

Jennifer Baker Ph.D. For the Love of Wisdom

# Cooking and Depression

## Taking steps to slow down rewards

Once in a class we were discussing happiness, and I mentioned that some celebrity (I think it was Michael Jackson, who had recently passed away) revealed to have had an in-house chef. I knew that might sound great, but I mentioned that this luxury was the kind to worry me. Surely it would get depressing to never be the one to experience the undeniable joy of cutting into a bright red tomato? Well, I got a note back from a student to the effect of "I'm sorry, cutting tomatoes is never going to do it for me. That actually sounds really boring. I can't relate to your example."

And of course it isn't the bright red that makes cooking a satisfying activity for *some* of us. It has to be more complex than that, as we are more complex than that.

After presenting the work of behavioral scientist George Ainslie to another class, I mused over whether, despite how nice it is to be treated, "doing things for yourself" might be a key to controlling your own (and your children's) moods. Why do we begin to feel bratty, after all, if it isn't because some treat is near that we are not getting for ourselves?

Or cooking for ourselves?

Jeanne Whalen at *The Wall Street Journal* has published a nice article that makes me think there really is something to the idea that we sometimes need what we don't think we want. She writes about a treatment center for depression and mental illness finding success in, among the other more standard therapies, teaching afflicted teens to cook.

From the article:

"Cooking and baking are pursuits that fit a type of therapy known as behavioral activation. The goal is to alleviate depression by boosting positive activity, increasing goal-oriented behavior and curbing procrastination and passivity.

If the activity is defined as personally rewarding or giving a sense of accomplishment or pleasure, or even seeing the pleasure of that pumpkin bread with chocolate chips making someone else happy, then it could improve a sense of well-being," says Jacqueline Gollan, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago."

And more from the article:

"Clinical studies on cooking's therapeutic effects are hard to come by. But occupational therapists say cooking classes are particularly widely used in their profession, which seeks to help people with mental or physical disorders maintain their daily living and working skills.

In one study published in the British Journal of Occupational Therapy in 2004, researchers in the U.K. found that baking classes boosted confidence ([link is external](#)), increased concentration and provided a sense of achievement for 12 patients being treated in inpatient mental-health clinics."

Cutting tomatoes might not "do it" for everyone, but, for some of us, that could be part of the problem. A problem that cutting tomatoes might actually help solve.