



My vision for a

HAPPIER, HEALTHIER TOMORROW

by Bonnie J. Kaplan, PhD



Hello!

I'M BONNIE

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I am currently semi-retired, & a Professor Emerita in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Calgary, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

I first joined the faculty in the Department of Paediatrics; later I held a secondary appointment in the Department of Community Health Sciences.

During my 40-year scientific career, I have published widely on the biological basis of developmental disorders and mental health – particularly focusing on the contribution of nutrition to brain development and brain function.

Originally from the U.S. (Ohio), I did all my training there (Butler University, University of Chicago, Brandeis University), including my postdoctoral training (West Haven, Connecticut, Veterans Administration Hospital's Neuropsychology Laboratory) and then a research faculty appointment in the Department of Neurology at Yale University.

I moved to Canada in 1979, to the Alberta Children's Hospital and the University of Calgary, and have now been a Canadian for more than half my life.

- In September 2019, I was awarded the \$250,000 Dr. Rogers Prize for Career Contributions to Complementary and Alternative Medicine (for all of Canada).
- In 2017, I was named one of the top 150 'Difference Makers' in Canada for the area of Mental Health.
- In November 2021, I was named one of the Top 7 Over 70 for the Calgary area.

THIS IS MY VISION FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER TODAY AND TOMORROW

and I want to share it with you.

Because by the time we turn 40, either we ourselves or someone close to us is struggling with their mental health. And as I write this in 2025, there is probably a better than 90% chance that they are being told that the only thing that will help them is a psychiatric medication.

In fact, I have been told countless times that a person has a 'serious' mental health problem, so there is no point in talking to them about their dietary pattern --- or anything other than treating them with medication.

But I have seen people with psychosis/schizophrenia decrease or eliminate their symptoms with micronutrients, so even though I truly respect that some people find relief with medication, I know that it is simplistic to assume that that is the only solution.

My vision for a happier, healthier tomorrow is that someday every single mental health clinic will educate patients about how to shift their diet away from ultra-processed rubbish and toward healthy, colourful whole foods.

They will also be guided about shopping in ways that will save money, and they will learn how to cook a Mediterranean-style diet.



FOR YOU READERS WHO MAY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR A LOT OF THE FAMILY COOKING, THIS IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT.

So here are a few 'first steps':

It is best to not start with a specialized, restrictive diet such as ketogenic diet, or intermittent fasting. I'm not saying these dietary patterns do not help some people!

However, restrictive diets can be difficult, and if you fail to follow through with them, then you may be overwhelmed with a lot of negative feelings about yourself.

So if you are curious about (for example) a ketogenic diet, fine --- try it --- but not as your very first step.



SO WHERE SHOULD YOU BEGIN?

Begin with something easier and do it gradually so that you enhance the chances of succeeding.

Here are some examples:

1. **Perhaps you could replace all liquid sugars (carbonated beverages, fruit juices) with carbonated water.** Maybe you can do it immediately, or maybe you need to taper more slowly, perhaps limiting your consumption to every other day for a week, until you can eventually eliminate sugar in liquid form.
2. Perhaps you have a habit of eating a pastry or donut every afternoon at work. **Could you begin by decreasing from five pastries per week to one?** Then taper to zero? **Challenge yourself to systematically move away from these items. Add a handful of walnuts, if a snack is needed in the afternoon.**
3. Maybe you could **switch out the ultra-processed store-bought protein bar with a homemade one each day – and use a recipe with real ground peanuts instead of sugar-sweetened peanut butter found in the store-bought energy bars.**
4. Can you also **limit the number of times you buy something from a vending machine each week?** It isn't likely that you are buying healthy whole foods from vending machines.
5. Perhaps you can gradually **decrease the number of times you go to a fast-food restaurant.** Set limits (perhaps once/week) and challenge yourself to decrease more (perhaps once/month).

AFTER A FEW WEEKS OF MOVING YOUR DIET AWAY FROM THE ULTRA-PROCESSED ITEMS,

you will probably feel ready to experiment with introducing more vegetables and fruits into your diet.



Can you try some recipes that teach you how to make a whole-foods entrée?

Perhaps you could identify **one or two days each week when you cook a lentil stew**, or you **make chili from scratch**.

In all cases, keep in mind one of the important goals of increasing your vegetables --- and it isn't to increase French fry consumption. **A more useful mantra is 'Green is Good'** (especially for your brain).

It may be helpful to **put some good visual cues into your kitchen**, like the Canada Food Guide 'Half your plate' initiative. You want to aim to have **half your plate be vegetables and fruits**. **Print out the figure at the end of this document and put it on your fridge. This is your goal!**

While you are working toward a better diet, keep in mind that anyone who tells you that there are specific magically important foods to eat is pulling your leg.

DIVERSITY IS KEY:

Eat a wide variety of whole foods, to enhance your exposure to all the nutrients that your brain relies on.

I'll summarize some additional nutrition-related health tips with a selection of the Take-Away messages from **The Better Brain.**

These are Take-Aways that I think have near-universal value:

1. **Never say something is “just” vitamins or minerals, which trivializes their importance.** Vitamins and minerals (micronutrients) are the foundation of your brain's metabolism. They are the cofactors which enable your brain to manufacture every single neurotransmitter, and without an abundant supply of them, the enzymes cannot do their work. They also enable every cell in your brain and body to make ATP, the energy molecule used in every physiological process.
2. **There is no single magic nutrient! We need them all, every minute of every day.** If our hearts are beating, these cofactors are being absorbed into our bloodstream, and they are moving throughout our brains.
3. **We need roughly 30** micronutrients, the essential fatty acids (e.g., omega 3s), the amino acids (building blocks of protein), and many other plant-based nutrients. So instead of looking for a single or a few magical nutrients, look for a diet with lots of whole healthy foods and many colours.
4. **We can acknowledge that our soil is deficient in many ways, and we should do everything we can to support the regenerative agriculture movement.** But do not use soil depletion as an excuse to not eat vegetables and fruit; use your knowledge to justify eating more of them. Go to farmers markets and talk to the people who are growing your food and find out what they are doing to protect our soil.



5. If people tell you that supplements are useless, ignore them. There is a very solid evidence base proving that taking supplementary micronutrients and omega 3 fatty acids can help build and maintain your better brain. But do your homework – do not just buy whatever is on the shelves of your local pharmacy or grocery store. Look for multi-nutrient formulas that have lots of both vitamins and minerals. And look for ones that have been studied by independent scientists if possible.

At the present time, the largest evidence base for mental health benefits from formulas with multiple nutrients comes from two Alberta-based companies who designed their very-similar formulas specifically for mental health (Truehope.com; HardyNutritionals.com).

And none of the people who have published the more than 50 peer-reviewed studies of those two formulas has received funding from the companies.

The studies can be downloaded from my [website](#).

FOR VEGETABLES, REMEMBER THAT GREEN IS GOOD!

