



Original Article



Navigating the Intersection of Mental Health and Nutrition in Adolescent Girls: Addressing the Dual Challenge – A short Review

Salwa AL Majali^{a**}, Mahsa Ebadi^b, Zeliha Selamoglu^{c-d}, Abdol Ghaffar Ebadi^e and Mehran Moslemi^f

^a College of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Al Ain University, Abu Dhabi - United Arab Emirates

^b Department of Psychology, Jo.C., Islamic Azad University, Jouybar - Iran

^c Department of Medical Biology, Medicine Faculty, Nigde Omer Halisdemir University, Nigde - Turkey

^d Khoja Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University, Faculty of Sciences, Department of Biology, Turkestan – Kazakhstan

^{e-f} Department of Agriculture, Jo.C., Islamic Azad University, Jouybar - Iran

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Abstract

Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to the twin threats of nutritional inadequacy and mental illness, an interactive effect that has long-term consequences for physical and psychological development. Nutrient deficiencies, particularly in iron, zinc, vitamin D, and common B-vitamins, not only impact growth and immune functioning but also compromise susceptibility to mood disorders, anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment. Simultaneously, mental health conditions influence feeding patterns, e.g., inadequate nutrient consumption, infrequent or irregular meal frequency, or food restriction and disordered eating, which contribute additional nutrient deficiencies, perpetuating a vicious risk cycle. This review critically examines the complex interaction between nutrition and mental health in adolescent girls, the physiological, neurocognitive, and psychosocial mechanisms linking deficits to psychological outcomes. The article also identifies contextual influences like socio-economic status, cultural norms, and environmental stressors that may magnify vulnerability. Comprehensive strategies that integrate special nutrition interventions such as micronutrient supplementation, dietary diversification, and fortified foods with mental health support activities are recommended to develop resilience, improve cognitive capacity, and general wellbeing. By addressing both nutrition and mental health simultaneously, such strategies aim to mitigate long-term developmental, educational, and health consequences and instead promote adolescent girls to attain their optimal growth and psychological well-being at this critical stage of life.

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of fast physical growth, hormonal changes, and vast emotional and cognitive growth. This stage of life is particularly significant in females as they navigate puberty, peer influences, and increasing academic and societal expectations. Adequacy of diet during this stage is not only important for sustaining physical growth, such as bone and muscle accretion, but also for optimal brain function, hormone balance, and immune function. Too frequently, adolescent girls are more vulnerable to nutrient deficiencies due to increased physiological requirements, sociocultural influences on food choices, and limited exposure to nutrient-dense foods. Iron, vitamin D, calcium, and fundamental B-vitamins are oftentimes the usual deficiencies that can sap energy, intelligence, and overall health, predisposing them to more acute and chronic illnesses [1-3].

Around the same time, mental disorders among adolescent girls become more prevalent worldwide. Depression, anxiety,

body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders are more prevalent, mediated by hormonal fluctuations, peer and family influences, and exposure to the media. These psychiatric conditions have a considerable effect on daily functioning, school attendance, and social interaction. In particular, psychological distress very often overlaps with eating habits: adolescents with anxiety or depression may limit food intake, overconsume processed foods, or skip meals, which may further compromise nutritional status. The relationship between nutrition and mental health thus evolves into a complicated, bidirectional interplay wherein deficiency exacerbates psychological susceptibility and the reverse [4].

Socioeconomic as well as environmental factors further amplify these issues. In low- and middle-income settings, limited exposure to diverse and dense foods in conjunction with inadequate health literacy and social inequalities can augment both nutritional inadequacy as well as mental health

burden. Even in wealthier environments, cultural customs, body pressure, and widespread availability of ultra-processed food all contribute to compromised nutrition and mental health status. It is important that these superimposed effects are understood in order to create effective interventions that address the physiological and psychological requirements of adolescent girls [5].

With these interrelated issues, an integrated strategy is now the imperative wherein nutrition and mental health are addressed simultaneously. Interventions that combine dietary improvement, micronutrient supplementation, and education on healthy eating with mental well-being care—counseling, mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral therapies—might provide holistic care. Treating both mental and nutritional conditions, these interventions can enhance resilience, cognitive function, and overall well-being, thereby laying the building blocks for healthier adulthood and breaking cycles of malnutrition and psychological stress among adolescent girls [6].

Mental Health Challenges in Adolescent Girls

Teenage girls are experiencing higher rates of mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, because of a combination of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. The hormonal fluctuations associated with puberty, combined with rapid body development, perhaps sensitize and predispose girls to mood disorders. In addition, cultural pressures, peer comparisons, and widespread media exposure—particularly social media—enhance self-consciousness and body concern. These stressors not only increase risk for symptoms of depression and anxiety but also enhance the emergence of disordered eating patterns, disrupting normal nutrition intake [7].

Adolescent girls' psychological issues usually appear in the form of maladaptive coping behaviors. Others engage in restrictive eating, bingeing, or consumption of ultra-processed foods as a coping mechanism or for relief of stress or anxiety, worsening micronutrient deficiency. These behaviors can form a self-reinforcing cycle whereby deficiency of nutrition exacerbates psychological distress, and worsening of mental health issues in turn affects the quality of the diet. For instance, poor intake of vital nutrients such as iron, zinc, and vitamin D has been linked with symptoms of tiredness, impaired thinking, and depression, illustrating the interrelated relationship between diet and mental health [8].

Mental health problem management in adolescent girls is therefore critical to prevent short-term and long-term adverse consequences. Early detection and intervention by counseling, psychoeducation, and social support, as well as dietary intervention, can avert the additive effects of poor nutrition and mental health stresses. Interventions that simultaneously impact both psychological health and adequacy of nutrients have the potential to promote resistance to emotional distress, body growth, and intellectual development based on Table 1 [9-11].

Table 1. Normal Mental Health Problems in Adolescent Girls and Nutritional Significance

Mental Health Challenge	Prevalence Factors	Common Nutritional Impact	Long-term Health Consequences
Depression	Hormonal changes, social pressures, academic stress	Reduced appetite, poor nutrient intake	Cognitive impairment, fatigue, growth delay
Anxiety	Peer comparison, social media, family stress	Skipped meals, reliance on processed foods	Micronutrient deficiencies, weakened immunity
Eating Disorders	Body image dissatisfaction, media influence	Restrictive eating, binge/purge cycles	Stunting, anemia, electrolyte imbalance
Low Self-Esteem	Societal norms, bullying, self-perception	Irregular eating, low dietary variety	Obesity, nutrient deficiencies, psychological distress

Micronutrient Deficiency and Mental Ills

Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to micronutrient deficiency due to increased physiological demands during growth and menstruation. Iron, zinc, and vitamin D deficiencies are among the most prevalent, each with specific impacts on mental and cognitive health. Iron deficiency has been associated with fatigue, impaired concentration, and susceptibility to depression, while zinc plays a central role in maintaining the balance of neurotransmitters, influencing stability of mood and emotional strength. Vitamin D insufficiency has been associated with depressive behavior and cognitive function impairment, highlighting the interrelation between nutrient status and cognition. Inconsistent intake of these micronutrients is often supported by limited dietary diversity, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural food habits [12].

These dietary deficiencies can create a negative feedback loop with psychological impact. For example, fatigue and irascibility due to micronutrient deficiencies may decrease the motivation for good food and exercise, resulting in further nutrient deficiency. Depressive symptoms can also impact appetite and food choice, naturally gravitating towards high-calorie but low-nutrient foods, which tends to perpetuate deficiencies. Closing these gaps with balanced dietary intake, supplementation when necessary, and familiarity with nutrient-dense foods can enhance mood regulation, cognitive function, and overall mental well-being in adolescent girls as shown in Table 2 & Figure 1 [13].

Table 2. Most Significant Micronutrient Deficiencies and Mental Health Impact in Adolescent Girls

Micronutrient	Common Deficiency Causes	Mental Health Impacts	Recommended Interventions
Iron	Menstruation, low intake	Fatigue, depression, cognitive impairment	Iron-rich diet, supplementation, fortified foods
Zinc	Poor diet variety, malabsorption	Anxiety, irritability,	Zinc-rich foods (nuts, legumes), supplementation



		mood disorders	
Vitamin D	Low sun exposure, poor diet	Depressive symptoms, cognitive deficits	Sun exposure, fortified dairy, supplementation
Omega-3 FAs	Low consumption of fish/seeds	Reduced cognitive function, mood instability	Fish, flaxseed, chia, supplementation

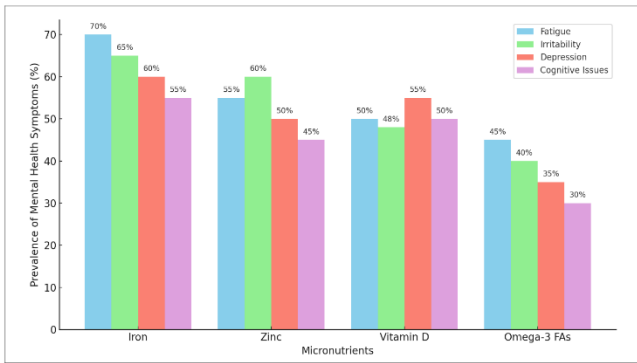


Figure 1. Micronutrient Deficiency vs. Prevalence of Mental Health Symptoms

Ways to Improve

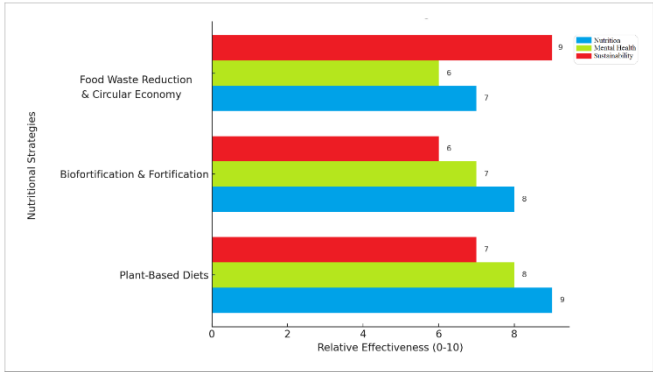
Enhancing dietary and mental health in adolescent girls needs to be a holistic approach that focuses on both dietary consumption and environmental protection. The promotion of plant-based diets rich in legumes, nuts, seeds, and other plant protein sources can offer micronutrients while minimizing the impact of animal agriculture on the environment. Protein source diversification ensures adequate intake of amino acids, vitamins, and minerals and encourages more resilient agricultural systems less vulnerable to climate variability. Encouraging school- and community-based plant-based diets has the potential to foster healthier eating habits and improved cognitive and emotional outcomes among adolescent girls [14].

Biofortification and food fortification are central interventions to avert micronutrient deficiencies, particularly in low-resource settings. Biofortification involves breeding or genetically enhancing staple crops such as maize, wheat, and rice to increase their iron, zinc, and vitamin D content. Fortification of commonly consumed foods such as flour, salt, or milk targets a population without requiring food practices to be altered. Together, these approaches increase nutrient availability, improve mental health, and reduce the weight of deficiency disorders such as anemia and tiredness, which exacerbate symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In the end, food system strategies such as reducing food loss and embracing circular economy strategies have the potential to support nutrition security and environmental sustainability concurrently. An estimated one-third of all the world's food production is lost or wasted, presenting a critical opportunity to increase the availability of food. Recycling crop residues, optimizing storage and transport, and creating closed-loop food systems for food production can decrease waste while providing additional nutrient-rich sources for at-risk populations. Combining plant-based nutrition, fortification,

and sustainable production practices, these strategies offer a systemic solution to improving adolescent nutrition and mental health outcomes according to Figure 2 [15-19].

Figure 2. Effectiveness of Nutritional Strategies for Adolescent Girls



Conclusion

Adolescent girls bear the double burden of mental health and nutrition insecurity, both with the potential to have a lasting impact on their physical and mental well-being. Both of these interconnected challenges need comprehensive solutions that intersect policy, health, and education with mental health care and nutritional interventions as complementary strategies for addressing the underlying causes. Mental health care has to be combined with nutrition education and programs because it not only addresses the immediate requirement but also contributes to long-term development through resilience as well as improved health outcomes. Long-term plans such as promotion of plant-based diets, crop biofortification, and reducing food loss and waste can enhance nutrition and reduce the environmental impact of food production. These steps also ensure increased availability of the required nutrients that would ensure healthy physical growth, mental functions, and emotional stability, ultimately leading to mental well-being. By taking care of both nutrition and mental health in an integrated manner, we can create a caring environment conducive to better health among adolescent girls that enables them to cope and thrive despite challenges caused by a volatile world. With collective effort, sustainable solutions, and holistic responses, we can enable adolescent girls with the resources and tools they need to survive this developing stage of life and secure healthier futures for themselves and their communities.

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Declarations:

Authors' Contribution:

a-b-d Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions

c-e Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript

- The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

Correspondence:

Prof. Dr. Salwa AL Majali

salwa.almajali@aaau.ac.ae