



Diet-Behavior Relationships: Focus on Depression

Larry Christensen

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Human beings persistently demonstrate a vivid interest in the effect of food on behaviour. Throughout recorded history, every cultural and ethnic group has associated certain dietary practices and guidelines with particular physical and behavioural health outcomes. Some of these associations have survived as "common sense" or "folk" notions, many have disappeared and been discredited. Yet other notions have evolved and found some degree of scientific support, while others remain largely unexamined. Currently, there is a small but growing body of scientific literature on the effect of diet and various specific nutrients on behaviour. Apart from overexposure to inaccurate information in the public mind, many psychologists are themselves confused as to the nature and scope of ongoing investigations in this arena. Psychologist Larry Christensen has written this book to summarise the scientific research in a form that should be useful to both researchers in this relatively new field (listing issues and methodological concerns that need to be addressed in future research) and to practitioners who wish to understand how the current state of scientific knowledge can be applied in the therapeutic context. Christensen begins with a brief historical survey of interest and research in the nutrition-behaviour association and offers a typology of the basic research strategies and methodological issues inherent in the field. He then examines both the neurobiological and the psychological mechanisms underlying the behavioural effects of food, particularly carbohydrates, and specifically focuses on the diet-depression nexus. Christensen then takes a look at the findings regarding specific nutrients and dietary components such as L-tryptophan, tyrosine, folic acid, selenium, caffeine, and sucrose in relation to specific physical and psychological conditions, such as premenstrual syndrome, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, Down's syndrome, depression, and seasonal affective disorder. He concludes with some recommendations and caveats on how to apply what we currently know about diet and nutrition as a potential adjunct to more econventional therapy.

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