

Eating and Learning

Introduction – Level 3

Learning is easier if your brain is working efficiently. You need to concentrate, to be in the right mood and to think clearly.

Brains are physical matter that work by physical and chemical reactions. To operate efficiently they need the right basic materials. These are provided through the blood stream when you eat and digest food, so to think clearly you need to eat properly. If you eat the wrong things, or in the wrong way, then in the short term you are more likely to be confused, tired, irritable and forgetful. In the long term, you can damage your physical and mental health.

There is general alarm among government departments and university research scientists concerning the diet of the British population, especially among the young. Some children are eating so unhealthily they are expected to die before their parents. Among the general population of the richer countries, by 2030 depression is likely to be the biggest cause of disability. Dementia, diabetes and heart disease come equal second ⁽ⁿ¹⁾. Diet can be a factor in all these problems.

We are eating more and more, but gaining less and less benefit from it. In some cases, we are taking in large amounts of the wrong chemicals that are actively harming our brains, affecting mood and behaviour. This is partly because of the way food is grown and partly because of the way it is prepared and eaten. A little knowledge of basic nutrition and some very simple science can protect us from a food industry that profits from our ignorance.

Of course, it is possible to become confused by all the different arguments. There are disagreements between scientists. The food industry puts a great deal of money into making their products appear healthy. Different people are affected in different ways and, as in most controversies, there may be exaggerated claims on all sides. Here are some facts that cannot be denied:

An experiment on 231 young offenders at a maximum-security prison reduced disciplinary offences by over 25% through simple improvements to diet. Those receiving vitamin supplements for a minimum of two weeks were involved in 37% fewer violent offences. An earlier experiment with 3,000 juvenile offenders changed their diet and reduced assaults by 25%, the use of restraints by 75% and suicide by 100% ⁽ⁿ²⁾.

The chemicals that most upset the brain are often addictive, so we most desire what does us most harm. The World Health Organisation recommends that we should take no more than 10% of our calories as sugar, but some breakfast cereals are 40% sugar and doughnuts contain even more. When laboratory rats were fed on a diet of too much sugar, they became nervous and aggressive. When it was