

Making Time for The Communal Meal:

A simple way to improve physical, mental and emotional health



#EatTogether

When you think of celebrating, getting together with loved ones, or catching up with an old friend, what comes to mind?

For me, it's food.

Not so much the type of food we're eating or the associated tastes and smells, but the experience of sitting down and sharing a meal – and a conversation – with someone I cherish.

For centuries and across all cultures and religions, the communal meal has been prioritized and valued as the pinnacle of togetherness; an opportunity to strengthen bonds, share stories, relax and get to know each other. Almost all holidays and celebrations are traditionally centered around some sort of sharing of food and/or drink, and most cultures have their own version of a regular communal meal:

The French are known for their long dinner meals uninterrupted by technology and the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Jewish households have a weekly Shabbat dinner which involves prayer, rest and rejuvenation and literal un-plugging. In Spain they engage in the siesta which involves a communal meal – before the famous nap – where people get a break from work to engage with family and friends or get to know colleagues.

But what about Americans?

Loïc Bienassis of the European Institute of History and Culture of Food comments on how Americans treat mealtime by saying, “in the U.S., eating is very ‘functional’ in everyday life; you eat [to avoid] being hungry [and] for having the necessary energy to work, which means you can eat while doing something else.” (Moriarty, 2015). With the average American reporting working 47 hours per week with some averaging as high as 60 hours (Ward, 2017), it's no surprise that we are spending less time

sitting down for a meal with loved ones (Mestdag & Glorieux, 2009) and instead eating on the go, at our desks or as fast as possible before we have to move on to the next task.

But does this shift away from the dinner table actually matter? Can spending less time sharing a meal with people whose company we enjoy actually impact our health?

Research says it can.

A meta-analysis by Fulkerson et. al found that across the lifespan eating with others, especially family, was associated with healthier dietary outcomes. Children and teenagers who ate family meals more often had a higher intake of fruits and vegetables, micronutrients, calcium-rich foods and a lower intake of sugar-sweetened beverages and fast food. In adults, those who ate more shared meals were found to have higher intakes of fruits, vegetables, milk products, whole grains, fiber and key micronutrients and lower intakes of soft drinks and fast-food. Unsurprisingly, these positive outcomes were even higher in those who shared **home-cooked meals** together. Older adults who ate alone were more likely to skip meals, had lower intakes of energy, calcium, zinc and iron and higher intakes of processed foods and soft drinks.

The benefits of sharing meals with people we like extends past dietary outcomes, though. In both male and female middle and high school students, frequency of family meals was **inversely related to disordered eating behaviors** – at least in families where weight-related teasing and weight and body talk were low and overall family functioning was reported to be good (Loth et. al, 2015). Eating main meals alone was also associated with unhappiness in a large sample of adults from Thailand, especially women (Yiengprugsawan et. al, 2015). Another study found that people who eat socially often have **higher self-esteem and self-worth** and a wider social network providing social and emotional support than those who don't (Dunbar, 2017). Evening meals in particular were associated with feelings of closeness, **laughter** and reminiscence between the people involved. This type of group bonding, especially shared laughter, also triggers the **endorphin system** (Machin & Dunbar, 2011) which obviously promotes general feelings of mental and emotional wellbeing but may also have a positive effect on the immune system (Sarkar et. al, 2012) – although more research needs to be done to confirm these benefits directly from frequent shared meals.

Let's be honest, the way our society is set up in industrialized America makes it unlikely that most people will be able to share even one uninterrupted meal a day with a person or group of people they enjoy. But if you take nothing else from this article, understand that there is a benefit to prioritizing even one shared meal a week where you simply enjoy the food, relax and give the person/people you are with your undivided attention. Think outside the box, shared meals don't have to fit the mold of the "traditional" family structure. You can likely incur similar benefits by inviting over a coworker you'd like to get to know, catching up with old friends you miss and never make the time to see, or even grabbing a bite with peers in the school cafeteria.

So, with all the emphasis on trying to avoid weight gain this and every holiday season, why don't we focus on something more positive that may actually make us healthier? – spending time with the people we love over a great (preferably home cooked) communal meal.

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