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“It’s about what you’ve assigned to the salad”: Preliminary results of a qualitative food and mood focus group study.

Lee, M., Bradbury, J., Yoxall, J., & Sargeant, S.

Background

Many quantitative studies have been published in the past decade in the field of nutritional psychiatry¹ with evidence indicating that whole of diet patterns can increase/decrease negative mental health². Less is known about how this manifests in everyday, lived experience of food consumption and its relationship with mood. This qualitative study aims to better understand personal relationships with food, meaning attached to food choices, the social context in which dietary choices are made and how these impact on mood.

Methods

Nine focus groups including 44 participants, comprising university students (n= 24), staff (n=14) and accredited practising dietitians (n=6), were conducted across two Australian university campuses, in person and online. Example questions included: ‘Can you describe how something you ate resulted in changing the way you felt?’ and ‘Can you describe how your feelings and emotions have influenced your eating’. Ethics was approved by SCU Human Research Ethics Committee. Data were de-identified and transcribed verbatim and analysed in NVIVO (v12). The research is currently in stage three of Braun and Clarke’s³ stages of thematic analysis

Stage 1
Familiarisation of
Data

Stage 2
Initial Coding

Stage 3
Generating
Themes

Stages of Thematic Analysis (Braun And Clarke, 2006)

Stage 4
Validity and
Reliability of
Themes

Stage 5
Defining and
Naming Themes

Stage 6
Interpretation and
Reporting

Example notes and codes for preliminary themes

Notes	Codes	Preliminary Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food habits learned from childhood Parental role modelling Eating alone decreases mood/nutrient absorption Eating with loved ones increases mood Foods healthier for mental health Mediterranean culture – social aspect of food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Context Upbringing Culture 	Social context dependency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gardening increases mood Growing own food increases mood Preparing food for family increases mood Process of preparing food increases mood Lack of nutrients in modern food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gardening Home-cooking 	Growing, preparing & cooking food increases positive mood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processed/refined/sugary foods increase mood in the short term Processed/refined/sugary foods decrease mood over the long term Processed/refined sugary foods often make you feel lower than you were prior to eating them Wholefoods sustain energy and mood over the long term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comfort foods Crutch Hangry Healthy eating increases mood Unhealthy eating decreases mood 	Short vs long term mood changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eating when emotional/bored/ celebrating Learning to stop eating when body is full Mindful eating Removing food guilt Eating to nourish the body and brain, not to lose weight Self sabotage/punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intuitive Eating Bio-individuality Control Diets Food guilt Relationship with food 	Intuitive Eating

“Because you really, in our culture, mood also relates to how much um love and passion goes into the cooking, because that’s part of the flavour and the experience”

Anita - student

“So that’s really motivating I get really happy when I’m cooking. I love having a glass of wine and stuff. I chuck on the music and yeah, there’s a big atmosphere happening it’s a big event for when I cook”

John - staff

“It’s a mood lifter. If you love home cooked food, there’s even more connection, if you cook it yourself. And it’s delicious. Like, that’s so much more powerful than I don’t know, eating a slice of pizza”

Melissa - dietitian

“And I’d actually get a high if I ate chocolate, like an immediate high. It would make my heart flutter, and I was happy. But then it would come that crash [...] and it just really triggered my mood to be lower”

Janine - dietitian

Conclusions

It is clear that the complexities assigned to discussing food and mood extend beyond dietary patterns and encompass a variety of social and behavioural circumstances. Continued work on the final three stages of Braun and Clarke’s³ thematic analysis is required to seek similarities and differences between the groups, and to refine the themes into larger interpretive factors

References

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