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## EMOTIONS, DIET AND HEALTHY LIFESTYLES IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a direct link between what a person eats and his or her health; however, there are aspects such as emotions and physical activity, which can enhance health or disease. For the purposes of this article, only the emotional effects on the quality of food intake and its relationship to a healthy lifestyle will be reviewed.

The hypothesis defended in this article assumes that the more emotionally mature a person is, the better his or her relationship with food will be, habitually choosing those that contain more nutrients, more ecological elements and less excess fats, sugars, white flour and preservatives, and therefore, will include less hyperprocessed products. Two central sections are presented, the first is linked to emotional health, its concepts and implications, and its affectation with the type of food intake; the second section focuses more on generating alternatives to promote the basis of a quality diet and a healthy university lifestyle.

## EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental/emotional health cannot be defined in isolation, since it necessarily involves aspects of people's physical and social health; however, specifically, with regard to mental health, it establishes three distinctive elements that integrate it: the possibility of adequately managing stress in their daily lives; being functional in productive life, be it academic or work, depending on the stage they are in; in addition to generating timely contributions to the community (WHO 2022), thus showing a person aware of their environment and in full use of their capabilities as an individual and social agent.

1. In a study by Ruiz-Lázaro (et al., 2022), they found that school bullying, including various forms of psychological harassment, are a leading factor in the etiology of Eating Behavior Disorders (ED), affecting the socio-emotional maturity of students, minimizing their self-esteem and autonomy, mainly due to the offenses received by a poorly stylized image by the standards of thinness of the media, promoted mainly by social networks.

In the same sense, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Government states that mental health "comprises our emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects the way we think, feel and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy decisions" (2021, p.1). Such health indicators, both from WHO and CDC, could become unattainable if we look at the majority of people, in this case students, product of a collapsing society in all its systems: economic, social, family, political, health and environmental, to name a few, and impacting the emotional health of the entire population.

Dévora Kestel of WHO (2022b), states that almost all educational, social and health systems give scant attention to mental health. "The result is that millions of people around the world suffer in silence, are victims of human rights violations or are negatively affected in their daily lives" (p. vii), aggravates the problem, the scarcity of free institutional options for their treatment, as well as, the stigmatization about this health issue, and the respective discrimination, given that it complicates people's care, due to the fact that the triggering factors, are common and often, high, such as the following: dysfunctional homes, unsafe and dangerous communities; (Unikel, et al., 2017; Larson and Story, 2009); as well as, bullying<sup>1</sup> (Barriguete, et al., 2022).

The aforementioned factors prevent students from seeking help for their mental disorders, in addition to the scarce options of psychological services available to most of them, which favors that when they reach the university stage, any help may, at that time, be insufficient "to curb abnormal experiences ranging from more or less isolated traits or symptoms to psychopathological manifesta-

tions [...].]Included in this area clinical pictures of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, accentuation of abnormal personality traits and several others” (Alarcón, 2019, p. 219). Therefore, in the classroom, behaviors of isolation, shyness or violence can often be observed, at the slightest provocation. The main output of these emotions is in the disorganized food intake that leads to risky eating behaviors<sup>2</sup> and states of poor nutrition, low rates of academic achievement and poor attention to mobility and body training (Zuniga-Jara, et al., 2018), important elements that make up a healthy lifestyle.(Montenegro and Ruiz, 2019; García, et al., 2012).

It is important to note that both aspects, food and emotions, are mutually affected, since the emotional state modifies the frequency, quantity and type of food that is desired to eat, and, on the other hand, the type of food chosen, can enhance certain emotions, Gibson (2006) notes that “The most common way in which food can affect behavior is the change in mood and excitement that occurs before and after eating” (p. 54), given the rapid communication between gut, liver and brain, with almost immediate impact, both in emotions and vitality or lethargy, “The relationship between perceived emotions and the effects on food consumption, with an almost immediate impact on both emotions and vitality or lethargy” (p. 54). 54), given the rapid communication between gut, liver and brain, with an almost immediate impact, either on emotions and vitality or lethargy, “The existing relationship between perceived emotions and the effects on food and beverage consumption is observed mainly in the intake of fatty and sweet foods, called palatable [pleasant or acceptable taste]” (Bernal-Gómez et

al., 2022, p. 81), which is why they tend to be the most preferred foods when there are problems of anxiety or stress, which is the main trigger of CAR and TAC.

That is why the importance of strengthening within universities, support systems for the emotional health of the student population is highlighted, where the institutional strategy integrates activities that show evidence “of prevention, constant environmental support, availability of offices and staff in charge of early diagnosis work, varied initial management and relevant additional provisions, dictated by a comprehensive assessment of the individual case” (Alarcón, 2019, p. 220), in addition to a professional updating support to the clinical therapeutic team, which should attend the student population in constant exposure to social networks, whose constant in these, is the change of trends, and an emotionally vulnerable student population, will be immediately affected by it.

On the other hand, there are complementary areas that favor a healthy lifestyle, practiced in different universities, such as recreational activities and art, since they also contribute to reduce stress, and allow the release of emotions that may be trapped, allowing a healthier influx of them, avoiding a food intake of venting; likewise, Olmos-Borja (et al., 2023), state that it is impossible to measure academic success if only the intellectual sphere is considered, since emotional intelligence is crucial for both school and work, so the authors defend the use of play strategies to facilitate emotional maturity and intelligence, given their direct impact on the development empathy “[...] achieving understanding of the feelings and needs of others. Many games and ludic activities present challenges, obstacles

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2. A risky eating behavior (CAR) may integrate high volume intake, as well as diets very limited in quantity and nutrients, may include “the use of laxatives, enemas, diuretics or anorectics, excessive physical activity and self-induced vomiting”; these behaviors do not meet the requirements to be diagnosed as eating disorders; however, the relevance of CARs is highlighted, given that, although they present less intensity than EDs, their frequency exceeds them (Unikel, et al..., 2017, p. 11), but may be their precedent,

and emotional situations [...] This provides an opportunity to practice self-regulation [...] an essential skill in emotional intelligence” (Olmos-Borja, et al., 2023, p. 167), and such self-regulation will be vital for the practice of a balanced food intake, from an emotional tranquility gestated from the same person, beyond the conditions that the social, family or academic context may present, contributing to the co-creation of a healthy lifestyle.

Finally, it is added that the training of states of bodily, mental and emotional self-awareness, through *Mindfulness*<sup>3</sup>, can favor a state of well-being, and its continuous practice can be an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. Moscoso (2019) states that this intervention model has achieved such an empirical advance from science, proving to be “a mediating variable in reducing emotional distress and promoting emotional regulation” (p. 108). There are several works that show Mindfulness as an important tool for physical and emotional well-being, some universities have already integrated it into their outreach and student support programs (Aranda, et al., 2019; Tapia and Gonzalez, 2019; Viciania, et al., 2018).

## **BASIS FOR A QUALITY DIET AND A HEALTHY UNIVERSITY LIFESTYLE**

Probably no person has escaped or will escape from the practice of *emotional eating*<sup>4</sup>, unrelated to the physiological need of hunger and attributable rather to disharmonized emotional states, and it is precisely in uni-

3. Model developed by Kabat-Zinn, who defines it considering full awareness of the here and now, with important complementary elements: non-judgment, systematic attention of one's own attention, in order to influence the quality of one's own experience and relationship with others (2012, p. 8).

4. The tendency to talk about the existence of emotional eating has been based on self-report instruments in people who assume their food consumption due to negative emotional moments; however, Bongers and Jansen (2016), conducted a longitudinal study of research published between 1986 and 2016, and conclude that the term *emotional eating* still does not have sufficient validation to affirm that there are people who modify their eating behavior when their emotions are negative. However, for reasons of the present work this term is still used, due to different works contributed by (Sosa-Cordobés, et al., 2024; Vizmanos and Betancourt, 2024; Bernal-Gómez et al., 2022; and Peña and Reidl, 2015; Sánchez and Pontes (2012).

5. The current presence of specialized psychological care centers within university spaces is vital, Alarcón (2019) states that “The university must forge an open and objective culture of maintaining that well-being and opportunities to seek professional help” (p. 220), where the teaching staff is also involved from classroom dialogues that facilitate the early detection of problems.

versity populations where there may be more such cases, given the presence of factors such as: academic stress, work, dating problems or lack thereof, family financial problems, the canons of beauty and thinness at that age, which among many others, favor eating from an unsatisfied emotional need.

In Spain, a comparative study was conducted in students (women and men) of three universities, some of the results found, show women as more prone to practice emotional eating, and that in parallel impacts on the deterioration of their physical health status, and increases their levels of anxiety and depression (Sosa-Cordobés, et al., 2024).

Although psychological support is of utmost importance<sup>5</sup>, having attractive, healthy and nutritious food options in school cafeterias is also relevant, especially because the university population is becoming more aware of the harmful effects on health of the excess of pesticides and hyperprocessed products in most supermarkets, restaurants and cafeterias (Salvador and Vargas, 2023; Velázquez and Vargas, 2023; Vargas and Panchi, 2023; Garduño, et al, 2023; Vargas and Chávez, 2022). In this sense, the University Coordination for Responsibility, of the Universidad Veracruzana, proposes among its objectives for the certification of sustainable cafeterias, to “Promote actions aimed at university canteens, cafeterias and food outlets to promote healthy, responsible and sustainable consumption in the university community and Veracruz society in general” (2022, p. 5).

Given that it is imperative that the different processes of the products offered in university cafeterias, apart from being healthy, show respect for the environment, protect human rights, and favor local and ideally agroecological suppliers (Comet-Herrera, 2022); it is necessary, as a catalyst, the establishment of a transversal education on responsible and conscious consumption, linked to fair trade, from the University Social Responsibility (RSU), especially, regarding ethical purchasing, which implies the consideration of the rights of the entire chain of production and fair trade, with support to local producers, increasing the availability of healthy, nutritious and agroecological products for the student population, in addition to the “The organization of awareness and communication activities aimed at the university community and society in general” (Comet-Herrera, 2022, p. 272); aspects that together contribute to the quality of a healthy individual, university and planetary lifestyle. It is clear that addressing the issue of nutrition from different angles is complicated:

it is important to insist that it is necessary to influence the implementation of spaces that are defined as places where defined as places where those in charge of the stores provide the consumer with food and not fantasies food and not fantasies that harm our organism. Taking into account that the notion of food not only implies subsistence, but also involves the maintenance of health (Arriaga, 2023, p. 14).

What are foods that can sustain health and are accepted by the student population? In 2018, from the Ministry of Health, the National Institute of Public Health (INSP) and

the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), propose the intake of dairy products, fruits, legumes, meats, eggs and vegetables, and discourage sweetened beverages, snacks, and various desserts, fast food, Mexican snacks and processed meats (Saucedo-Soto, 2021). On the other hand, WHO indicates that healthy eating, of course, will depend on many factors<sup>6</sup>; however, WHO, FAO and UNICEF (2024), suggest proposals that tend more towards balance and moderation, which have a direct impact on a healthy lifestyle:

1. Adequate level and quantity of nutrients, both micro and .
2. Balance of macronutrient intake such as carbohydrates, proteins and fats.
3. Variety that allows to ingest the greatest coverage of food needs.
4. Moderation, paying special attention to processed meats, white sugars, flours, salts and trans fats

In public university populations, there are two problems: the economic situation of the student population, which prevents them from buying food with a good level of nutrients, and, on the other hand, there is the lack of food offerings that are visually, olfactory and gustatory attractive to young people<sup>7</sup>, because, of course, it is necessary to question, as Arriaga states:

How far is it possible to break with the mental structures of consumption that young and not so young people have? How far is the influence of marketing and advertising as a process of consumption control by the food industry? Is it possible to resist the seduction of this industry? How far is it feasible to endure? (2023, p. 14).

6. Such as “[...] age, sex, physiological status, lifestyle and level of physical activity, cultural context, availability and affordability of local foods, and dietary customs, among other factors” (WHO, FAO, UNICEF, 2024, p. 3).

7. In studies conducted with university students have been detected as obstacles to practice healthy eating, the difficulty to acquire in university cafeterias or nearby, dishes, snacks or menus at low cost, but with high level of nutrients; they are also considered to student urgencies to get a quick service that includes high fats and sugars, given the saturation of the academic day that leads to consume fast products, palatable and easy to get (Vargas, et al., 2023; Troncoso, et al., 2013), the concessionaires of university cafeterias have not only joined in, but have also encouraged this consumption, boosted by agribusiness marketing.



And it is at this point, where it is understood that young people and adults face a multitude of advertising that ends up transforming their consumption habits, disdaining healthy eating, preferring products with excess of toxic substances, artificial and lacking in nutrients, which undermine the health of those who consume them. Without forgetting the component of the visual standard of the ideal figure of women and men, also established by marketing strategies, which generate morbid consumption, mainly in women, triggering risky eating behaviors (CAR) and eating behavior disorders (TAC) (Torres-Cruz and Torres-Cruz, 2021; Unikel, et al., 2016; Fandiño, et al., 2007).

In a sample of 436 diners in university cafeterias of the Autonomous University of Mexico, 80.5% were between 18 and 25 years of age; 58.5% expressed their willingness to have more plant-based dishes on the cafeteria menu (without any ingredients of animal origin); likewise, 87.4% mentioned the need to have in university cafeterias, the presence of organic or agroecological products (Vargas, et al., 2023).

As the population, not only students, becomes aware of the implications of hyper-processed products saturated with pesticides, their preference for healthier, agro-ecologically produced and artisanal dishes may increase, and their consumption will become more conscious and critical, which will have an impact on their physical and emotional health. However, although theoretically highly probable, there are other conditions that affect the real and sustained possibility of this happening:

agroecological production systems, thanks to soil restoration, water conservation, crop diversity and the exclusion of the use of toxic inputs, would lead to improved food and health conditions, livelihoods and food security for family farmers, the economic tensions due to the instability of climatic conditions, market and land rental prices, among others, generate conditions

of poverty in this peri-urban horticultural sector, a determinant cause of overweight and obesity, which are weighted as an indicator in the health-disease relationship of this population (Vera, 2022, pp. 186-187).

The above quote is the result of a study on agroecological food, environment and health in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires; However, it can be applied to different contexts, where there are also economic problems, tensions and environmental surprises due to climate change, which can cause the total loss crops, and that all contribute to problems of a healthy and sufficient supply for the population, therefore, the need to influence a greater agroecological training, gastronomic, nutritional and emotional, which are crucial aspects to improve the food conditions of the people and their universities, reiterating the link between physical health, food and emotional health, but the population may show illiteracy in the three issues, without discarding the environmental issue. In this regard Sobel (2017) states that it is urgent to educate on issues related to environmental care and sustainability, “it is a paradigm that aspires to educate students to make decisions tending to achieve a balance between conservation of ecosystems in good condition, prosperous economies, and equitable social systems” (p. 52). Thus, taking on the cross-cutting educational challenge of food, emotional and planetary health are vital challenges for all educational institutions.

There are very specific educational alternatives focused on the management of eating behaviors and disorders, which integrate: (a) body image, where the existence of perfect bodies is demystified, and the acceptance and appreciation of individual differences is strengthened; (b) emotional education in relation to self-esteem, seeking alternative cognitive training to negative thoughts that boycott self-esteem; (c) training in nutrition and alternative healthy eating habits; and (d) critical consumption, which confronts manipulative

advertisements of personal image and, of “nutritional” fantasies of low-nutrient products Ruiz-Lázaro, et al., 2022, p. 47), and it is added, loaded with agrotoxics, both for the health of people and the community of life (Vargas, 2018; Díaz-Salazar, 2017; Herrero, 2015; Conde, 2007), including those considered as healthy, as is the case of dairy products (Pérez, 2024), which have affected health from infants to the elderly; therefore, education in critical consumption is important, which facilitates being alert to the manipulations of the media, given their transcendence in a variety of physical and emotional diseases. Impacts susceptible to escalate to deaths that could be avoided can be detonated, including suicides (Baquero, et al., 2017; Rodríguez, et al., 2013), identified in samples with eating disorders.

## CONCLUSION

We point out the recognition of the multiple factors that affect the nutrition of students, some of which are beyond the immediate reach of correction, such as poverty, climate change or the policies of dictatorial governments, among others. However, focusing on the university student population, we recover the theoretical proposals that involve the same educational institutions in the generation of strategies to prevent and treat emotional problems in students, given their proven links with morbid food consumption. Thus, on the one hand, as proposed by Alarcón, Zuniga-Jara, et al, Kestel and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is vital to have special areas for timely diagnosis, prevention and treatment; it also requires the critical-sensitive involvement of the teaching staff, who should have basic training for the timely detection of these problems, which would facilitate the early detection of the emotional health elements proposed by both the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, focused on stress management that promotes

healthy decisions for the person and the team around him/her. Therefore, the positive effect can be observed both at individual and social level, involving active life balanced with the community, not only social, nature is also vital, more than important, from an approach of care, knowledge, respect, the which implies a mature relationship towards the same person, generating a self-esteem that will positively affect the intake of food from health

Likewise, eco-social training in healthy eating is required for the orientation of the student population, without discarding the professors themselves, who can be role models, helping to promote agroecological, local and nutritious food. It highlights the responsibility of universities to promote from their cafeterias, these features, at optimal prices for the possibilities of students with more economic weakness, whose impacts also favor the ethical purchases of the university, developing and hiring local ecological suppliers, promoters of greater environmental sustainability.

The studies reviewed also consider the negative impacts on academic achievement when students present eating disorders and alterations, which can lead to self-perceived school failure and further escalation to self-destructive behaviors.

A healthy lifestyle, therefore, integrates options that are appropriate to age, gender, preferences, etc. A healthy, affordable, attractive and varied diet, free of hyper-processes and agro-toxins; alternatives of contact with nature; transversal eco-social education; as well as options of specialized, sensitive and discreet psychological support, without stigmas and discrimination that may cause those who need the service to flee from it; additionally, it is important to integrate playful and mindfulness strategies such as Mindfulness, to assist in stress management in university students, which in parallel, may also have an impact on academic success.

Therefore, it is affirmed that for a healthy nutrition it is indispensable from the University itself: The attention and continuous training of healthy emotions, including the development of self-esteem and self-awareness; training on the basis of healthy eating and responsible and critical consumption, beyond the marketing manipulations of agribusiness;

and an ecosocial education that reconnects the awareness of the university population with nature, interacting with it to relearn its respect and care, aspects that by themselves will impact on the self-esteem of those who practice them, their physical and emotional well-being, detonators of a healthy lifestyle.

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