

## **COOKING THERAPY TOOL FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A NEW METHOD TO FIND YOURSELF**

**Sebastiana Roccaro**

*Associazione APS EDU.CO.BENE. ETS, Siracusa (Italy)*

### **Abstract**

The objective of Cooking Therapy protocol is to build a tool within the reach of children, adolescents, adults and the elderly who could rediscover well-being in the kitchen of their home. Combined with specific psychological techniques, it can be used by psychologists as a complementary therapy. Following studies and research in various fields of psychology combined with the skills acquired as a psychologist and psychotherapist of relational systemic training; sharing the theoretical assumptions and some techniques of Mindfulness in 2017 the Cooking Therapy protocol is developed. The protocol is based on the premise "I'm sick so I cook", which has now become "I cook to feel good". Through 7 main stages of preparation: fastening the apron, reading the recipe, weighing the ingredients, kneading, seasoning, decorating, sharing, Cooking Therapy acts on four dimensions of the person: physical, cognitive, social, intra-personal. Each session sees the participation of a small group, lasts 90 minutes and occurs twice a week. It sees the preparation of 5 basic recipes that will be modified to achieve specific objectives. The pandemic and the lockdown have changed the way of conducting and participating from face-to-face to online and later mixed, allowing the protocol to be known and used throughout Italy and other countries. From the growing demand, from the constant participation especially of children, from the attention paid by professionals to the protocol and training, we can deduce a sufficient interest useful to continue using the tool and to build protocols useful for the management of specific discomforts or disturbances.

**Keywords:** *Wellness, psychology, cooking therapy, mindfulness, health.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Cooking Therapy by Dr. Roccaro is an innovative project that was born in September 2017 in Syracuse after studies and research in the sector. The idea developed over the years was to be able to use an ancient and daily act, such as cooking, as a tool to regain psycho-physical well-being, thus ensuring that preparing food, in addition to being a daily action, took on a therapeutic value. Build a tool within everyone's reach that can become an intervention strategy for the recovery of specific discomforts or simply to pay attention to oneself in a path of "awareness".

Cooking Therapy is a new discipline but one that uses something that is very ancient, cooking and preparing for oneself and for others, as a tool for care and well-being. Cooking becomes not just a daily act, but is equivalent to taking care of the mind, body and soul. It means recalling one's traditions and family ties through smells and flavors, it means giving shape to one's creativity, strengthening self-esteem, taking care of one's body.

Cooking with and for others represents a tool for regaining possession of one's daily life after periods of suffering, it turns out to be a way to treat more or less serious disorders related to stress, anxiety and depression in a creative and non-medicalized way.

Cooking allows you to rediscover yourself and relate to others, recovering confidence and instinct for sociability.

### **2. Theoretical assumption**

Cooking Therapy, as it was born, is based on a founding principle, namely "I feel bad, therefore I cook", overturning the principle "I feel bad therefore I eat" on which Comfort food and eating disorders are based.

“I’m sick so I cook” means recovering one’s mental well-being through the preparation of a dish. Cooking means: increasing self-esteem, refining manual skills, expressing creativity, strengthening cognitive skills, rediscovering conviviality, activating old and new communication processes, managing anxieties and fears, evoking memories, rediscovering family ties.

From the direct observation of the experience of the Cooking Therapy laboratories according to the Dr. Roccaro protocol, the hypothesis of revising the principle “I feel bad therefore I cook” into “I cook to feel good” was born. This principle would allow us to integrate the concept of cooking as a therapeutic tool related to illness and give strength to the importance for human beings of taking care of their own psycho-physical well-being even in a condition of non-illness. Cooking would also be a tool for primary prevention and a healthy lifestyle, as is eating healthy or practicing physical activity.

Cooking Therapy acts therapeutically on the 4 dimensions of man: physical dimension, cognitive dimension, social dimension, intra-personal dimension.

**Physical dimension:** when cooking, shoulders, hands, wrists, elbows and neck are involved in finding good overall balance, energy and muscular strength.

**Cognitive dimension:** All senses are activated, time management skills improve, versatility, memory and concentration are refined.

**Social dimension:** creating special foods for friends or family promotes the sharing of sensory experiences and facilitates contact and communication.

**Intra-Personal Dimension:** the creation of a dish is the expression of one’s creativity.

### 3. Methods

A facilitator leads a small group of max 5-6 people, homogeneous with respect to the variable considered, for example age, life cycle, discomfort. Each session has an average duration of 90 minutes and usually occurs fortnightly.

All laboratories are divided into at least 5 of the 7 processing phases identified and studied and which constitute the true essence of the Cooking Therapy protocol by Dr. Roccaro. The phases are:

**1) Wearing the apron:** this is the phase that marks the beginning, if not the entire time frame, of the session. The action of wearing the apron was born as a ritual, the apron represents the symbolic object. This can all be translated into “I’m starting to take care of myself”. It allows you to become aware of your existence and your need for well-being.

**2) Read the recipe:** this is the moment in which concentration and cognitive functions are activated.

**3) Weighing the ingredients:** weighing implies the activation of concentration and memory, it gives the possibility of acting on mathematical calculation activities by activating the various cognitive functions.

**4) Kneading:** when we cook and mainly when we knead our hands, wrists, arms, shoulders move. Through coordinated muscular movement, control of the energy and force exerted while kneading, you acquire awareness of both the various parts of the body involved in the action and of your own breathing. Kneading allows you to release both physical and emotional tensions, make contact with emotions such as anger and sadness and then process them or transform them into so-called positive emotions.

**5) Seasoning:** choosing between the various condiments or fillings is used metaphorically to gain awareness and decide, facing fears and insecurities if necessary

**6) Decorate:** decorating allows you to leave room for imagination and creativity and to bring out the child in each of us. In this phase, through metaphors and visualizations it is possible to access one’s own relational experiences and family ties.

**7) Sharing:** it is the last phase; sharing begins the process of socialization in the group and will develop along a continuum that leads to sharing within the family.

### 4. Conclusions

To date, numerous workshops have been conducted with children, adolescents and adults; workshops for the management of anxiety and stress, for health emergencies during the pandemic, workshops with people with cancer and in the management of burnout of healthcare workers.

From the growing demand, from the constant participation especially of children, from the attention paid by professionals to the protocol and training, we can deduce sufficient interest to continue using the tool and building protocols useful for managing specific discomforts or disorders. Scientific study and experimentation continues.

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