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The Power of Togetherness: New Study Reveals Shared Meals as the Key to Well-being and Happiness Across the Globe

Research by University of Minnesota and supported by Barilla Group unveils a significant link between the frequency of eating together and improved emotional well-being: as the number of reported family or shared meals rises per week, the levels of happiness increased for adults in all countries.

Parma, DATE – Shared meals have long been cherished as a time for connection and nourishment; In a landmark study conducted by researchers at University of Minnesota supported by Barilla Group, new findings shed light on the profound connection between shared meals and overall happiness. The key findings of the study indicate a strong positive correlation between how often people gather around the table during mealtime and enhanced connectedness, reduced depressive symptoms, and an improvement in mood across all three countries. Moreover, significant positive correlations were found between shared meal frequency and adult happiness across all countries.

This suggests that shared meals not only contribute to preventing depressive symptoms and negative health outcomes, but also promote positive emotions and feelings.

The study explores the significance of family and shared meals on the health and well-being of individuals across three countries: United States, Italy, and Germany, with over 1000 participants from each country. Drawing upon over three decades of mostly U.S. based research, the study reveals strong associations between family or shared meal frequency and various aspects of physical and emotional health across all age ranges.

The health benefits of strong social connections are well-documented. A meta-analysis study¹ published in 2022 on mental health suggests that loneliness is associated with a subsequent onset of depression or anxiety, emphasizing the critical role of social support in mental health. This togetherness study builds upon this foundation by examining the correlation between shared meals and overall happiness, further emphasizing the multifaceted benefits of social connection in enhancing well-being.

This study, published on March 1, 2024 in the journal, *Family, Systems, and Health* reveals compelling evidence that supports the importance of togetherness around the table.

“It is important to know that the benefits of shared meals beyond the avoiding negative health outcomes and fewer depressive symptoms, this research shows that shared family meals promote happiness and positive emotions,” comments William Doherty, Professor, University of Minnesota.

Undoubtedly, meals play a central role both in bringing people together around the table and fostering bonds with loved ones. Of note, almost 50% of adults across all three countries engage in six or more family or shared meals per week. While dinner was the most prevalent shared meal at 65% for all countries, the highest frequency of the shared meals occurred on the weekends. Furthermore, the highest frequency of the shared meals occurred in Italy, with 74% of adults reporting six or more meals weekly.

Valeria Rapetti, Nutrition & Wellbeing Director Barilla Group emphasizes, “We are proud to see Barilla Group’s commitment to bringing people together and promoting well-being reinforced through this study. The findings not only highlight the positive effects of shared meals on adult health, which are a key element of a Mediterranean lifestyle, but also align with our mission to bring the joy of food for a better life, and we

¹ Mann, F., Wang, J., Pearce, E. *et al.* Loneliness and the onset of new mental health problems in the general population. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* **57**, 2161–2178 (2022).



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were happily surprised to see the similarities between the three countries. Barilla believes that fostering connections around the table, also with sharing a delicious pasta meal, is not just a tradition but a powerful food culture tool, able to enhance the quality of life for individuals and communities. This study reaffirms our dedication to being at the forefront of initiatives that prioritize the well-being of all those we serve, by giving people tools and knowledge to build a food culture.”

Does conversational engagement contribute to the positive feelings of shared meals? According to the study, over 50% of adults reported the food on their plate was one of the most frequent conversational topics during mealtime. In the U.S., it was by far the most talked-about topic, with 58% of people stating they often engage in discussions about the dishes they are enjoying, followed by current events (45%) and TV shows or movies (41%). In Germany and Italy, the main topic of conversation was current news and events (respectively almost 69 and 68%), but food came in a close second.

As people around the world continue to navigate busy schedules and competing priorities, the results of this study serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of making time for shared meals. Whether it's a leisurely weekend brunch or a quick weeknight dinner, the benefits of coming together around the table are undeniable.

Of note, the study underscores the global significance of family or shared meals and their potential positive effects on well-being, thus emphasizing the need for continued international research to inform targeted public health interventions.

Other Key Research Findings:

Preferred Meal To Share with Others

Over 65% of the study respondents reveal that dinner was the best meal to share with others, a global percentage that grows to almost 77% during weekends. In the U.S. and Germany, breakfasts during weekends are also key moments to share meals (69% and 84% respectively), while in Italy lunch is designated as another sharing moment by 80% of respondents. Additionally, the highest prevalence of having no family meals occurred in the U.S. at 10 percent.

Meal Preparation and Cleanup as Social Rituals

Italians and Germans also come together around the act of preparing the meal. 57% of Italians and 51% of Germans reported that setting the table was a frequent activity done together, and engaging in meal prep was also more prevalent in these two countries (47% for German respondents and 43% for Italians). Although U.S. respondents reported higher levels of stress resulting from carrying out family meals, they did report greater levels of connectedness and improved mood after engaging in a family or shared meal. However, Germans showed only positive correlations between meal preparation, sharing, and improved emotional well-being, while Italians reported an improved mood for the rest of the day after the meal.

Modern Dining Dynamics

Italians are less likely to watch a TV show during meals, as they are considered a distraction. Similar to the German respondents, they prefer to discuss current events and politics. Nevertheless, TV show watching was highest in the U.S.; these respondents reported the highest prevalence of watching a show before (55%), during (46%), and after meals (59%) as well as talking about the show during meals, proving how the element of entertainment in addition to the meal can foster connectedness.



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The Barilla Group

Barilla is a family business, not listed on the Stock Exchange, chaired by the brothers Guido, Luca and Paolo Barilla. It was founded by their great-grandfather Pietro Barilla, who opened a bakery in Parma in 1877. Today, Barilla is renowned in Italy and around the world for the quality of its food products. With its brands – Barilla, Mulino Bianco, Pan di Stelle, Gran Cereale, Harrys, Pavesi, Wasa, Filiz, Yemina, Misko, Voiello, Academia Barilla, First, Catelli, Lancia, Splendor, Pasta Evangelists and Back to Nature – it advocates tasty, hearty and wholesome nutrition, inspired by the Mediterranean Diet and the Italian lifestyle.

When Pietro opened his shop more than 145 years ago, the main aim was to make good food. That principle has now become the Barilla way of doing business, with over 8,700 people working for the company and a supply chain that shares its values and passion for quality.

The Group's commitment is to offer people the joy that good, well-made food can bring them, produced with selected ingredients from, as far as possible, responsible supply chains, to contribute to a better present and future.

Since 1987, a historical archive has been collecting and preserving the company's over 145-year history, now a resource open to all via the portal-museum www.archivistoricobarilla.com.

For further info, visit: www.barillagroup.com; Twitter: [@barillagroup](https://twitter.com/barillagroup); LinkedIn: [Barilla Group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/barilla-group); Instagram: [@barillapeople](https://www.instagram.com/barillapeople)

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