

Should we make eating together a priority?

Background

In recent years, the cultural and societal shift towards individualism (Santos et al., [2017](#)) and fast-paced living has led to a significant decline in communal and cultural cohesion (Miller, [1986](#)). One example of this is the practice of social eating. Indeed, while shared meals have historically been the norm for meal times (Ulijaszek, [2002](#)) – evidence suggests that our traditions of social eating have changed significantly – particularly due to economic pressures on our time and budgets (Cheng et al., [2007](#); Clark et al., [2002](#); Edwards, [1983](#)). This trend raises questions about whether we should be making eating together a higher priority.

Purpose

The purpose of this evidence brief is to review the existing evidence related to social eating, including a review of the role of social eating in human social life, the benefits of social eating, and barriers and challenges to social eating.

Evidence from Existing Studies

The Role of Food Practices in Social Life

The concept of commensality, or eating together, has been integral to human civilization, serving as a common practice with significant cultural and social implications (Yan et al., [2023](#); Jönsson et al., [2021](#); Scander et al., [2021](#); Halkier, [2020](#); Higgs & Ruddock, [2019](#); Grevet et al., [2012](#); Cruwys et al., [2015](#); Beagan et al., [2015](#); Enloe, [2003](#)). Shared meals have been essential in shaping social relationships, reinforcing community bonds, and setting societal norms (Neely et al., [2014](#); Absolom & Roberts, [2011](#); Veen, [2019](#); Gregerson & Gillath, [2020](#); Spence, [2016](#); RodriguezAlegra, [2005](#); Woolley & Fishbach, [2019](#); Smith & Harvey, [2021](#)). These social eating practices have facilitated trust, fostered commonality, and assisted in resolving conflicts among diverse populations, thereby influencing societal ethos and perspectives (Hamburg et al., [2014](#); Wells, [2021](#); Woolley & Fishbach, [2017](#); Stajcic, [2013](#)). Additionally, communal meals have acted as conduits for cultural exchange, intergenerational connection, and the spread of culinary traditions (Herman et al., [2019](#); Jones & Ismail, [2022](#); Graham et al., [2016](#); Reddy & Dam, [2020](#); Marovelli, [2019](#)). Furthermore, the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of shared meals, encompassing religious and sacrificial dimensions have significantly contributed to the expression of unity and shared values (Fischler, [2011](#); Souisa, [2018](#)).

The Benefits of Social Eating

Social eating extends its benefits far beyond the mere enjoyment of food in the company of others. These benefits are multifaceted and can be classified into communal, networking, and personal levels, each offering distinct advantages (Dunbar, [2017](#)).

Communal Benefits. Communal eating, such as dining with neighbors, coworkers, and friends, fosters a sense of community and belonging and facilitates meaningful interactions (Giacoman, [2016](#); Absolom & Roberts, [2011](#); Bailey, [2017](#)). It plays a pivotal role in establishing social bonds, maintaining social cohesion, and reinforcing a shared identity among participants (Fischler, [2011](#); Masson et al., [2018](#); Gregerson & Gillath, [2020](#)). Additionally, communal drinking sessions contribute to relationship maintenance by enabling conversations, laughter, and shared activities, thereby strengthening social connections (Bian & He, [2022](#); Testa et al., [2019](#); Thurnell-Read, [2021](#); Dunbar et al., [2017](#)).

Networking Benefits. On the networking front, sharing meals symbolizes a sense of community and opens avenues for social interactions, information exchange, and supportive relationships (Andersen & Brünner, [2020](#); Kushida et al., [2020](#); Marovelli, [2019](#)). Individuals who frequently partake in social eating are found to have higher levels of trust, increased social engagement, and more extensive social networks (Dunbar, [2017](#)).

Personal Benefits. Regarding personal benefits, the phenomenon of social facilitation of eating is observed, where people tend to consume more food in the presence of acquaintances, with an increase in intake of up to 60% (Middleton et al., [2022](#); Ruddock et al., [2019](#); Herman, [2017](#)). Engaging in shared meals significantly enhances emotional well-being, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly among older adults (Boyer et al., [2016](#); Björnwall et al., [2021](#)). Regular engagement in communal eating also promotes healthier eating habits and positively impacts mental health by reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Victoria-Montesinos et al., [2023](#); Harrison et al., [2015](#); Hammons & Fiese, [2011](#); Gillman et al., [2000](#)).

Barriers and Challenges to Social Eating

Despite the benefits of social eating, recent years have witnessed significant transformations in the patterns of social eating, particularly influenced by the global pandemic (Bauer & Mills, [2021](#); Fourat et al., [2021](#)). These changes reflect evolving societal norms and uncertainties, profoundly affecting the nature and perception of shared meal experiences (Higgs, [2015](#)). Contemporary trends in social eating reveal a paradox, simultaneously facilitating socialization and mirroring an increasing trend towards social isolation, depressive symptoms, and poor mental health (Vesnaver et al., [2016](#); Mestdag & Glorieux, [2009](#); Takeda & Melby, [2017](#); Son et al., [2020](#)).

There is a noticeable shift from traditional communal eating practices to more individualized eating patterns (Danesi, [2012](#)). This change is characterized by an increase in dining out, reduced time allocated to food preparation, and a decline in shared meals (Yates & Warde, [2016](#); Koponen & Mustonen, [2020](#); Chang et al., [2022](#)). Contributing factors to this shift include the growing prevalence of fast-food consumption, challenges in coordinating communal meals, and an increased dependence on charitable food banks (Smith & Harvey, [2021](#); Twine, [2015](#)). These shifts indicate a move away from the traditional, communal aspects of eating, suggesting a need to reassess the role and impact of social eating in contemporary society.

Of course, these changes are not occurring without cause or reason. For example, variation in dietary habits and needs may present challenges to communal eating (Masson, [2013](#); Sobal & Bisogni, [2009](#); Bove et al., [2003](#); Sobal & Nelson, [2003](#)). Indeed, dietary preferences, restrictions arising from allergies, and those related to cultural practices may limit the extent to



which individuals can share foods (Salmivaara et al., [2022](#); Niva & Mäkelä, [2019](#); SéréDeLanauze et al., [2021](#); Dornan et al., [2021](#)). These restrictions have a disproportionate impact on those who have non-normative nutritional needs or preferences, and these impacts are compounded by stigma around some practices such as vegetarianism, abstention from alcohol, and even living with an allergy (Salmivaara et al., [2022](#); Nezelek & Forestell, [2020](#); McKeown & Dunn, [2021](#); Cook, [2023](#); Pavlidis et al., [2019](#)). These factors may discourage social eating (Brown et al., [2003](#)).

In addition to the challenges arising from differences in nutritional needs or preferences, many families struggle to dine together due to time constraints, conflicting schedules, and other sources of stress during meals (Middleton et al., [2023](#); Holm & Lund, [2019](#)). Older individuals particularly face multifaceted challenges in social eating, stemming from age-related physiological, socio-economic, and psychological changes, and leading to increased loneliness and food-related issues (Björnwall et al., [2021](#); Hanna et al., [2023](#); Fjellström, [2009](#)). Practical barriers such as the cost of meals, lack of transportation, and the impacts of illness and disability, especially among the elderly, therefore further restrict opportunities for social eating (Saeed et al., [2019](#)). These challenges underscore the need for new models of inclusive social eating practices and targeted person-centered interventions to support and encourage eating together (Glanz et al., [2021](#); Masson et al., [2018](#)).

Analyses from The Canadian Alliance for Social Connection and Health

Results from the 2023 Canadian Social Connection Survey suggest that social eating is very common – with only 10% of participants reporting not eating socially in the past month and 58% reporting eating with others on at least a weekly basis. However, most social eating occurs with families and friends – and 71% report that they ate with a stranger less than once per year and approximately half of participants reported not eating with coworkers in the past six months.

Results from the study also showed that 62.7% believed that eating with others enhances closeness with others and 70.7% reported that it also had health benefits. Of note, 39% said that having food provided in a social situation made it easier to socialize.

Furthermore, participants noted the importance of food as a motivator for participation in social activities – with 48.3% saying they are more inclined to attend an event if there is food. Of course, participants also reported challenges: two-thirds (68.6%) said food in their community was too expensive (presenting as a barrier to social eating) and 34.3% reported not being able to eat food at events they attended. Of those impacted by dietary restrictions, 20.8% said that these reduced their enjoyment of social activities. Importantly, however, participants widely reported enjoying food from other cultures (82.7%), but only 44.2% said that the foods at social eating events were culturally diverse.

Discussion

Based on the evidence reviewed here, it is clear that social eating plays a significant role in shaping both individual and communal well-being. The practice of sharing meals and the communal consumption of food and beverages are pivotal in enhancing social health and fostering community bonds. To fully realize these benefits, a collective embrace of communal eating practices is essential. However, it is also clear, that social eating is a challenge for many



and that a wide array of factors contributes to these challenges. Understanding the barriers to social eating that individuals in a community face can help facilitate accommodation of their unique needs and preferences.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence reviewed above, we recommend inclusive social eating practices that account for variation in dietary restrictions and cultural appropriateness.

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