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PARTNERSHIPS AND WELLNESS

How Mutual Interdependence Supports Us

A Happy Mind Needs a Happy Gut

After running lab tests, my doctor said my gut flora was some of the healthiest she'd ever seen. This was because a few months earlier I'd learned to make fermented veggies. It turns out my tangy sauerkraut, along with my diet rich in fresh veggies and fruits, helps keep my intestinal tract optimally populated with friendly flora, *partner organisms*, that help me in myriad ways.

It's common knowledge that the hundreds of trillions of microbes in the human *gut microbiome* are crucial to our digestion. We're now learning they're also crucial to our general wellness including immune function and brain health. That's right, the bugs in your belly help regulate your mood and sustain good brain function in complex ways scientists are just beginning to understand.

Studies show that patients given probiotics experienced improved focus and a decrease in anxious and depressed moods. Researching the gut-brain axis in mice, scientists found that changing their microbial mix changed mouse behavior from retiring and cautious to curious and bold. When the microbes reverted back, so did the old behavior.

Your gut-microbes contribute hundreds of neurochemicals to keep your brain and nervous system functioning. It's estimated that over ninety percent of your *serotonin*, a neurochemical essential in regulating mood, is produced in the microbiome of your gut.

No wonder dietitians, gastroenterologists and neurologists are ever more interested in our microbial partners. We contribute a warm dark environment and food. In exchange, our partners (who far outnumber the human cells in our bodies) work round the clock to keep us well and whole. Our best shot at helping them help us is to eat a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, quality proteins and fats, and small amounts of uncooked fermented foods containing live probiotic cultures. All great cuisines have these. Think brie, yogurt, lassi, kimchi, sauerkraut, salsa, olives, kombucha and grandma's refrigerator pickles.

For more information on mental health and partner organisms see:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2013/11/18/244526773/gut-bacteria-might-guide-the-workings-of-our-minds>

<http://directorsblog.nih.gov/2014/01/09/creative-minds-can-microbes-influence-mental-health/>

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/gut-bacteria-may-exacerbate-depress/>

<http://www.webmd.com/digestive-disorders/news/20140820/your-gut-bacteria>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/scott-mendelson-md/personal-health_b_4533877.html

Partnerships in the Wider World

The gut-brain axis is a complex partnership similar to those of larger ecosystems. You don't have to be a biologist to see eco-partners at work in your back yard or in the green space near your apartment. Bees and birds pollinate flowers and trees, enabling them to fruit and multiply. Birds and squirrels feed on seeds, mosquitoes and gnats. Earthworms and countless underground microorganisms chew and digest leaf debris and animal waste, producing rich soil for next year's growth. Sounds idyllic, right? Earth's partner organisms sustaining Eden...

Yet today stress abounds from the microbiome of the gut to the macrobiome of our workplaces and our world. Our partnerships with our bodies, with each other, with our land and seas are distressed, and this seriously effects our collective mental and emotional health. Meaningful choices, large or small make a difference.

Choosing local produce puts you in partnership with local growers. Choosing to share tools or books with neighbors makes for a friendlier neighborhood. Taking public transport puts you in partnership with your city, your fellow riders, and now that we have electric buses, your lungs!

When in strife it helps to ask, "What partnerships are in play here? How can all partners benefit?" Humans are endlessly innovative when it comes to forging win-win partnerships. Here are some truly creative examples:

A normally happy couple was new to parenthood and new to Seattle and found themselves feeling isolated. They started a “parents in the parks” group, inviting other parents to wheel their babies around the parks. “It was a great way to meet people,” the mom said, “and to get to know Seattle.”

A depressed dad stopped using pesticides when he learned it was bad for bees. He got his kids to help put in a rain garden where a lawn had been. When spring came they were amazed at the buzz of hummingbirds and bees. “It’s an uplift,” he said, “and the kids are glad to see their old man off the couch.”

A lonely girl joined a student brigade to clear invasive species from urban forests. She made (human) friends and felt strong exerting herself in all weather. She gained a sense of accomplishment preserving habitat for eagles and owls.

A 60 year old who found herself increasingly fearful of death chose to serve in a hospice program overseas. “My patients became my teachers,” she said of the experience, “they’ve given me so much courage.”

Partnership awareness is growing world-wide in community health, in youth programs, education, business and government. The partnership model assumes the value of each partner and strives to respect each partner’s basic needs. The success of psychotherapy depends upon a trusting partnership between client and therapist. We humans are a relational species—partnering is the foundation of our wellbeing and helps us stay strong.