

PRIORITIZING HEALTH EQUITY & FOOD SECURITY

Spotlight on Mental Health



Feeding America is collaborating with Mental Health America (MHA) to raise awareness about mental health conditions and their connection to food and health equity. Together, we can help people facing hunger get the extra help they need to maintain mental wellness.

Mental health is an essential component of an individual's overall health and well-being. It influences how we think, feel and act, and includes our emotional, psychological and social well-being. Mental illnesses are brain-based conditions that affect thinking, emotions, and behaviors. Facing a mental health challenge during your life is common and treatable. Nearly 1 in 4 adults in the United States had a diagnosable mental health condition in 2022.¹

There are many factors that may increase one's risk for mental health conditions.² Some of these factors include:

- Poor sleep
- Physical inactivity
- Chronic medical conditions
- Family history of mental health
- Increased stress

Diet and nutrition play a critical role in maintaining optimal health and well-being. However, social, structural and systemic inequities have contributed to higher rates of food insecurity and mental health conditions for Black, Latino and Native American individuals.³ Individuals experiencing food insecurity are at increased risk for psychological distress and mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety.^{4,5}

To overcome these inequities, new opportunities must emerge to ensure that everyone has access to culturally appropriate healthy food, unbiased health care and essential resources that improve overall health and well-being. Feeding America is focusing on solutions and supports that inform models of community health, free from injustices and inequities. This brief includes "real life" stories of progress.

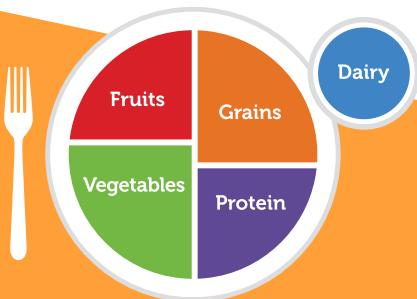
FAST STATS Mental Health

- Mental illness affected 23% of adults in the U.S in 2022.¹ Due to systemic and structural inequities, such as reduced access to quality care, treatment, and affordable, nutritious foods, and experiences of discrimination, historically marginalized communities experience a higher prevalence of mental illness than other communities.³
- Over 23 million adults with a mental illness (55%).⁷
- Nearly 1 in 6 youth (16%) reported suffering from a major depressive episode in 2022. 60% of youth with major depression did not receive treatment.⁷

Diet and nutrition

A nutritious, [well-balanced](#) diet including leafy green vegetables, fruits, legumes, fish, whole grains, nuts, avocados and olive oil supports a healthy brain and helps prevent and manage mental health conditions.⁶

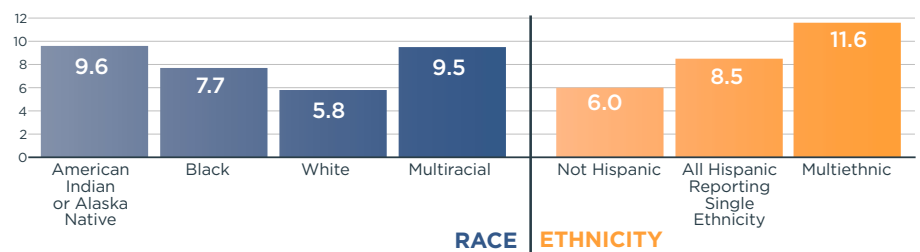
Community stakeholders, including food banks, food pantries, non-profits, public health and health care organizations, can support people in eating healthier. That's why Feeding America has partnered with [Healthy Eating Research](#) to develop strategies and evidence-based nutrition guidelines to improve the quality of foods distributed through the charitable food sector.



MyPlate.gov

- FRUITS AND VEGETABLES: 1/2 PLATE
- WHOLE GRAINS: 1/4 PLATE
- FISH AND OTHER LEAN PROTEINS: 1/4 PLATE
- LOW FAT OR FAT-FREE DAIRY: 3 CUPS

Average days of activities missed due to poor physical and mental health, by race/ethnicity⁸



Source: Ng, J, Zhang, Q, Hudson Scholle, S, and Guerino, P. Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Mental Health Among Diverse Groups of Medicare Advantage Beneficiaries. CMS OMH Data Highlight No. 11. Baltimore, MD. 2017.

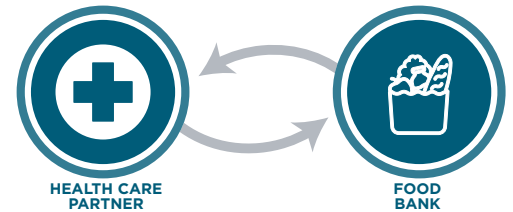
- Food low in saturated and trans fats
- Low sodium options
- Low sugar options



Stories from the Field

The Association for Mental Health and Wellness (MHAW), an affiliate of MHA, recognizes the complex links between economic inequality, food insecurity, and mental and physical health. Through a lens of wellness, MHAW looks beyond the symptoms of illness and instead focuses on how to build optimal health through a multi-level, prevention-oriented approach. As a recovery center, shared meals are a way to build connections and teamwork, and several years ago, MHAW worked with a nutritionist to examine the food they served. Their approach was to promote healthy choices by making them readily available. Many of the Recovery Center's members, when given the option, opted for fresh fruits and vegetables. This promoted healthy choices at the center and revealed that many members were facing food scarcity at home. Thus, the food pantries at MHAW were born. Since 2009, they have operated food pantries at three of their service centers in efforts to continue to serve and support the overall health of their communities.

TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY TOGETHER



"We offer staple pantry items that can easily create a nutritious meal, with a focus on fresh fruits and vegetables. Through donations and, in season, through our very own organic Healing Garden, we provide freshly grown vegetables, fruits, and herbs for our pantry."

Colleen Merlo,
CEO at MHAW

"It is not just about the quantity of food but the quality. What you eat affects your mood."

Ruth McDade,
Director of Development and Healing Garden Volunteer

Take Action! Address mental health and hunger.



CONVENE food/hospitality, education, social service, and other community partners to identify and develop solutions to hunger and health barriers within the community.



PRIORITIZE increasing access to affordable food, health care and medication; addressing the social determinants of health; eliminating health disparities; amplifying community voice.



BUILD TRUST through positive interactions and communication with the community and engage in developing strategies to address the unique and complex needs of people facing hunger, eliminating bias, recognizing we are all in this together.



DESIGN culturally appropriate resources; and make accessible in local clinics, grocery stores, food banks and pantries, community centers, schools and places of worship.



ADVOCATE for policy, systems and environmental change approaches that support increased nutritious food access, improved health and well-being for community members in greatest need.

¹2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables. 2022. Retrieved from: www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt42728/NSDUHDetailedTabs2022/NSDUHDetailedTabs2022/NSDUHDetTabsSect6pe2022.htm

²Mental Health America. What Plays a Role in Developing a Mental Health Condition? Retrieved from: mhanational.org/what-plays-role-developing-mental-health-conditions

³Kirkbride JB, Anglin DM, Colman I, et al. The social determinants of mental health and disorder: evidence, prevention and recommendations. *World Psychiatry*. 2024;23(1):58-90. doi:10.1002/wps.21160

⁴Pourmotabbed A, Moradi S, Babaei A, et al. Food insecurity and mental health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2020;23(10):1778-1790. doi:10.1017/S136898001900435X

⁵Leung CW, Lاراia BA, Feiner C, et al. The Psychological Distress of Food Insecurity: A Qualitative Study of the Emotional Experiences of Parents and Their Coping Strategies. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 2022;122(10):1903-1910.e2. doi:10.1016/j.jand.2022.05.010

⁶Lim SY, Kim EJ, Kim A, Lee HJ, Choi HJ, Yang SJ. Nutritional Factors Affecting Mental Health. *Clin Nutr Res*. 2016;5(3):143-152. doi:10.7762/cnr.2016.5.3.143

⁷Reinert, M, Fritze, D. & Nguyen, T. (October 2022). "The State of Mental Health in America 2023" Mental Health America, Alexandria VA.

⁸Ng, J, Zhang, Q, Hudson Scholle, S, and Guerin, P. Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Mental Health Among Diverse Groups of Medicare Advantage Beneficiaries. *CMS OMH Data Highlight No. 11*. Baltimore, MD. 2017.



161 North Clark Street
Suite 700
Chicago, Illinois 60601

1627 I Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20006

1.800.771.2303
www.feedingamerica.org