

Psychological Dimensions of Eating Practices in The Context of Cancer and Climate Change

Sidra Abid Syed*

Biomedical Engineering Department, Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology, Karachi, Pakistan.

*E-mail: sidra.gha@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Eating practices profoundly affect not only physical health outcomes but also psychological well-being, self-perception, and emotional resilience. In recent years, two major global phenomena cancer and climate change have been shaping how individuals relate to food, health, and sustainability. Cancer remains one of the most emotionally taxing diagnoses, altering people's relationship with nutrition due to the physical effects of treatment and the psychological pressure to "eat right" for recovery or prevention. On the other hand, awareness of climate change has intensified the social and moral dimension of eating, transforming diet from a purely personal choice into an ethical and environmental statement. These intertwined factors reveal that food-related behaviours are deeply psychological, driven not only by biological needs but also by emotional regulation, fear management, and identity expression.

Objectives:

1. Investigate how dietary behaviour influences emotional regulation, anxiety, depression, and coping among cancer patients and survivors.
2. Explore how climate-related awareness shapes individual perception of food as a moral and ecological act, potentially leading to both empowerment and distress.
3. Identify the psychological mechanisms linking food choices to self-control, body image, and environmental responsibility.
4. Suggest strategies for healthcare and mental health professionals to develop supportive interventions promoting balanced eating behaviour, improved mood, and sustainable dietary practices.

Methodology: This paper employs a multidisciplinary review and qualitative synthesis of current literature across psychology, nutrition, and environmental studies. Sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals published between 2018 and 2025. The research design is descriptive and analytical, focusing on thematic content analysis of studies that examine emotional and cognitive responses to dietary behaviour among cancer patients and climate-conscious individuals. Statistical tools, such as frequency counts and thematic coding frameworks, were used to identify recurrent psychological patterns, including food-related anxiety, guilt, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, cross-sectional survey data from secondary sources were analysed to contextualize behavioural tendencies observed in different populations affected by cancer or motivated by environmental concerns.

Key Findings: Findings reveal that eating habits serve both as a coping mechanism and as a source of psychological vulnerability. Among cancer patients and survivors, food choices often reflect an emotional struggle between fear of recurrence, bodily control, and hope for recovery. Restrictive or "anti-cancer" diets may provide a sense of empowerment but can also induce stress, guilt, and obsessive behaviours when patients fail to meet self-imposed expectations. Meanwhile, individuals adopting climate-friendly diets such as plant-based or reduced-meat eating often report heightened moral satisfaction and reduced anxiety about climate change progression. However, the same awareness can generate eco-anxiety, cognitive dissonance, and emotional fatigue, especially when individuals perceive their dietary actions as insufficient to make a meaningful difference. Both groups those affected by cancer and those motivated by environmental concern,

exhibit similar patterns of psychological tension between personal control and global uncertainty. The findings highlight the complex emotional landscape that surrounds food in times of crisis, showing that eating is not only a health practice but a psychological act of meaning-making.

Conclusion: The study concludes that eating practices are a psychological nexus linking health, identity, and global consciousness. Food choices are tied to self-perception, control, and moral reasoning, becoming deeply symbolic in the face of illness and environmental threat. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for designing interventions that support mental well-being and encourage sustainable, adaptive eating behaviours. Health professionals, counsellors, and policymakers must approach nutrition not only from a biomedical or ecological perspective but also through the lens of psychological resilience. Future research should focus on developing integrated frameworks that combine mental health support with nutritional and environmental education, enabling individuals to manage both cancer-related stress and climate-induced anxiety through more balanced and compassionate relationships with food.

Keywords: Eating Behavior, Cancer Psychology, Climate Change, Sustainability, Emotional Well-Being.

REFERENCES

1. Wullenkord, Marleen, and Gerhard Reese. "Avoidance, Hopelessness, and Action: Understanding Psychological Responses to Climate Change." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 42, 2021, pp. 54–59.
2. Sato, Ryo, *et al.* "Correlation between Cancer Cachexia and Psychosocial Impact, Nutrition Impact Symptoms, and Geriatric Assessment in Older Patients with Advanced Lung Cancer." *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 2025, PMC, doi:10.1007/s00520-024-08976-3.
3. Arabmoorchegani, Mohammad, *et al.* "Integrative Cancer Care: Leveraging Nutrition and Positive Psychology for Optimal Outcomes." *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Care*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2025, pp. 45–56.
4. Da Prat, Valentina, *et al.* "Anticancer Restrictive Diets and the Risk of Psychological Distress." *Cancer Medicine*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2024, pp. 5678–5690.
5. Keshtkar, Neda, *et al.* "The Effect of Individual Nutrition Counseling on the Quality of Life and Psychological Status of Cancer Patients." *Scientific Reports*, 2025, article no. 18177