

Nutrition and mental health – the power of natural healing

The brain accounts for only 2 per cent of your body weight but uses up 20 per cent of the energy derived from food, so watch what you eat



Psychologist Maeve Halpin, editor of *How to be Happy and Healthy – the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health*. Photograph: David Conachy

A reluctant client, Martina* slouched in the seat in front of me with eyes downcast, arms folded and a rebellious scowl on her face. Just turned 19, she was sullen, angry and suffering. She had been accepted for her first choice in college but only lasted two weeks.

The mood swings, irritability and chronic unhappiness that had marked her teenage years, affecting her school work and driving her family to distraction, seemed to escalate with the move to a university environment. She had already missed most lectures, fought with her roommate, gotten drunk enough to lose her phone and passport and was back at home with the family she professed to hate.

Having grown up in a stable and loving home, Martina's older sister and two younger brothers exhibited none of her unpredictability and instability. Martina herself grudgingly agreed that there were no dysfunctional factors in her early life that would lead to her disruptive behaviour, yet she seemed destined to sabotage her life, while blaming those closest to her for all her problems.

Teenage rebellion

Martina's responses to my questions were monosyllabic at first, but slowly she opened up, revealing a fuller picture. She felt her childhood years were happy and secure, but from about second year in school, she found it more difficult to concentrate, became moody and snappy and found she had no patience with being around her family. She began to spend more time alone, listening to music and going online. She started secretly smoking and having a drink with friends at the weekends. She often didn't feel hungry and avoided meals at home, instead spending her pocket money on sweets, chocolate and crisps. She earned a certain cachet as the "bad girl" in her class, revelling in the notoriety, but at the same time felt lonely, lost and angry, without any way of understanding why.

Martina's teenage years were marked by poor school marks, chaotic relationships, episodic drug use and risk-taking behaviour with friends. She seemed to have little behavioural control or ability to regulate her emotions. Her current life she also described as haphazard, unfocused and irrational – she could stay up till 4am on the computer, then sleep till 2pm the next day, eating little but chocolate, chips and fizzy drinks, then go out to see her friends without any interaction with her family because "it's too much hassle".

Determining the cause

The lack of any obvious precipitating psychological determinants of Martina's suffering, coupled with her addiction to sugar and sporadic but compulsive use of cannabis and alcohol, led me to suspect that a biochemical imbalance might be contributing to her problems. This means that she has a genetic predisposition to have a nutritional imbalance of essential nutrients in her bloodstream, leading, in her case, to impulsive, self-destructive behaviour and a volatile, tormented emotional life.

I explained to her the importance of adequate nutrition for the brain and nervous system. Though the brain accounts for only 2 per cent of the weight of the body, it uses up 20 per cent of the energy that is derived from the food we eat – far more than any other organ. The human brain is the most complex entity in the known universe, the product of many millions of years of evolution. It is a chemical factory, performing millions of chemical reactions every second. We do not tend to think of our emotions as having a physical existence, but the brain and nervous system, the seat of all our emotional experience, are utterly physical. The human brain evolved to develop the extraordinary capacity it has today by using the only fuel that was available – oxygen, and the vast variety of natural food that the earth produces.

Modern food and mental health for the first time in our long history, the artificially processed foods of modern culture have introduced additives, colourings, refined sugar, hydrogenated fats and preservatives into the human body and brain. By replacing natural foods in the diet with processed food products laden with sugar, fat and salt, a person can be missing vital minerals, vitamins and trace elements, even though eating three meals a day. In some vulnerable people, this “double whammy” of artificial elements combined with nutrient deficiency can disrupt the very sensitive functioning of the nervous system, leading to emotional reactivity, instability and even psychiatric problems. For many people with mental health problems, distressing symptoms can be alleviated just by cutting out sugar, processed food, caffeine and alcohol and adopting a diet of natural, nutrient-dense, ideally organic whole foods.

To delve deeper into the person’s individual nutritional profile, an intervention called nutrient therapy uses comprehensive blood and urine tests, looking for biomarkers that conventional medicine does not concentrate on. From these, many nutritional and/or biochemical imbalances in the person’s brain can be detected. The results allow for a tailored program of natural vitamins, minerals and micro-nutrients to be formulated. The effects can take a number of weeks to become evident, but a significant decrease in symptoms can result. As psychoactive medication works more quickly, this can initially be prescribed in conjunction with a daily regime of nutrients. As the composition of the blood returns to normal and symptoms abate, medication can be reduced or discontinued, with professional medical supervision.

The road to recovery

In spite of her resistance, Martina was intrigued that there could be a practical solution to her difficulties. With the support of her long-suffering family, she began to instigate a routine of healthy eating, regular sleep and getting out in the fresh air for a daily walk. I referred her to Drs Edmond and Andrew O’Flaherty, based in Mount Merrion, the only medics in Ireland who offer the nutrient therapy approach to treating mental illness.

Martina’s blood and urine tests indicated a clear nutritional imbalance and with the oversight of her parents, she began a daily intake of specific nutritional supplements, about 18 tablets over the course of the day. Within about a month, she was sleeping better, was calmer and no longer needed her parents to oversee her intake of nutrients. She continued in counselling with me for about four months, developing skills of self-awareness, self-care, mindfulness and emotional regulation.

By the time she left, she was a different person to the angry, unhappy, immature teenager who had turned up in my office – she has become an articulate and communicative young woman, working on repairing her family relationships and determined to stay well and return to college the following September. Most of all, she understood that a healthy lifestyle, maintained on a daily basis, was the foundation of her mental health and crucially, that the responsibility for this rested entirely with herself.

For more information on nutrient therapy, see biobalance.ie. Dr Edmond O’Flaherty has contributed a chapter on nutrient therapy and mental illness to the recently-published book *How to be Happy and Healthy – the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health*, compiled by counselling psychologist Maeve Halpin.

**Names and identifying information have been changed.*