

The Value of Integrating Nutrition in Mental Health Counseling and Treatment

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Abstract

There is significant research supporting the concept that good nutrition can be effective in maintaining good mental health. Current studies contribute to the growing evidence that nutrition plays a role in the etiology of mental health problems as well as effective treatment. When mental health counselors are aware that nutritional factors are intertwined with human cognition, behavior and emotions and trained in associated psychoeducational procedures will better prepare them to tackle the potential health issues associated with poor nutrition.

Opinion

Mental health refers to our cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being or how we think, feel, and act. Mental health research concludes that diet and nutrition is related to the overall well-being of a person [1]. There is growing evidence that there is a significant relationship between dietary patterns (nutrition) and mental health concerns. Mental health counselors are aware of several factors related to mental health such as age, socioeconomic status, education, and other life-style patterns. Are counselors significantly aware that nutrition and diet may be important in assessing and treating mental health issues? Do counselors acknowledge and understand the potential connection between nutrition and mental health issues? Is there training available for counselors in this area?

Many people are aware of the impact their diet has on their physical well-being; yet, individuals may not have considered the implications their diet has on their mental health. Numerous studies have been conducted showing the link between a person's dietary choices and their mental health. One study posits a Western diet, comprised of processed and/or fried foods, high sugar levels, and refined grains, is associated with a higher score on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)-an assessment method used to measure anxiety and depression. Also, in the same study, participants whose diet consisted of vegetables, whole grains, fish, and fruits have lower scores on their GHQ [2] Another study identified 66% of children and adolescents with poorer mental health reported notably unhealthier diet patterns [3]. A study conducted in British men concluded that a whole-foods diet involving fish, fruits, and vegetables provided protection from the development of depressive symptoms. Also, a diet rich in sweets, fried foods, and processed meats amplified vulnerability to depression [4].

Historically, depression is explained as a solely emotional or biochemical concern. However, nutrition may act as a key factor in the onset as well as the duration and severity of depression. Dietary habits can influence a person's emotion, cognition, and behavior. Food habits and patterns that appear before a diagnosis of depression are identical to food habits during depression. These food habits include meal skipping, poor appetite, and cravings for sugar [5]. Nutrient deficiencies of omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins, minerals, and amino acids are correlated with mental health disorders [6]. Adhering to a Mediterranean-style diet has been associated with a lower risk for depressive symptoms [7]. The Mediterranean diet consists of fruits, nuts, olive oil, vegetables, and fish. Engaging in a healthy diet has many benefits-these benefits include overall brain health and decreased cognitive decline [8]. Mental health counselors are neither nutritionists nor trained in the methodology of coaching clients with diet regimens and nutritional requirements. They do, however, assess daily patterns of

living which may include dietary patterns. There are already many mental health issues that necessitate dietary considerations such as pregnancy, bulimia, anorexia, addiction, and anxiety. "Awareness of the relationships between dietary intake and mental health may prompt counselors to pursue new avenues for helping clients" [9]. Counselors offering psychoeducation about the connection between nutrition and mental health concerns, such as decreasing caffeine consumption to reduce anxiety or increasing the amounts tryptophan by taking in more eggs, salmon, spinach, seeds to reduce fatigue and increase serotonin in the brain [10] may lead to a greater understanding and acceptance of healthy eating habits.

Effective counseling can include therapeutic lifestyle changes that include exercise, relationships, recreation, stress management, relaxation, etc. Counselors are in a position to proffer easily conveyed principles of nutrition. The greater the understanding and the ease of communication strongly influence whether therapists recommend, and patients adopt, interventions. It is suggested that therapeutic lifestyles should be an essential focus of mental health [1]. An important part of counseling is knowing when to make a recommendation of medication management. However, many clients refuse to take mental health medications because of the undesirable side effects and cost. Unwanted side effects of medication include reduced emotions, memory loss, tremors, weight gain, and dulled personality. Side effects may be so serious and adverse that clients become non-compliant. In the critical cases of drug toxicity, the side effects of medication can also be life threatening. These clients may be more open to life-style and dietary changes [6]. As with any changes in diet and dietary supplements, clients should be supervised by medical providers. Thus, a multi-disciplinary approach is recommended and should incorporate nutrition and is not intended to take the place of medical care. Instead, nutritional approaches should augment and supplement pharmaceutical intervention.

A growing body of research on the connection between nutrition and mental health has provided a framework for counselors to

assist clients in making treatment goals and objectives. Although there is emerging research on the effects of nutrition and mental health, more research is needed to provide competent prevention and treatment measures. Educating clients on how good nutrition may affect how they think, feel, and handle stress will give clients another treatment option. The implication for counseling is that adequate counselor training is needed, perhaps wellness courses, a certificate program, or incorporating nutrition into existing course offerings that specifically target nutritional counseling and education.

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