

Back to Basics: applying a salutogenic approach to understand the origins of healthful eating

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Creating an enabling environment, allowing for healthful eating as the preferred and easiest choice is a top priority in research, practice and policy. Particularly since obesity rates remain high and social disparities continue unabated. Suggested health promotion strategies should focus on making healthy options available, accessible and affordable in diverse contexts. Yet do we actually know how healthful eating is learned and perpetuated in everyday life situations? Obesity research typically takes a biomedical approach to find risk factors of poor dietary practices. However singular focus on this approach limits the evidence base for public health practice as it fails to identify the resources that support healthful dietary practices. The Salutogenic Model of Health (SMH) is a socio-ecological model that complements the biomedical research paradigm by examining the psychosocial and contextual factors that support health and well-being. Gaining insight into the mechanisms and resources that support healthy lifestyles can help in designing a blueprint for novel strategies to enable healthful eating in diverse contexts.

The SMH was applied in four mixed methods studies to determine the origins of healthful eating within the Dutch context. The integrated findings show that healthful eating results from exposure to individual- and context-bound factors during childhood and adulthood and involves specific mental and social capacities relevant to cope with everyday life situations and challenges. Overall, healthful eating results from and enables three composite factors: 1) balance and stability in life, a balanced mixture of giving meaning to eating as an integral part of life, comprehending its importance to oneself, and having competencies to manage its social organization; 2) sense of agency, “be in the driver’s seat” of ambitions and actions related to eating and life in general; 3) sensitivity to dynamics of everyday life, how people deal with and navigate through everyday challenging situations.

The findings show that factors representing the origins of healthful eating diverge from those causing poor diets. This implies that an additional set of factors should inform nutrition strategies. Strategies should take a holistic, balanced orientation to food and eating and facilitate health-directed learning processes through positive interactions and experiences with food.