

## THE RECIPE FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

*Take mindfulness, creativity and a dash of focus. Fold together gently. Bake in a slow oven and watch your spirits rise. MiNDFOOD asks whether time spent in the kitchen can enhance your mood and promote mental wellbeing.*

Words by **Libby Hakim**

“Cooking is my therapy,” says financial adviser and mother-of-two Amanda Cassar. The weekend is her favourite time to delve into recipe books and begin the ritual of “chopping, cutting, stirring, mixing and creating”.

“It takes my mind off the day-to-day [stresses] of being a boss, sorting out clients’ finances and chasing the kids. It lets me concentrate on being creative,” says Cassar.

Alison Elliott, a mother-of-one who works in administration and forensics, is another weekend leisure cook.

“I enjoy making desserts,” she says, “tortes, mousses and cheesecakes, in particular.” She usually doesn’t eat them, though. That job is left to her husband and work colleagues.

It’s the process of baking she craves; it helps her to “switch off” and deal with the anxiety that has been with her for most of her adult life.

While cooking is clearly a means to satisfy the body’s need for food, it’s increasingly being recognised as a way of nurturing the mind.

Researchers in Israel, from the University of Haifa and Tel Aviv University, published a paper in the *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* looking at the therapeutic qualities of cooking as a hobby, including its reported ability to cause a dimmed sense of time and an altered state of consciousness.

The researchers say their findings suggest that cooking as a hobby improves a person’s wellbeing to a certain extent and have recommended further research.

Their paper cites a study carried out in Canada that considered the impact of more than 60 artistic pursuits.

Interestingly, the study found that cooking was the best predictor of subjective happiness. The act of cooking was also found to have one of the strongest associations with life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing.

For some, hours spent in the kitchen engrossed in baking and cooking may be exactly the recipe needed for improved happiness and mental wellbeing.



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#### COOKING WITH ATTENTION

Asked to describe the cooking activity she enjoys most, Maggie Beer, one of Australia’s most celebrated cooks, is quick to answer.

“One of the loveliest things is that feeling of making bread that I’ve never, never stopped loving ... that total immersion that it gives you when you’re kneading bread ... it takes you to another space, it’s so gorgeous.”

The “space” Beer refers to can perhaps be explained by the concept of mindfulness. Liana Taylor, clinical psychologist and director of the Mindfulness Centre, says that while mindfulness is a form of meditation that comes from the Buddhist tradition, there is often an element of mindfulness in many of our daily activities.

Taylor says learning mindfulness meditation while sitting in a chair during a class is merely learning how to cultivate that feeling we sometimes get when engaged in an everyday activity we enjoy.

“When we look to our daily lives, all of us have things we’re quite passionate about,” she says. “Some people garden, some people bake, some people surf, some people dance. It’s a chance to be totally focused on what you’re doing. You feel in contact with your body. You’re completely focused on one thing, the chatter in your mind just drops away. You’re engaged. This is a light meditative state.”

The psychological benefits of entering this other “space” are plentiful. Research suggests that mindfulness is positively

associated with several indicators of psychological health. These include higher levels of life satisfaction, vitality, and adaptive emotion regulation.

The soothing effect of engaging in creative tasks may be attributed to something called “flow”, says psychologist Jane Turner Goldsmith. The term “flow” was first described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990).

“When a person is in a ‘flow’ state they can lose their sense of time and ‘consciousness of self’ ... it is like they are in an ‘optimal’ state of being ... a state of complete, pleasurable absorption in an activity,” says Turner Goldsmith.

#### GETTING CREATIVE

The kitchen offers endless opportunities to express your creativity and find your flow. Ever noticed how two people can follow the same recipe and end up with different results? Part of why this happens can be attributed to the invisible element that is part of every recipe: creativity.

Creativity is something that Elliott, who studied fine arts at university, felt she “slowly lost” when she started taking anti-anxiety medication. She says this meant she slowly lost interest in baking, too.

While medication helped her “get back on track”, she later revisited her decision when she found herself wishing for a baby to complete her family.

She decided she wanted to first “tackle the problems” causing her anxiety and spent some time talking things over with a psychologist.

Elliott eventually said goodbye to the medication – and soon after welcomed a baby. “It’s been five years since I have had a full-blown anxiety attack, I’ve kept on top of it. Now I recognise the signs when I am anxious,” she says.

Part of her strategy for staying on top of things is to book some time in the kitchen when she feels “particularly stressed and restless”.

“I will warn my husband that I will be in the kitchen for the day,” she says. “I plan ahead and usually make two or three different things. As the day goes on I slow down ... at about seven or eight at night, I finally sit down and can actually relax.”

#### MAKE YOUR CAKE (AND EAT IT)

We’ve always been told we can’t have our cake and eat it too. But maybe we can – and, if we’re feeling generous, we might share. At the end of the day, after all the mind-soothing stirring, moulding, greasing, basting and simmering, you’ve also achieved something tangible, something that can be admired, enjoyed and shared. And when you feel you are going nowhere, this sense of achievement should not be underestimated.

Beer agrees that while time spent in the kitchen can be “joyous”, it is often the outcome of a day spent cooking that is the most satisfying. “I love an afternoon bottling tomatoes at the end of the season ... that’s a wonderful thing to do. The process is fun but it’s the outcome of seeing all the jars heaped up and glistening that is most satisfying.”

Psychological therapist Annie Gurton says the outcome of cooking can reach further than just a sense of accomplishment. It can satisfy the emotional need for purpose and meaning in our lives.

It is also an activity that can satisfy our emotional need to feel respected by others and to have our skills and talents acknowledged, adds Gurton.

“Cooking and baking are tasks that require the combination of several skills – understanding and planning, attention to detail, using our memory and imagination to plan and visualise, manual dexterity, creativity and style.”

Sometimes, the greatest satisfaction isn’t in fulfilling our own emotional needs. It comes from sharing. Weekend cook Cassar says while she loves seeing people enjoy the “little masterpieces” she creates, she feels particularly satisfied when her cooking can contribute in a bigger way.

“My sister has a little boy who is autistic and intellectually impaired. So I try to cook for her and give her a little bit of relief. I can’t imagine the pressures she goes through in her life so, when she has that to deal with, if I can make her life a bit easier, that brings me satisfaction.”



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KEYWORDS: INGREDIENTS, BALANCE



#### THREE STEPS TO BLISS IN THE KITCHEN

If you find the kitchen intimidating rather than relaxing, follow these three steps to culinary bliss:

1. Find your confidence first, advises Maggie Beer (above). “Find something simple that you love to eat and just master it ... practice is a tremendous thing.”
2. Beer also suggests growing some ingredients yourself. “If you pick fresh rosemary and put it in your dish ... that makes such a difference to your food and you get so much pleasure that you’ve grown it.”
3. Finally, cultivate some mindfulness. Psychologist Liana Taylor says: “Smell the ingredients; really see the ingredients. Feel the texture, notice what happens when you mix the ingredients. Take notice of all the senses.”

#### WIPE YOUR WORRIES AWAY

At the end of a blissful few hours in the kitchen, the mess to clean up can be a chore.

Maggie Beer says the rule in her household is simple. When cooking for someone, “if you cook, they clean up”.

However, if you are stuck with the task of cleaning up, psychologist Liana Taylor says you can turn this simple, repetitive task into an opportunity for developing mindfulness. She suggests noticing the movements of your arms and the muscles that are being used as you wash and wipe away the mess – and possibly your worries too.