ON CALL

Lay Community Health Advisors

Healthy eating habits and cultural and social influences

Introduction

This short handbook will provide you with some additional information about how your culture and society influences our eating habits.

This handbook will be useful in promoting positive mental health with members of your local health network. Thanks to reading this handbook you will be aware how what we eat is formed and constrained by circumstances – both social and cultural - that we live in.

Social influences

Without any doubt social factor strongly influence our eating habits. The easiest way to see it is to compare what do we eat when we are alone and what when we are surrounded by others, especially by the people we don't know very well. In most cases people, looking for approval of other people, tend to eat less and more healthy when surrounded by others. There are even diet plans where the main principle is to never eat alone.

Social factors influence our diet since early childhood. As soon as we start eating solid food we start to observe what people in our closest surroundings eat and start to copy them. For example if members of our family eat healthy and regularly, there is a big chance that we will adapt same model of eating. In that case social influences affect our diet in positive way. Although, if our closest social environment has a bad influence on us, for example we will see that everyone around us is eating fast food and lot of snacks every day, we will be more likely to develop bad eating habits as it would be seen as a norm.

Studies has shown that there are clear differences in social classes regarding food and nutrient intakes. Unfortunately not everyone has an access to healthy food. The healthiest goodies are usually also the most expensive ones. It is way cheaper to buy a cheeseburger than peanuts or mango. Preparing meals also requires time, so eating healthy requires more money and free time than eating whatever we can get fast and at the lowest price.

Social support (e.g. family, group of friend), on the one hand, can have a beneficial effect on individual's food choice by encouraging and supporting healthy eating practices or discouraging eating empty calories. On the other hand, it can also have a bad influence by promoting bad eating habits. Not only people in our environment, but also place

of food consumption (e.g. home, school, work, bar or restaurant), will affect our food choice by suggesting us meal options. If there are no sweets in the house there's bigger chance that kid craving for something sweet will choose to eat a fruit. Accordingly, it there are only healthy meals options in menu of restaurant we are currently visiting, we probably don't decide to chance place just to eat something unhealthy.

The power of the impact that social factor has on out diet is enormous. That's way it is important to promote healthy eating in the world where eating a lot and in a rush becomes more and more popular.

Fortunately healthy lifestyle is becoming more popular, especially among young people. We have to remember that promoting eating healthy food is not a "fat shaming", but taking care of our health. Social support from friends, family and co-workers play important role in improvements in our diet.

Cultural factors

Cultural factors, like ways of food preparation, traditions, beliefs and values also greatly influence our food preference.

It is natural that people in different countries eat different foods. The healthiest choice is to eat what comes from our region, as our bodies are best

prepared to digest it. For example Japanese people are better suited to eat raw fish and seaweed than Europeans, and doesn't need as high fat intake as people leaving in cold countries. Another advantage of eating what comes from our region is certainty that our food is fresh.

Nowadays eating only food from the region is not as popular as it used to be not so far ago. Popularity of eating food from other regions has started with the popularity of travelling. People tend to change their cultural habits, for example, when moving to a new country and adopt the food habits of that country culture. People are curious from nature and no wonder trying different kind of food is tempting. We have to remember that even if exotic food can be healthy and beneficial for us, the best food for our digestive system we can find in our own homeland.

Every culture has its cuisines, which makes basic diet for its members. Some of traditional cuisines are low in fat and sugar and really good for health, others are rich in fats (mostly in cold climate) and are good only for active people.

There are many factors which have impact on what is eaten in given culture. Some cultures restrict eating some kinds of food, for example for religious regions, in other eating habits include eating animals that wouldn't be eaten in other (e.g. spiders) etc.

How to use this Resource with your Local Health Group?

This handbook presents information on the topic of healthy diet planning for different age groups. It helps us understand how our cultural and social environment influence our diet.

Reviewing this handbook before each session with the group will help you to lead a discussion about the topic. In the resources you will also find a PowerPoint presentation which will help you to explain the topic to your group and start a conversation with them.

Group Activity

After you have shared the digital resource and the PowerPoint presentation with your group, you can start a group discussion asking all group members to think about if people in their closest environment eat healthy, and if their own way of eating change when they eat alone and when they eat with friends.

Once they are finished, ask them to think if their eating habits are the same as their parents' and friends' habits. Ask them to write down similarities and differences (e.g. I don't drink milk, like most of my friends; I eat meat even if no one in my house does). Ask them if they would eat the same way if no one would know what do they eat.

Next, ask them what kind of food is popular in their country/region, and if they eat accordingly. How often does they eat traditional food? How likely are they to recommend that food to foreigners?

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