

Challah

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August 1, 2020

With more of us at home and less frequent trips to the grocery store since we have been sheltering in place, Friday has become a day for challah making (not just eating) in my family. Different members of our pod have taken turns each week.



As my great niece and I had a try, it occurred to me that the science and art of making challah is a metaphor for so much of life, including at least these five mental health insights.

1. The ingredients. One might think that the same ingredients go into every challah. That could be not be further from the truth. Yes, there are the core items: eggs, flour, yeast, and water. But some recipes use oil, some butter. Choice of flour is only limited by your imagination. Sugar? Honey? Maple glaze? Poppy or sesame seeds? Raisins? The variety that exists in terms of the exact ingredients and their quantity is almost infinite. The ingredients are essential in determining the qualities of the challah in the end. In mental health terms, the basic ingredients are our genes. And the combination of these basic building blocks are truly infinite in the human experience. Our genetic makeup matters when it comes to mental health and risk for mental illness, contributing substantially to certain mental illnesses like schizophrenia and various mood disorders. But the ingredients are just part of the story.

2. The recipe. Google “challah recipe” and you will get over 8 million results. Every recipe has a methodology that tells us what to do with the basic ingredients. Instructing on the order of mixing. Describing how

vigorously to beat the eggs. Specifying the temperature of the water for activating the yeast. Detailing how to knead the dough. In so doing, we meet these basic ingredients with purpose and promise, and the hope that our engagement will help turn their potential into something wonderful. If we put the yeast in excessively hot water, we can kill it. Too much kneading and the gluten will become over tight, resulting in a bread that is dense and rock-hard. The recipe is the metaphor of psychosocial factors that contribute to shaping our mental health. We know that social and interpersonal factors have profound impact as risk and protective factors for mental illness. How we interact with the raw ingredients matters.

3. Time to rise. Beyond the ingredients (our genes) and the recipe (our interpersonal experiences), the larger environment also impacts how our challah turns out. During these days of bread baking, we have discovered that our oven has a “proof mode” that sets the temperature and humidity for perfectly controlled conditions that promote leavening. In our human experience of development, the environment is much less controlled. Often referred to as the social determinants of health, our [zip codes](#) - a proxy for things like access to education, quality of housing, exposure to violence, access to exercise and quality of food supply - profoundly impact our life experiences in ways that influence our health, including our mental health.

4. Braiding. The braided loaf is such a distinctive feature of challah. But why? Like all good Jewish traditions, there are a variety of proposed explanations. The one that resonates for me is the idea that braiding is associated with strength. The ancient text of Ecclesiastes says, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Even before the pandemic, it had become clear that loneliness is more than just an unfortunate situation. [Loneliness has serious mental health consequences](#) and can be [fatal](#). In the [current pandemic](#), we are only beginning to reckon with the anguish and mental health burden of not being able to visit loved ones, and especially not being able to be with loved ones as they depart this world. Better braided.

5. The blessing. Before we eat the challah, we say a blessing. Most simply, it is a chance to pause and be grateful. For all of us, feeling grateful comes more easily at certain moments in our lives than others. The practice of saying a blessing over the challah every Friday, whether I am feeling especially grateful or not has been instructive. No matter how I feel beforehand, I always feel more grateful afterwards. The [mental health benefits of practicing gratitude are many](#), including promoting resilience, increasing happiness, decreasing anxiety, and enhancing mood.

Raw ingredients; a recipe; time to rise, braiding, and blessings - insights from challah on mental health.