



The Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Mental Nutrition

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Mental nutrition in a broad sense

Mental nutrition is more than just seeking spiritual growth; it involves vitality, motivation and happiness—key components for sustaining and enhancing mental health. It covers a broad spectrum of factors necessary for overall well-being, including physical, psychological and social health.

Recent research highlights strong links among food, nutrition, and mental health. Mental nutrition involves physical nutrients from food as well as psychological factors such as social interactions (often referred to as 'strokes'), feelings of achievement, laughter and relaxation. Like physical deficiencies that contribute to illness, deficiencies in mental nutrition have been linked to both physical and mental disorders. In line with the concept of mind-body unity, our mental health results from the intricate interactions among these factors.

Dietary nutrients for mental satisfaction

Specific nutrients have emerged as particularly important for mental health. For instance, omega-3 fatty acids are known to prevent and treat mental disorders, while folic acid and vitamin D are vital for maintaining brain health. Other important nutrients include iron, often called 'the key to mental health'; mood-stabilising minerals such as lithium, zinc and magnesium; and tryptophan, a precursor to serotonin that helps regulate mental stability. Additionally, lactic acid bacteria and bifidobacteria, which influence the gut environment, aid in serotonin production—the so-called 'happiness hormone'—via the brain-gut axis, thus supporting mental well-being.

Mental fulfilment activities and psychological factors

Psychological and social strategies are vital for mental well-being. Building strong interpersonal relationships, such as encouraging others and receiving love and understanding from family and friends, enhances self-esteem. Engaging in hobbies, exercising, laughing and participating in various activities helps develop a sense of self-efficacy through achieving goals and increased independence. Additionally, maintaining connections with the environment and society is crucial. While external stressors and maladjustment can negatively impact mental health, positive social interactions help prevent social isolation and significantly alleviate psychological stress.

Mental nourishment through animal-assisted therapy

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) supports both physical and psychological/social well-being. Studies have shown that AAT encourages the release of neurotransmitters like serotonin, which provide mental nourishment for healthy adults, the elderly and terminally ill cancer patients [1]. AAT has been shown to have a healing effect on adults and elderly individuals who have suffered a stroke and experience functional disabilities, such as paralysis. It has also been suggested that it serves as 'nutrition for the mind' [2]. Moreover, interacting with animals helps reduce stress in healthy children and childcare workers. The presence of animals in the workplace has also been proposed to support mental well-being [3].

AAT promotes relaxation and enhances quality of life. It effectively offers 'mental nourishment' to a diverse group of

patients, including children, the elderly, those with acute or terminal conditions and both healthy individuals and those with illnesses or disabilities, provided they do not have animal-related allergies.

Future outlook

Future studies will contribute to the growing body of scientific evidence on the diverse effects of AAT. There is a need to develop an integrated mental health strategy that combines nutrition from food with psychological nourishment through AAT.

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