

# Positive eating

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Feeling healthy is not just a matter of your physical state but also your mental well-being and spiritual activity. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), health is defined as a "[...] state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." [1] But as no one could claim to be completely free of adverse effects, according to this definition everyone would be viewed as being ill. What is more, it takes no account of human resilience, and the strength and ability to overcome illness or to deal with adversity. The focus should therefore be moved from pathogenesis, in other words the question of what makes us ill, to salutogenesis, with the question of what makes us healthy. Based on a salutogenic concept of health, in 2014 Machteld Huber completed her doctoral thesis in which she published her concept of "positive health". It has already been taken up in the Netherlands by the Dutch Municipal Health Services (GGD Nederland) [3]. The way in which a person experiences their own state of health is shown in six dimensions of life (bodily functions, mental well-being, meaningfulness (the spiritual and existential dimension), quality of life, participation (social and societal), and daily functioning) in a web diagram. This is depicted as a hexagon (see Fig. 1). Each dimension of life is scored on a scale of 0-10 and, by joining the dots, gives a personal health area.

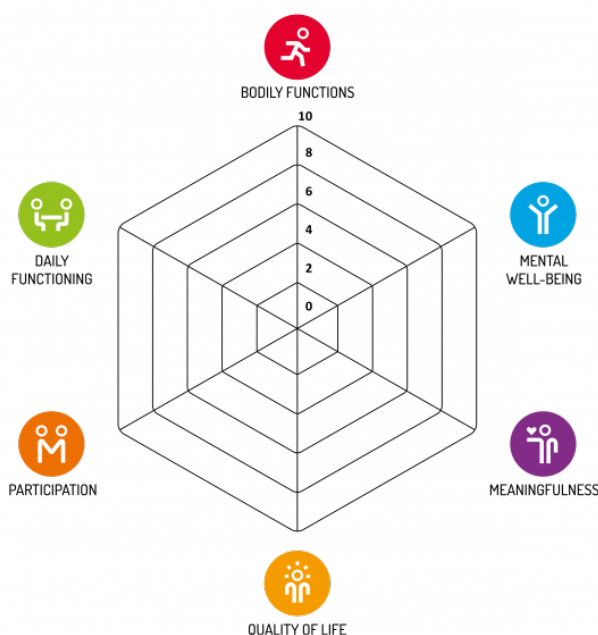


Figure 1: Web diagram of "positive health" after Machteld Huber [2]

Illness and health now cease to be opposing poles. The health area can be expanded by working on different areas of life, opening up numerous options for actively shaping your own health. At the same time, it strengthens personal initiative, which helps in accepting the illness

and the healing process. This means that the human being can actively work with the conditions they have, their health, their well-being and therefore their life.

Focussing on resilience and what is positive is also gaining in importance in the field of nutrition. Up until now, attention was mainly directed towards "unhealthy eating" – too much, too fatty, too salty – and the diseases this causes. Eating too little fruit and vegetables means that people consume too much confectionery and fast food. All these prohibitions and restrictions send people the message that they are doing everything wrong, producing a predominantly deficit-oriented picture of the human being. Many people allow their eating habits to be strongly influenced by diet plans, calorie apps or the media, and increasingly lose touch with the feeling itself, their true needs and their own feelings of hunger or repleteness. Diets fail because instructions and recipes are adhered to for a while. An authority is followed that has or claims to have nutritional expertise, instead of trusting and developing our own ability to judge.

Based on positive psychology, new approaches to healthy, beneficial eating are now being developed, such as mindful or intuitive eating behaviour [4]. This involves the human being in actively developing their own healthy eating: they will thus become their own nutrition expert, paying heed to their needs and circumstances. Positive experiences such as pleasure and well-being while cooking or eating are brought to the fore. Cooking is experienced as a process of creativity and self-efficacy, which is enjoyable, and the ingredients are handled with appreciation. Attention is no longer turned to what is nutritionally "unhealthy", but to what increases human health and well-being. This attitude also allows the salutogenic approach to be incorporated in daily eating.

Eating more healthily requires a perception of our own sensations and body signals. This assumes that we are in contact with ourselves, which can be understood as a process of "forming a relationship". This necessitates our personal initiative. Supporting our own ability and strength to develop healthy eating habits is one of the key components of nutrition therapy work.

To achieve a sustainable change in behaviour it is important to consciously establish behaviour patterns that are not only positive but are experienced as being so. This is a central message from the broaden-and-build theory in positive psychology. Positive emotions linked to an activity (for instance cooking or eating) expand our thinking and behaviour patterns (broaden), so contributing to the development of resources (build) [4]. What makes it difficult is that negative feelings such as anger or stress are usually perceived very quickly and clearly, while positive feelings such as joy or repleteness are usually less clear and go unnoticed for longer. Positive feelings like these need to be perceived consciously as often as possible. A study has been able to show that the experience of meals as pleasurable moments that can be shared with others can have a positive effect on health [5]. This study looked at the "French eating model" which is characterised in particular by structured mealtimes and socialising (for further information, see: <https://www.sektion-landwirtschaft.org/ernaehrung/ea/esskultur>). The conscious sense of pleasure during a shared family mealtime can, for instance, provide motivation for preparing other meals and so help to establish a mealtime rhythm which in turn has a positive effect on family life. Conscious enjoyment not only allows the perception

of positive emotions but also makes these stronger. This contributes to a healthier and more intuitive eating behaviour.

In this context, the nutrition consultant Maike Ehrlichmann has developed her "HONEST EATING METHOD": "Just eat what you need." [6, 7] A requirement for successful intuitive eating is a body that knows what it needs, in other words has a sound regulation of hunger, repleteness and appetite. However, this regulation is prone to disruption: stress, excessive levels of sugar or additives such as taste enhancers and artificial flavourings distort the signals that our body sends to our brain. But instead of prohibiting all foods containing the specified ingredients as part of a diet, we can practice observing these signals correctly again. In addition to the method of "intuitive eating" there is "mindful eating". This means that all the sense perceptions, thoughts and feelings that arise during eating are experienced without judging or making comparisons [8]. An easy way to begin to train this is, for example, by using three questions that you ask yourself about a meal and which you answer before, during and after eating:

- Before the meal: What is on my plate?
- During the meal: Do I like it?
- After the meal: How do I digest and tolerate what I have just eaten? [9]

After only a few repetitions over several days, this little reflection can lead to a clearer and simpler perception of the effects between eating, your own body and well-being. This allows pleasure and enjoyment when eating, and an honest relationship can develop to the foods. Healthy eating behaviour is in principle possible for everyone. In terms of positive nutrition, what matters is to rediscover enjoyment of our own food, and to develop this consciously with the resources available to every one of us and so strengthen individual well-being.

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