servings of fruits
- Proteins derived from legumes, soy, fish, eggs
- Ample spices, such as turmeric, cinnamon



Omega-3 and Vitamin D

If you aren't eating fatty fish or foods fortified with omega-3's twice per week, it may be time to start. At the very least, you should aim to include fat from chia and flax seeds, walnuts, and avocado oil due to omega-3 content. If you're following a vegan eating pattern, algae oil supplements are recommended.

In the winter months, a Vitamin D 3 supplement is recommended and may have a serious impact on some. Speak with your physician, psychiatrist or a registered dietitian before selecting the D supplement that is best for you.

Nurturing your digestive tract

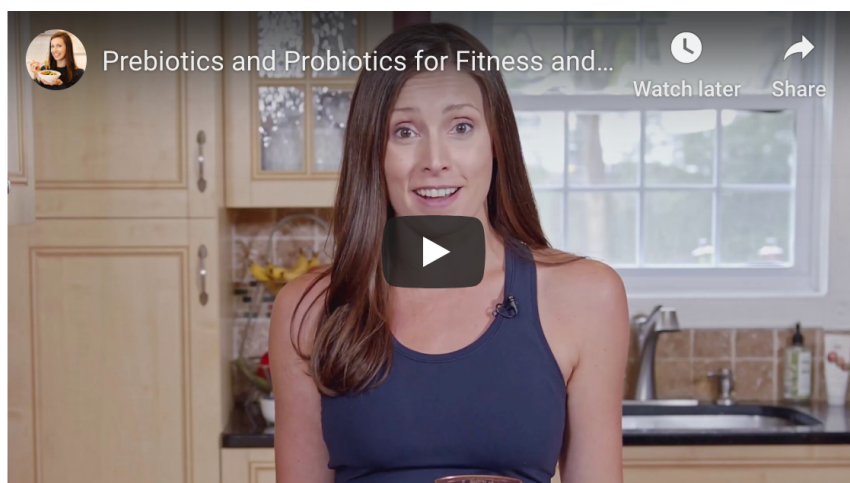
The bacteria in your digestive tract are referred to as the *microbiota*. These bacteria have a communication system with the CNS called the "gut-brain-axis". When gut flora are balanced, the communication system is more likely run effectively. With an imbalance, and inflammation, research has shown an increased incidence and severity of mental illness. Of special concern in this field are anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

Factors Influencing Adult Microbbiota

Your microbiota is unique to you, and begins forming during pregnancy. It is influenced in infancy depending on factors such as vaginal vs. C-section birth, breastfeeding vs. formula feeding, timing and variety of solid foods introduced, as well as illnesses and medications.

As life goes on, diet, stress, infections and antibiotic use likely have the greatest impact on alterations to the microbiota. While not all infections or antibiotic dosages can be prevented, diet is something that many of us do have control over (unless there are large socioeconomic access barriers).

Click to Learn About Prebiotics!



In addition to a variety of vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals that reduce inflammation and support mental health, whole plant foods also provide prebiotics to support your gut health. While research may show new advances in the near future, inclusion of a regular variety of PREbiotic foods, along with probiotic foods, is your best bet at supporting gut health as an adult.

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Kelly Jones is a media and consulting dietitian based in greater Philadelphia. With degrees in nutrition and exercise physiology, and a board certification in sports nutrition, her expertise lies in performance nutrition for collegiate and professional athletes as well as busy, active adults. When consulting with sports organizations and food companies, Kelly ensures that nutrition marketing messages are based in sound science while offering tips that apply to everyday life. While Kelly has worked with patient's alongside a psychiatrist, it is her personal and family experiences with mental health disorders that drive her desire to help others find a better mood with food.

Kelly has a whole food, plant-forward approach to nutrition, while encouraging intuitive eating and flexibility to optimally fuel the body and mind. As mom and former Division I athlete, who continues to enjoy most forms of fitness, she helps her audience integrate better nutrition and joyful movement into their lifestyle in realistic and sustainable ways.

She is also the co-host of The Imperfect Health Podcast.

Find her recipes and tips for fueling an active lifestyle at [KellyJonesNutrition.com](https://www.KellyJonesNutrition.com) or by following her on Instagram @KellyJonesRD or Facebook @KellyJonesNutrition.