

MIND & BODY

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This succulent weed is one of the most underappreciated genuine superfoods around.

Purslane: A Superfood and Potent Medicine

This common 'weed' is one of the most nutritious and easily grown foods in the world

EMMA SUTTIE

Purslane is a superfood you may have never heard of. This humble weed is a treasure hiding in plain sight, commonly found growing in the cracks of sidewalks, along the edges of driveways, and in other urban environments.

It also happens to be one of the most nutritious greens on the planet and a powerful healing herb that has been used in Western herbalism and Chinese medicine for millennia.

"Recent research demonstrates that purslane has better nutritional quality than the major cultivated vegetables, with higher beta-carotene, ascorbic acid, and alpha-linolenic acid. Additionally, purslane has been described as a power food because of its high nutritive and antioxidant properties," Malaysian researchers note in a 2014 review published in *Scientific World Journal*.

Purslane is in the Portulacaceae family and is also known as pigweed, little hogweed, verdolaga, and red root. It's thought to be native to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Indian subcontinent but to have arrived in North America and Europe by the late 16th century. Now grown worldwide in both tropical and temperate climates, purslane grows year-round in warm climates, and from late spring through early fall in colder climates.

Also known as *Portulaca oleracea*, the herb is a succulent and often grows as a groundcover, reaching about six inches tall and spreading out in a wide mat. It has thick, dark green leaves with smooth stems that are reddish-pink in color.

Purslane prefers full sun and will grow in almost any kind of soil. The plant produces small, yellow flowers that grow in groups of two or three that appear in late summer and like to open in the first few hours of morning sun. It's happiest in warm weather and, although it prefers to be watered regularly, it's quite resistant to drought, making it easy to grow and allowing it to thrive almost anywhere.



Continued
on Page 4

UNDIAGNOSED

Are Your Chronic and Mysterious Symptoms Really a Mystery?

Understanding Autoimmunity

Millions of people suffer from autoimmunity for years because insurance companies don't approve screening until organ or tissue destruction.



On average, patients sees
**4 DOCTORS OVER
A 4 YEAR PERIOD**
before receiving
a correct
diagnosis for
late-stage,
clinically obvious
autoimmune
disease.

SOURCE: AMERICAN AUTOIMMUNE
RELATED DISEASES ASSOCIATION

Early antibody
testing lets patients
make lifestyle
changes to relieve
autoimmunity
symptoms.

DATIS KHARRAZIAN

While heart disease and cancer dominate the media, millions more people suffer from a barrage of miserable and sometimes debilitating "mystery" symptoms. These symptoms can rob them of their energy, motivation, ability to function, livelihood, relationships, and even their hope.

It takes most patients many years of visiting multiple doctors before they finally find out that an autoimmune disease is causing their symptoms.

Until then, they're told they're "perfectly healthy," accused of making up symptoms that "don't exist," or prescribed antidepressants.

Never mind that they can't get out of bed, they hurt all over, their brain barely functions, they have lost motivation to do anything, they can't lose weight but are losing hair, or they have a myriad of other unexplainable health issues.

When these patients find their way to functional medicine, testing shows that many of them suffer from the early stages of autoimmune reactivity, a condition in which an imbalanced immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys a person's own body tissue, usually slowly over many years. Autoimmunity can attack any tissue, enzyme, hormone, or cell in the body, depending on a person's genetic predisposition and their unique inflammatory triggers.

Common examples of autoim-

Antibodies are elevated for years before autoimmunity destroys tissue.

mune diseases include Hashimoto's thyroiditis, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, vitiligo, celiac disease, Graves' disease, Type 1 diabetes, lupus, and some inflammatory bowel diseases.

Normally our immune system defends us against bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens. However, immune imbalances and chronic inflammation can cause it to attack the body's tissues, organs, and glands, too. This is called "autoimmunity" or "self-attack immunity." In the early stages of autoimmunity, our immune system makes immune antibodies that erroneously stick to our own tissue instead of attaching to foreign invaders.

Continued on Page 2



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AN INCREASING
PROBLEM

The average American adult weighs 30 pounds more now than in the 1960s. With the added weight comes a slew of negative effects on the body.

That tempting highly processed food that always seems to be available has profound neurological consequences.

The Dire Connection Between
Diet and Obesity, Depression,
and Anxiety

A physician researcher is linking hyper-processed foods to highly problematic brain changes

MARTHA ROSENBERG

The link between routine obesity and mental health disorders is more significant than most people realize and one physician researcher has been working to better understand the reasons. Obesity has become epidemic with the average American man now weighing 198 pounds—up from 166 in the 1960s—and the average American woman weighing 170 pounds—up from 140 in the 1960s. Concurrently, mental disorders like depression, anxiety, ADHD, and posttraumatic stress disorder are also becoming epidemic, and Dr. William Wilson, author of the “Brain Drain,” believes the phenomena are correlated. While many researchers have linked several of these conditions to factors related to modern life, everything from sitting too much, to social isolation, to environmental contaminants including endocrine disruptors, Dr. Wilson believes the overarching cause is our food.

Or more accurately, his findings focus on how the food we commonly eat triggers a neurological/psycho-emotional disorder he calls “Carbohydrate Associated Brain syndrome” or the CARB syndrome. Dr. Wilson is the unusual family physician who is also active in the research community, a combination that led to his work in the field. According to Dr. Wilson, the long-term consumption of highly processed food made by Big Food, or the “Food Industrial Complex” as he calls it, has had a profound impact on brain function. These ultra-processed foods are packed with high glycaemic carbohydrates and sugars that drain the body of crucial neurotransmitters like dopamine, epinephrine, serotonin, and norepinephrine. This loss nudges people toward mental disorders even as it compels the body to store extra fat—regardless of how much the person eats. “I noticed a strange correlation [in my patients] between certain brain dysfunction symptoms and changes in body composition, and the symptom changes

preceded the body composition changes,” Dr. Wilson told The Epoch Times. In other words, psychological factors seemed to have a causative role in weight gain. “To me, this suggested that when it comes to fat storage, the brain calls the shots,” he says. Dr. Wilson made this observation after taking the somewhat unusual step 16 years ago to begin measuring body composition using a Futrex machine. It measures body composition far more accurately than the typical method of using body mass index (BMI), which is a formula based on dividing weight by height. Unfortunately, BMI takes no account of muscle. Even people with anorexia can still have excess body fat, says Dr. Wilson. Over the years, Dr. Wilson has amassed a database of more than eighteen thousand cases and he noticed another pattern: when body composition improved, so did several psychological conditions. A 2003 paper by Harvard researchers theorized that 14 common brain disorders may be part of an overall disease called “Affective Spectrum Disorder.” The



Eating healthy, nourishing foods can go a long way in helping to improve brain function and mental health.

paper got Dr. Wilson thinking. “I realized they were the same symptoms associated with changes in body composition and I eventually identified 22 symptoms that fit this pattern. The symptoms, which Dr. Wilson says characterize CARB syndrome are:

1. Carbohydrate cravings
2. Abnormal hunger drives
3. Excessive physical and mental fatigue
4. Difficulty concentrating and focusing
5. Poor impulse control
6. Feelings of depression
7. Excessive anxiety
8. Excessive mood swings
9. Insomnia
10. Lack of proper sensory filtering
11. Low self-esteem
12. Low self-image
13. Loss of cognitive function
14. Lack of empathy
15. Chronic pain
16. Short-term memory problems
17. Internal restlessness and racing thoughts
18. Poor listening skills
19. Obsessive-compulsive tendencies
20. Intestinal symptoms
21. Increased communication lag time (CLT)
22. Consciously thinking about food and eating

At the heart of CARB syndrome is a pattern of disordered eating that is linked to shifts in brain chemistry and mental health. The symptoms of CARB syndrome can overlap with many traditional brain disorders, says Dr. Wilson, which creates confusion in the medical and scientific communities. “For example, bipolar disorder has been with us since the dawn of human civilization, characterized by mania and psychosis—a complete separation from reality,” he says. “Over the past 50 years, we have been seeing a lot of people with hypomania but no psychosis. The medical profession decided to call this ‘bipolar disorder II’ which, in my opinion, is wrong. These patients have CARB syndrome which is unrelated to bipolar disorder I. If you treat them with antipsychotics, over time they get worse and gain a lot of weight.”

Disordered Eating
People with CARB syndrome do not eat like normal people, Dr. Wilson explains. “In normal, healthy people without CARB syndrome, mild cravings for sugar and highly refined carbohydrates can occur, especially after consuming processed food, but these cravings tend to be mild and transitory,” he says. In those with CARB syndrome, “these cravings become very intense and persist regardless of food consumed. They push people to consume more of the very food that is frying their brains, triggering a vicious circle of disease and declining quality of life. There are likely multiple reasons for these pathological cravings, including fluctuating glucose levels.”

Published Research Supports Diet and Brain Connections
Studies in the scientific literature have supported Dr. Wilson’s te-

nets. Research published in the journal Current Nutrition Reports in 2019 observes that, “dopamine receptor agonists show attenuation of obesity and improvement of mental health in rodents and humans. Modulating brain insulin and dopamine signaling in obese patients can potentially improve therapeutic outcomes.” In other words, fixing dopamine issues decreased obesity and improved mental health in the subjects, suggesting one way to treat obese patients. Research published in 2017 in the journal Birth Defects Research notes that recent studies have highlighted how “palatable high fat and high sugar ‘junk’ foods” affect brain function, “resulting in cognitive impairments and altered reward processing.” “Diet can lead to alterations in dopamine-mediated reward signaling, and inhibitory neurotransmission controlled by gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), two major neurotransmitter systems that are under construction across adolescence.” The researchers conclude that, “poor dietary choices may derail the normal adolescent maturation process and influence neurodevelopmental trajectories, which can predispose individuals to dysregulated eating and impulsive behaviors.” In short, eating poorly can affect brain development and trigger disordered eating even as it undermines impulse control. This year, research published in the journal Behavioural Brain Research also studied links between diet and brain function in adolescent rats. The researchers looked at the role of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), an ingredient found in almost all junk food.

Mental disorders like
depression, anxiety,
ADHD, and post traumatic
stress disorder are also
becoming epidemic.

“While HFCS consumption has been linked to an increased likelihood of obesity and other physical health impairments, the link between HFCS and persistent behavioral changes is not yet fully established,” wrote the researchers. “The present study aimed to assess whether adolescent HFCS consumption could lead to alterations in adult behaviors and protein expression, following cessation,” and the researchers found it did. “Taken together, these data suggest that adolescent HFCS consumption leads to protracted dysfunction in affective behaviors and alterations in accumbal proteins which persist following cessation of HFCS consumption,” they conclude. Dr. Wilson co-wrote a 2021 article with Dr. Richard Johnson, a top fructose researcher, in the journal Evolution and Human Behavior which The Epoch Times cited earlier this year. Titled “Fructose and Uric Acid as Drivers of a Hyperactive Foraging Response: A Clue to Behavioral Disorders Associated With Impulsivity or Mania?” the article also buttresses the CARB syndrome concept.

Is There a Link Between CARB Syndrome and COVID-19?
Obesity has been linked, in the scientific literature, to a greater chance of contracting COVID-19 as well as a greater chance of developing COVID-19 complications, links



Addiction
to Fast-Food

High fructose corn syrup (HFCS), is an ingredient found in almost all junk food. In many recent studies, this additive has been shown to alter neurotransmitters in the brain that increases junk food cravings and impulses.

which Dr. Wilson also notes. “I believe that in many cases there is a two-way connection between COVID-19 and CARB syndrome,” he says. “Because the brain plays a critical role in maintaining a healthy immune system, I believe that people with CARB syndrome are more prone to developing COVID-19. Once people have the illness, they don’t fully recover due to their malfunctioning immune system, and they end up with what is termed ‘long COVID-19.’ If you peruse the typical symptoms of long COVID-19, they closely overlap with typical CARB syndrome symptoms.” If someone develops COVID-19 and doesn’t already have CARB syndrome, they are more likely to develop it down the line, Dr. Wilson adds. “That’s because COVID-19 alters brain function, making individuals more prone to developing other brain disorders like CARB syndrome. Thus COVID-19 and CARB syndrome seem to be connected in a deadly dance into sickness and diminished quality of life.”

How Can Those With CARB Syndrome-Like Conditions Recover?
Because neurons “dump” neurotransmitters when exposed to high glucose levels and they are excreted in the urine, Dr. Wilson says he gives patients precursors of neurotransmitters such as the amino acids L-tyrosine, DL-phenylalanine, and 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-htp) and sees their condition improve. “I also add L-glutamine, an amino acid that helps to suppress those pesky cravings for sweet and starchy food,” he says. Not surprisingly, more healthful and conscientious eating makes a difference in those suffering from negative diet/brain connection says Dr. Wilson, who offers some recipes on his website CarbSyndrome.com. As a final word, Dr. Wilson says, “CARB syndrome is preventable, reversible, and treatable,” and no one should be discouraged.

Martha Rosenberg is a nationally recognized reporter and author whose work has been cited by the Mayo Clinic Proceedings, Public Library of Science Biology, and National Geographic. Rosenberg’s FDA expose, “Born with a Junk Food Deficiency,” established her as a prominent investigative journalist. She has lectured widely at universities throughout the United States and resides in Chicago.

UNDIAGNOSED

Are Your Chronic and Mysterious
Symptoms Really a Mystery?
Understanding Autoimmunity

Continued from Page 1

When these antibodies attach to our own tissue, this signals our immune system to send out destructive immune cells called natural killer cells to destroy the tissue just as it would destroy a pathogen. Millions of people suffer for years or decades without treatment because insurance companies don’t approve screening for autoimmunity until the patient shows significant signs of organ or tissue destruction. At this point, the patient can be prescribed some type of immune-suppressing treatment. However, a patient’s ever-worsening symptoms and declining function can go on for years before diagnosis. Until then, doctors continue to tell patients they’re perfectly healthy. This is unfortunate, as early antibody

testing allows patients to make dietary and lifestyle modifications to relieve symptoms and prevent the condition from progressing. Let me give you an example. Let’s say a person starts to develop an autoimmune reaction against their joints. It could have been any tissue—skin, thyroid, brain—but in this case, let’s make it simple and say the autoimmune reaction is against their joints. In the early stages, they may suffer from chronic joint pain with varying degrees of recurring pain. At first, their joints look normal; there’s no joint fusion, deformity, or arthritic nodules yet, just pain and inflammation. A doctor visit will likely result in nothing more than advice to take an over-the-counter drug for inflammation and pain. Over the years, the autoimmune reaction progresses, and they develop joint fusion,

deformity, and arthritic nodules. Now, finally, they receive a diagnosis of an autoimmune joint disease such as rheumatoid arthritis. If their doctor had simply screened for joint antibodies in the early stages, the condition could have been identified and its progression either significantly slowed or completely halted through dietary and lifestyle applications.

Most patients aren’t aware that their symptoms are due to the early stages of autoimmune disease.

Autoimmune antibodies are elevated for years before autoimmunity destroys tissue. Unfortunately, both conventional and alternative medicine models don’t routinely test for early markers of autoimmunity, nor do they implement dietary, nutritional, and lifestyle suggestions to affect the expression of the disease. It’s unfortunate that millions of patients spend much of their lives suffering because of this disconnect, especially considering how clear the research is. Studies show autoantibodies appear in the early stages of autoimmunity and can be used as both diagnostic and predictive tools in clinical settings.

Yet, both conventional and alternative health care providers aren’t up to date with the research. Most medical schools still only teach how to identify late-stage autoimmune disease, not how to identify autoimmunity in its early stages and nor how to affect its progression through dietary, nutritional, pharmaceutical, or lifestyle applications. A survey conducted by the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association found that the average patient diagnosed with a serious (late-stage and clinically obvious) autoimmune disease had seen more than four doctors over a four-year period before receiving a correct diagnosis. I know of patients who have seen as many as 20 different doctors looking for help. Most patients aren’t aware that their symptoms are due to the early stages of autoimmune disease. They’ve seen numerous practitioners, both conventional and alternative, become a connoisseur of hundreds of supplements, tried multiple diets of every extreme, and taken to the internet to search, vent, and commiserate with the many other people in the same boat. Every supplement and every therapy is a shot in the dark. Occasionally, they will stumble onto what seems to be a miracle cure. But for the most part, symptoms of undiagnosed autoimmunity turn into a life of endless searching and experimenting.

As autoimmune reactions progress over years, patients develop joint fusion, deformity, and arthritic nodules.



This is a misunderstood and neglected area of medicine that’s nevertheless epidemic. Most patients simply must become their own autoimmune experts to understand their condition and how to manage it. The good news is, we have plenty of research and resources available, though it takes quite a bit more work than going to the doctor and getting a prescription. Autoimmune management requires a personalized approach of overhauling your diet so that it’s anti-inflammatory, removing other inflammatory triggers from your life (they’re different for everyone), getting daily physical activity but not overtraining, getting plenty of good quality sleep every night, and avoiding toxins, including toxic situations and people. I give more advice on my site at DrKNews.com and in my books, videos, and podcasts.

Datis Kharratian, Ph.D., DHSc, DC, MS, MMSc, FAcN, is a Harvard Medical School trained, award-winning clinical research scientist, academic professor, and world-renowned functional medicine health care provider. He develops patient and practitioner education and resources in the areas of autoimmune, neurological, and unidentified chronic diseases using non-pharmaceutical applications.

Reducing exposure to toxins and removing them from the body can significantly reduce the prevalence of autoimmune diseases.



Moms often find themselves focused more on what they do wrong, or not enough of, than what they do right—and what they need in order to feel well.



Tips for Breaking the 'Mom Guilt' Habit

Become aware of your inner-guilter. Breaking mom guilt starts with awareness, noticing how and when you're "should-ing" yourself with a dose of shame and blame for failing to live up to some idea of the mom you should be.

Notice the thoughts of not-enoughness, and how your inner-mom critic is criticizing you for not being someone you're not.

Consider your own well-being. When you recognize that you're spinning in the mom guilt narrative, drop out of the story of who and how you should be, and consider who and how you actually want to be—in this moment, this situation, and this life.

Take the bold step that it is, as a woman and a mom, to stop assuming that you should be invisible. Remind yourself that your wants and needs matter. Put your authentic self back into the story.

Ask yourself what takes care of you in this situation, what serves your well-being. What would happen if you allowed your own well-being to matter, too, not just your children's? Is there a way to take care of both you and your child?

Remind yourself to keep coming back to the present moment. When you're lost in mom guilt, you're distracted out of the present moment. You're not with your children, which is ultimately what good mothering is all about.

When you catch yourself mom-guiltering, get fierce with your mind. Tell your inner critic to stop telling you what's wrong with you.

Focus on modeling for your kids what it looks like to be on your own side. Focus on what you like about yourself, what makes you a good mom. Let your kids meet who you actually are, as opposed to a tortured version of yourself trying to be someone else.

Practice self-compassion. Remember, being a mom can be an exceptionally difficult role. Some say it's the hardest job in the world.

We all fail our kids and we've all been failed by our own moms (and dads). Thankfully, humans are resilient; our kids find a way to be OK most of the time. That's reality.

So, keep your shortcomings in perspective and remind yourself of all the things you do right, not just those things you think you do wrong.

Use whatever you don't like about your parenting as an opportunity to grow and be more mindful, rather than an opportunity to judge yourself.

Remind yourself, too, that you're doing the best you can, even when there's room for improvement.

Moms, like all human beings, are works in progress; being the best mom you can be today, that's the goal—with all the shortcomings and gifts that that includes.

That's enough.

the ultimate test of our worth.

When Sheila was packing her kids into the car for yet another weekend trip this past summer, each of which took enormous effort and cost (and wasn't that much fun), it suddenly dawned on her that she was doing all of this to live up to some idea in her head of what a good mom should be and what she should offer her kids in the summer.

And yet, she also realized that she didn't want to do it, and truth be told, neither did her kids.

The irony was that no one in that car actually wanted to be going away for another "family" weekend; no one wanted to be living this "perfect family life." She was enslaved by some archaic story of what was supposed to happen in the idyllic months of summer, by being perceived as a "perfect mom," the "perfect family," and people living a "perfect life."

In a revolutionary moment, she decided to put the car in reverse, unpack the trunk right then and there, and start living in what was true, rather than some idea of what should be.

She decided to step out of her imaginary story and into reality.

At any moment, we can step out of the story we're telling ourselves, about who we should be, and in that moment, invite and welcome the mom we really are.

Nancy Collier is a psychotherapist, interfaith minister, thought leader, public speaker, and the author of "Can't Stop Thinking: How to Let Go of Anxiety and Free Yourself from Obsessive Ruminations," "The Power of Off," and the upcoming "The Emotionally Exhausted Woman: Why You're Depleted and How to Get What You Need" (November 2022.)

Keep your shortcomings in perspective and remind yourself of all the things you do right.



Often moms run around taking care of everything and everyone but themselves. Make sure to take a step back and do something special for yourself too.

MINDSET MATTERS

Letting Go of 'Mom Guilt'

Put an end to the never-enough-mom story

NANCY COLIER

"Mom guilt" is the feeling of not being a good enough mother. It can come in many forms: We're not spending enough time with our child; we're not patient, loving, fun, or interested enough in our children; we're not offering our children the life, family, and opportunities that we should; and so on.

The list of ways we moms can fail our children is endless.

Most women, and moms in particular, struggle with the belief that we're not good enough. We feel like we're failing our children and failing to live up to some image of a perfect mom who's selfless, has no needs of her own, and exists only for her children. Some of this remains as a remnant of the role women played in the family in previous generations.

Despite the fact that our culturally conditioned idea of who we should be no longer fits into modern life, in which women work outside the home, our idea of the perfect mom remains unchanged.

And maybe more importantly, despite the fact that our image of perfection is frequently in conflict with our own well-being, we continue to shame and blame ourselves for not being who we imagine we should be.

Mom guilt is built on an idea of who we should be—not who we are.

From the time we're little girls, our emotional safety, acceptance, and approval is built on our ability to be selfless and take care of other people's needs. The better we are at taking care of other people, the more we're liked, which makes us feel valuable—and makes us like ourselves. Being a mom is the ultimate test of our caretaking abilities; how much can we give ourselves away in service to our children, which then is



Seeking the Safe Side of Sun Exposure

This life-giving orb comes with some risks—and a long list of essential benefits

Sunlight has widespread and essential health-promoting effects beyond creating vitamin D.

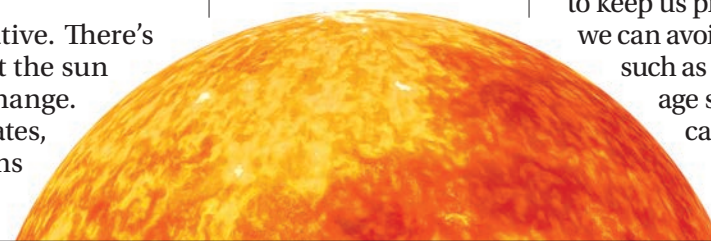
CONAN MILNER

The sun is an indispensable agent for life on earth. It provides the daily heat and light that makes it all possible.

But the sun can also be a bother, such as during drought, sweltering heat, or when it gets in your eyes as you're trying to drive.

Many see only the negative. There's even a proposal to blot out the sun as a way to slow climate change. Harvard University, Bill Gates, and top scientific institutions

The sun emits many types of light and we are still discovering how they affect the body.



NERTHUZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

have all prompted the U.S. government to pour \$200 million into solar engineering experiments. The sun dimming plan involves spraying a chemical into the atmosphere to reflect some sunlight away from the earth.

Similarly, the trend in public health over the past few decades has been tilted toward reducing our sun exposure. The advice aims to keep us protected from the sun's rays so we can avoid all the damage it may cause, such as sunburns, cataracts, wrinkles, age spots, and, most concerning, cancer.

Of course, sun exposure isn't

the only factor in these ailments, and it may in fact only play a very small supporting role. While ultraviolet (UV) radiation can indirectly contribute to skin cancer, cataracts, and other diseases, excessive exposure only accounts for 0.1 percent of the total global burden of disease according to a World Health Organization report on "The Global Burden of Disease Due to Ultraviolet Radiation."

The Other Sun Ray
The life-giving influence of the sun is enormous.

Continued on Page 12

How Pesticides and Herbicides Affect Farmers

These cancer-causing chemicals are a risk in our food, but they're an even greater risk for the people who grow it

JENNIFER MARGULIS & STEPHANIE SENEFF

In the past few decades, thousands of studies have revealed the negative consequences of herbicides and pesticides on human and planetary health. But few people—even among those who buy organic—think about who's really most at risk.

According to a report released in June by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 81.4 percent of Americans older than the age of 6 tested positive for high levels of glyphosate, an herbicide

linked to cancer.

Three months later, another study, conducted by a nonprofit group dedicated to children's health, found detectable levels of glyphosate in 95.3 percent of the public school lunches tested. The highest quantities were in soft tacos and pizza.

Research from Mississippi published in 2014 showed that glyphosate was the predominant new herbicide detected in both the air (86 percent) and rain (77 percent) as early as 2007.

Continued on Page 10



Farmers and field workers pay a heavy price for our preference for slightly cheaper food.

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The Healthy Effects of Kindness

Researchers have studied which acts of kindness make you happier and healthier

ALL PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK

MEENA ANDIAPPAN

How to optimize the pursuit of well-being and happiness is a question that researchers have tried to tackle from a range of angles. The social effects of the pandemic led many people to focus more closely on their mental health and create buffers against threats to their well-being. In short, they tried to pursue happiness.

As a social scientist, I study the intersection of ethical behavior and well-being. Last year, my colleagues and I decided to explore ways that people could increase their sense of well-being and decrease the increasingly common feelings of anxiety and depression that arose during the pandemic.

Given the recent popular movement toward ideals of self-care and focusing inward, we wanted to further investigate the best way to increase one's happiness and mental health.

We compared people who chose to treat themselves by spending money, or time, or some form of resources on their own happiness (anything from painting their nails to watching their favorite movie), versus those who treated others (again, anything from opening the door for someone at the grocery store to donating goods to charity). In both cases, people largely did simple, low- to no-cost acts on a daily basis.

Committing to Kindness

What we found was surprising: For people who didn't consistently enact behaviors outside their normal routine, kind acts had no effect on their well-being. However, for those who fully engaged in the study by consistently enacting behaviors outside their normal routine, acts of kindness had bigger boosts to their well-being and mental health compared to those who treated themselves.

Not only that, but for those who fully engaged in their kind acts, those acts were associated with reductions in both anxiety and depression.

Our study joins a long line of research findings that concur. Why does research find these effects? Some have found that spending our energy on other people (particularly those less fortunate) makes our

own troubles seem less pressing.

Others have noted that treating others often means spending time with them, building and reinforcing relationships—and we know that strong social relationships are one key to happiness. Relatedly, when other people are present, we tend to smile much more—essentially experiencing positive emotions more frequently.

Research has also suggested that leading a meaningful life is a significant predictor of feeling well. It's likely that spending your limited resources and energy on other people can help boost this sense of meaning, making life more fulfilling and worthwhile. In contrast, spending—whether time, money, or effort—on yourself doesn't seem to have the same benefits.

Predictors of Happiness

We're now conducting a follow-up study, trying to better understand if all of the kind acts that people may engage in are equal predictors of happiness, or whether there are particular characteristics of certain acts that may make them more helpful in increasing positive feelings.

Interestingly, we have found that as long as you don't do the same act over and over (for example, baking cookies for your neighbor every day), you're sure to gain benefit from your kindness.

However, there were three factors that make certain acts particularly beneficial to happiness.

- First, doing something outside your normal routine—for example, driving your neighbor to his doctor's appointment—affects your happiness more than routine acts, such as helping your spouse with the dishes.
- Second, changing the kind acts that you do is important. For example, one day



Leading a meaningful life is a significant predictor of feeling well.

you might help a co-worker finish their tasks, while another day you might choose to spend time helping your niece learn to play soccer. So, variety is key.

- Third, happiness is boosted when you receive positive feedback about the kind act that you did. Knowing how you have helped someone or receiving gratitude and appreciation for your act amplifies your positive feelings.

Acts of kindness, like volunteering or giving a compliment, can bring significant improvements to mental health and well-being.

Trying to increase your happiness and mental health doesn't have to be hard, time-consuming, or expensive. In fact, it can be done in the span of 60 seconds without much effort or money at all—just consider holding open a door for a stranger or giving your colleague a compliment.

Although engaging in kind acts isn't a universal remedy for emotional needs, these little acts of kindness can all add up to the old adage: In helping others, you really can help yourself.

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