

# Kai and hauora hinengaro

**Taryn Hale**



Tēnā koutou katoa

I am originally from Te Tau Ihu, the top of the South Island, and my family whakapapa to Ngāti Koata. I have two energetic boys and lots of supportive whanau to help me juggle study and parenting.

I have been privileged to work as a rehabilitation programme facilitator with Te Ara Poutama o Aotearoa, Department of Corrections for twelve years prior to starting my clinical psychology training at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha, University of Canterbury this year. My time at Corrections gave me a wide range of experience in working alongside people making changes and developed my confidence in using concepts and principles from te ao Māori in my therapeutic work.

I am conducting my Masters of Science research with Te Puna Toiora – The Mental Health and Nutrition Research Group at Canterbury University. I will be looking at the effectiveness of a micronutrient formula on symptoms of depression and anxiety for participants who have experienced trauma in their lives.

I am currently doing my Master of Science research at Te Puna Toiora - The Mental Health and Nutrition Research Group at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha, University of Canterbury. Our rangahau, research aspires to reduce the burden of mental health on communities and is currently focused on the important link between our tinana, physical body, and our hinengaro, mind, through our taioranga, nutrition. This concept fits well with the Māori wellbeing model, Te Whare Tapa Whā, literally the House of Four Parts. Dr Mason Durie proposed this model in the 1980s as a result of many marae-based discussions regarding the approach to healthcare for Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. The model conceptualises wellbeing as four taha or dimensions that support wellness of the whole person, using the metaphor that four parts of the house are needed to make the building strong. Therefore, a whole-person approach to health was

advocated. Te taha tinana or physical wellbeing is the aspect most often considered in Western medical models, while te taha hinengaro refers to the mental processes such as cognitions and feelings that was typically the domain of psychiatrists and psychologists. The model also includes te taha whānau, the social wellbeing dimension and te taha wairua which is the dimension of spiritual connection, including connection to identity, whakapapa, ancestry, and, the natural environment. The model suggests then that when we work to obtain wellness, we consider the interplay of all four taha (Durie, 1985). Nutrition, mostly obtained through our kai, food can be seen as central to all four taha.

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In Māori culture, kai, food was gathered from the bush, sea and rivers. Access to traditional kai gathering sites, mahinga is immensely important and loss of these as a result of colonisation, was a central part of the iwi, tribe Ngāi Tahu's Waitangi Tribunal claim (McKerchar & Heta, 2009). Kai is considered to come from the atua, gods and there are many spiritual components to the processes of gathering and preparing kai. Kai is used to lift tapu, sacredness in many rituals and manaakitanga, hospitality is demonstrated at hui, gatherings by providing lavish kai. The process of growing, gathering and sharing kai connects whanau and brings pride and joy (Pickering, Heitia, Heitia, Karapu, & Meek, 2015). And as anyone who has prepared a hāngī or food cooked in the earth will know, it can also be hard work, but made easier with whānau,

family and friends to help out. Along with the benefits to our wairua, spiritual well-being, our whānau connections and our connections with ngā atua, the gods and the natural environment, kai is the way in which we provide our tinana, body and hinengaro, mind with the nutrients it needs to perform at its best.

Research from around the world has established that healthy diets, particularly the Mediterranean diet are associated with better mental wellbeing, while the opposite is also true – highly processed or Westernised diets including takeaways and sugary drinks, are associated with poorer mental wellbeing (Jacka et al., 2010). The Mediterranean diet is a diet rich in plant based foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and olive oils and fish, with limited red meat, poultry, dairy and alcohol consumption (Lassale et al., 2019), this is also in line with many international healthy eating guidelines. Two studies of adolescent diet and mental wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand found similar patterns, with the young people eating the healthiest diets having the lowest rate of depressive symptoms, and those with the least healthy diets having the highest rates of mental health problems (Kulkarni, Swinburn, & Utter, 2015; Puloka, Utter, Denny, & Fleming, 2017). The idea that what we eat affects our mental wellbeing is not a new idea and most of our great grandparents would probably not be surprised by this finding.

Of interest also, is a reference in the literature to 'traditional diets' being associated with better mental health. This has largely come to mean diets that are not highly processed, and consist largely of whole foods, meat, fruit and vegetables (Jacka et al., 2010), similar to the Mediterranean diet but perhaps more reflective of the part of the world you live in

and the kai you have access to. A Japanese study found that people who adhered more strictly to a traditional Japanese diet experienced lower rates of depression than those who did not. This study also observed the difference in eating patterns based on their marital status (Nanri et al., 2010), bringing in the important social aspect of food preparation and consumption, and how our te taha whānau, family dimension can influence our diet. These findings seem relevant to the Aotearoa New Zealand context given the impacts of colonisation on access to traditional kai through environmental impacts on mahinga, kai gathering sites and migration of Māori away from ancestral whenua, land.

The beautifully named study, "Korero te kai o te Rangatira: Nutritional wellbeing of Māori at the pinnacle of life" spoke to older Māori about their dietary practices and the significance of these to their health and wellbeing. The kaumatua, elders reported that traditional Māori kai were important to them, and those who had access to Māori kai had lower nutritional risk: that is, they ate well. They reported that their access to Māori kai was often facilitated by whanau, family bringing kai to them, eating the kai at gatherings on the marae, meeting house or that they were able to get the food themselves (Wham, Maxted, Dyal, Teh, & Kerse, 2012). Food insecurity increases the risk of depression and anxiety, possibly through the effect poor quality food has on vulnerability to illness (Pickering et al., 2015).

What we eat provides us with vitamins and minerals, or taiora moroiti, micronutrients. Many micronutrients are essential factors in neurotransmission – the process of sending signals around our brain to give us our thoughts, feelings and physical responses. Our brain uses up a

massive percentage of the energy and nutrients we consume each day, so it's important we eat sufficiently to provide our brain with what we need to achieve optimal functioning and mental health.

Traditional Māori kai includes huawhenua / vegetables, ika me ngā kaimoana / fish and shellfish, miti / meat, paraoa / bread and miro berries, although many meats we eat today arrived with European settlers, along with bread. In pre-European times, birds would have provided the main source of meat. Kumara is a well-known Māori vegetable, brought to Aotearoa by Māori who then had to establish ways to cultivate the tuber in colder climates. The kumara is high in carbohydrates and fibre, and provides taiora moroiti, micronutrients. Kumara is typically high in pre-vitamin A or beta-carotene which is great for youthful skin and organ regeneration, night vision and is a known antioxidant. You might have heard about antioxidants being 'anti-aging', and in terms of our brains, antioxidants can help prevent our brains deteriorating over time or in older age. Kumara also has a decent amount of vitamin C, famous to many for its important role in warding off scurvy but is also an antioxidant, which is required in the absorption of iron and works to support the body in stress. Kumara also contains B vitamins which are important in our bodies' stress response, and these vitamins are usually well-represented in over-the-counter stress management supplements. Other plants such as puha / sow thistle, kōwhitiwhiti / water cress, mouku / hen and chicken fern and tī kouka / cabbage tree also provide all the taiora moroiti / micronutrient goodness of leafy green vegetables and are also known for their anti-inflammatory properties which can in turn improve in mental health.

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Ika / fish was a traditionally accessible Māori food, similar to the Mediterranean and Japanese diet found to benefit mental wellbeing. It has been found fairly consistently that essential fatty acids from fish are associated with a reduced risk of depression, post-partum depression and improved mental wellbeing generally, and we should aim to eat this two to three times per week. Tuna, the te reo Māori word for eel is a really good source of omega-3 fatty acids, with its healthy fatty acid content being about the same as sardines which is regarded as a great source. It's also suggested that tītī or muttonbird, traditionally harvested around Rakiura Stewart Island contain high levels of polyunsaturated fatty acids due to their largely seafood diet. The seeds or berries from plants such as harakeke / Flax, miro, rengarenga and kohia also provided a good source of essential fatty acids.

So kai is really important! Not only for its nutritional content, but for all the connections it provides for us to whanau, family and culture, our relationship with the natural environment and the impact all these things have on our sense of wellbeing. Access to traditional kai is a taonga, treasure and needs protecting. Dr Durie calls for the prevention of poor health in a holistic way, and nutrition and access to culturally significant kai is an important step in this.

If you want to know more about our rangahau, research, follow us on facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/mentalhealthandnutrition/posts/>) or email us for more information at [mentalhealthnutrition@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:mentalhealthnutrition@canterbury.ac.nz).

*Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou, ka ora ai te iwi.*

*With your food basket (your contribution) and my food basket (my contribution), the people will be healthy.*