

The Mental Health Benefits of Baking by Carmen Murray

From the time I was very little, the kitchen had always been a space filled with happiness. My grandmother used to tell this anecdote about a moment from my youth. I came back from visiting my Floridian grandparents and suddenly knew how to fold batter in a mixing bowl. It often feels as if most of my life has been spent in a kitchen, to some capacity. If not observing or stirring side-by-side with grandparents, I was more often than not eating something delicious. Kitchens remind me of conversations over oven fans, tupperware stuffed with treats for home, and my grandmother's chocolate trifle. I've always been at peace in a kitchen.

Cooking is enjoyable to me, and as a foodie learning to cook has been a necessity. However, baking is where my skillset shines. Folding a brownie batter or precisely pouring out flour provides a sense of calm no other activity has measured up to.

I cultivated my baking in my parents' kitchen during the pandemic. Baking proved to be essential during that isolating and fearful period. Whether physically or emotionally, most struggled throughout 2020 and the years following. Mental health can take a downturn during times of uncertainty (De, 2022). However, I discovered, along with many others on various forms of social media, how cooking and baking can benefit mental health. Whether through cloud bread, dalgon coffee, or the viral feta pasta we fled Covid's reality through the kitchen.

This is a phenomenon that has been researched. A study of a mental health service analyzed the mental health benefits of baking. They interviewed the participants in a baking class and found that overall the class provided meaning to the group. Through improving the participants' coordination, concentration, and confidence they developed a higher self-esteem (Haley & McKay, 2004).

Baking isn't just about the treats you make yourself. It's often more satisfying to make one of your friends or family member's a taste tester. Then the pleasure you get from baking is transferred to someone else. It becomes a way to prove, not only to yourself, to others how great your skills are (Haley & McKay, 2004). It can be a real self-esteem boost, and giving away your treats is a great way to let someone know you were thinking of them.

Getting in the kitchen and baking isn't the easiest skill. As a self-proclaimed overachiever, I often lean towards making things from scratch. However, baking doesn't require croissant dough rolled on marble countertops or three tiered cakes. Boxed Duncan Hines can be just as good as cocoa powder, sugar, flour, and oil measured and mixed by hand. My grandmother, blessed with a husband and grandchildren with the largest sweet teeth, often stored boxes of cake mix in her kitchen. They were perfect as is or in dump cakes or as cookies. Baking doesn't have to be fancy to taste delicious.

Whether it's baking, reading, or some other activity, it's important for everyone to find their reprieve from everyday life. When work, school, and family makes you feel like you're in the

deep end, we all need some form of escapism. And if you enjoy sweets, baking is a great place to find it.

Sources

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