

Mental Health & Community Kitchens

Community kitchen programs aim to increase food literacy measures such as cooking skills and nutrition knowledge. However, there may also be mental health benefits for participants.

What is mental health?

The capacity for each and all of us to feel, think and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.⁽¹³⁾

What is food literacy?

A set of interconnected attributes including food and nutrition knowledge, skills, self-efficacy/confidence, food decisions, and other ecologic (external) factors.⁽¹⁰⁾

Protective Factors for Mental Health⁽¹¹⁾ from Community Kitchen Programs:

Individual (Internal) Factors



Cognitive

- Improved coping skills^(4,12)
- Ability to overcome obstacles⁽²⁾



Emotional

- Increased self esteem^(4,6,8)
- Sense of achievement and accomplishment^(2,8,12)
- Positive effect on mood⁽⁶⁾
- Relief from frustration⁽¹²⁾



Social

- Better social skills^(1,6,8)
- Improved teamwork^(1,2,8,12)
- Decreased anxiety⁽⁶⁾
- Increased tolerance and patience⁽¹²⁾



External Factors

Social (Community)

- More opportunities for social interaction^(1,3,6,7,9)
- Extended social support networks^(1,4,9,12)
- New friendships^(2,5,8)
- Ability to share experiences with others^(5,10)
- Sense of belonging^(2,5)

Structural & Environmental

- Less social isolation, particularly for marginalized communities^(3,5,9,12)
- Access to safe environments⁽⁹⁾
- Connected to other programs, resources, and information through sharing with others^(4,8,9,12)
- More empowered communities⁽⁴⁾

While more research is needed, evidence shows that community kitchen participation may have a positive impact on mental health.

How can these findings be applied?

1

Reorient community kitchen programs to promote mental health

- Design community kitchen programs to include problem solving, achievement, teamwork, and other abilities to build resilience.
- Build in opportunities for social time and sharing.
- Make relevant community resources and information available.

2

Consider Protective Factors for Mental Health⁽¹¹⁾ when measuring program outcomes

- Think about your goals and decide how protective factors can be incorporated into the community kitchen program.
- Develop evaluation questions based on these factors to measure the mental health impact of the program.

References

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