

The Impacts of Cooking & Food Skills on Physical & Mental Health - A Literature Review

Jake Callow

Abstract

Over recent years, there has been a cultural shift in the relationships people have with food and their health. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the temporary shutdown or lack of access to dining establishments such as restaurants and fast food companies, forcing people to either suddenly learn at home cooking skills. With both emotional eating problems and diet culture on the rise, it is clear that a lot of people are missing the skills and knowledge to cook themselves meals in the home - or more accurately, they are missing the resources to develop these skills. This review will discuss the importance on home cooked meals and the skills required in relation to mental and physical well-being.

1 Introduction

It is widely understood that cooking meals at home has many benefits for your physical health over eating out. Although eating away from the home can be an important form of social gathering, many depend on it for their food consumption due to a lack of cooking knowledge and skill. It has been projected that the gap in understanding between people and how their food is prepared will continue growing as the years go on, with an influx of purchases towards take out and prepared meals. (Serecon Management Consulting, 2005)

It has been shown that a lack of cooking meals at home has a direct effect on the increase of obesity and diet related issues, and vice versa. (Smith et al, 2013) This makes it clear that cooking skills are vital for one to take control of their health.

2 Defining Cooking Skills

For the sake of clarity, it is important to define what is meant by the term cooking skills. Cooking skills are the physical skills required to use the tools around you to cook meals, such as using a knife to chop ingredients or knowing how to use an oven. (Short, 2002)

This is often considered separate to what is known as food skills, which is a broader term used to define the ability to know what to do with the ingredients at your disposal, as well as time management and food budgeting when it comes to cooking. (Fordyce-Voorham, 2009) Food skills and food literacy are overall harder to define and are a large roadblock to many when trying to develop a healthier mindset around cooking, as food skills are more of a soft skill you learn from experience than something you outright study. Although many people would have the technical skills on how to use the right tools, they might be less knowledgeable on the best ways to prepare certain foods or dishes they are unfamiliar with.

Both cooking skills and food skills are important aspects of being able to confidently prepare and cook meals at home, and these are the skills this review is referring to in the discussion of the resources available to learn these skills and the impact that can have on mental health as well as physical health. As recipes are often considered an important aspect of the kitchen, an app designed around sharing and promoting easy to follow recipes would help improve people's food skills and make it easier to learn how to prepare many types of dishes.

3 Impacts on Physical Health

Many people have the general understanding that consistently eating out has negative effects on their health, especially when considering fast food establishments, but most do not know explicitly how the food is prepared or what nutrients they are missing from their meals. Additionally, those that do understand specifically what is missing might not know the exact differences between the food they consume out of the home compared to home cooked meals.

A study performed in 2017 showed a direct correlation between eating home cooked meals and a reduction in excess body fat, cholesterol, and chance at developing diabetes. The same study also showed significant improvements between groups that ate home cooked meals roughly three times a week compared to groups that ate them five or more times a week, showing that the consistency is also an important factor. (Mills S. et al, 2017)

It was also shown that there was an increase in vitamin C, fruit and vegetable intake, showing that home cooked meals also provide important nutrients that take out does not as well as lowering health risks. (Mills S. et al, 2017)

Interestingly, this study also displayed that one of the largest groups that consistently cooked meals at home were women around the age of 50. It is assumed that this is due to the expectation put on women in previous generations to be the meal provider for the family, which is something that can still be expected of women today in certain cultures, pointing out a potential observation between these groups and an overall increase in health. (Bava et al, 2008)

Other research shows that fast food and prepared meals have a higher content of fat, sugar and salt, which are used to compensate for the lack of freshness or ingredient diversity and to add flavour rather than increase nutrition. (Jaworowska, A. et al, 2012)

Overall, it is clear that there is almost always some positive benefits to cooking at home rather than eating out, with the consistency and amount of home cooked meals also having a significant impact on one's physical health and reducing the chances of obesity and diabetes. Giving more access to the knowledge of nutrition through well written recipes would help consumers feel encouraged to cook meals at home more often, therefore improving their physical health.

4 Impacts on Mental Health

Seeing that food and nutrition is innately tied to our physical well-being, it can be harder to measure the effects that cooking proper meals has on our mental health. There are the benefits that come from our body performing healthier and that having an effect on our day-to-day enjoyment in life, and there is also the security and confidence that cooking and food skills bring that can make oneself feel healthier overall mentally.

A study was performed in 2022 that involved a food literacy cooking program and observed the effects that had on subjects mental health and overall cooking confidence. (Rees, J. et al, 2022) The study was based on measuring the confidence in 5 main areas:

1. Cooking with ingredients.
2. Following a recipe.
3. Cooking with new foods.
4. That a dish will turn out well.
5. Tasting new foods and dishes.

The study had discovered that all of the factors they were observing had improved after the courses were completed. Over the 6 month course, it was also shown to have a significant impact on the mental health of the subjects involved. This shows that there is a clear link between the confidence in cooking alone and one's mental health that doesn't directly include the mental health affects of nutrition. (Rees, J. et al, 2022)

A common factor in this study is that the subjects were being given clear recipes with assistance on how to follow them as well as being provided ingredients, which shows that access to resources is a large aspect of building confidence in cooking and food skills, and that there might be a gap in the market for a centralised source of information for these recipes. This is where having an app dedicated to sharing well rated recipes that allow for substitutions would help build more cooking confidence in people of all skill sets and ages.

As mentioned in the physical health portion of the review, many people will pre-existing cooking and food skills are women, which this study also shone light on, as a larger improvement in confidence was shown amongst the men who participated. (Rees, J. et al, 2022)

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear through the studies and research shown that individuals who prepare and eat home cooked meals themselves show an improvement in both physical and mental health. They gain more nutritional value and knowledge through learning to cook meals themselves and gain a better understanding of what they might need from their food and how it is made, as well as building confidence in their cooking and food skills which helps improve their self image and overall confidence in themselves.

Creating an app or website as a centralised database where people can use consumer rated recipes to build up their skills and easily write their own recipes as well as help reduce food waste would be hugely beneficial for consumers physical and mental health as a result, as it would directly contribute to the amount of home cooked meals made by all groups regardless of gender or age as the app would be easily accessible.

6 References

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