

# Participating in local food projects may improve mental health

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A new study soon to appear in the Faculty of Public Health's *Journal of Public Health* suggests that participating in local food projects may have a positive effect on wellbeing and psychological health.

Local food is a growing movement, and includes initiatives such as allotments, community gardens, community supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and food buying cooperatives. Consumers are increasingly interested in where their food comes from. Retail sales of local food have grown significantly over the past decade, as has participation in farmers' markets, community supported agriculture schemes, and buying cooperatives.

Research has explored the physical health benefits of growing food, but has not so far systematically explored how local food projects may influence psychological well-being. Mental illness presents a growing global public health crisis. In the United Kingdom, mental health contributes to 28% of the total financial cost of healthcare. Psychological wellbeing generates important benefits for people and societies, including [good health](#), longevity, improved [personal relationships](#), better productivity, and civic engagement.

Using an on-line survey, researchers compared participants of local food initiatives across three English counties—Essex, Norfolk, and Suffolk—with members of the wider public. They found that those who participated in [local food](#) initiatives scored higher on standardised measures of well-being than those who did not participate. They also explored why this might be the case, looking at four different mediators known to influence well-being: connection to nature, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, better diets, and physical activity. Finally, they explored how different types of participation—such as for longer durations or in more active roles—influence well-being.

"These findings are encouraging to those of us looking at how sustainability and well-being interact," said Zareen Bharucha, the study's lead researcher. "They show that we should be looking more seriously at projects such as allotments, [community gardens](#), community supported agriculture, and farmers' markets, which can bring people together, improve diets, improve connection to nature, and help people learn new things. All of these help to improve mental health, which is one of the most significant public health challenges of our time. At the same time, they help build the foundations of a really sustainable food system, which is also fundamental for the well-being of people and the planet."

Provided by Oxford University Press

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