

# A Hands On Approach to Family, Food and *Fun*

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The Modern Psychology of Family Meals



## The Research Background

Research has shown that up to one-third of families seldom eat together. However, research has also shown a clear link between eating together and significant health and social benefits for children, adolescents and older people, including improvements in family nutrition, social adjustment, and even childhood academic performance. For more details on this research, please visit the Better Together website at [www.bettertogetherbc.ca](http://www.bettertogetherbc.ca).

With this in mind, BC Dairy Foundation, in partnership with the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, initiated a project to encourage family meals in the province of British Columbia. The first phase in this project involved undertaking research to properly understand and explain family meal behaviour in BC. The second phase of this project involves developing messages and initiatives to encourage and support families to eat meals together.

We are excited to share the groundbreaking insights we have gained from our research into family meal behaviour.

## The Research Methodology

In December 2008, BC Dairy Foundation commenced research to explore the psychological drivers of eating behaviour in families with children (or grandchildren) between the ages of 5 and 15.

Completed in February 2009, this study used Morphological Research in order to build a psychological model of family meal behaviour. The research involved undertaking in-depth interviews and focus groups with 44 participants across British Columbia. Participants in this research were selected to reflect a broad range of variables including geography, gender, age, ethnicity, household income, religion, marital status and eating attitudes.

Assuming these participants ate meals for five years of their life, our research had access to over 200,000 meal memories (44 participants x 3 meals a day x 365 days in a year x 5 years = 240,900 meals).

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# About Morphological Research

Morphological Psychology was developed by Professor Wilhelm Salber, from the University of Cologne in Germany. The world's most modern complete psychological theory, Morphological Psychology is based on three psychological tensions that drive everyday human behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

Morphological Research is the practical application of Morphological Psychology, a research system designed to build models of market and consumer motivation.<sup>2</sup> Unlike traditional research techniques that often focus on surface ideas and rational responses, Morphological Research is designed to systematically explore underlying, often unconscious human motivations (which cognitive scientists believe constitute up to 95% of all human thought).<sup>3</sup>

Some key differences between Morphological Research and other traditional research techniques include:

- The use of in-depth interviews lasting between 90 and 120 minutes, designed to allow for a deeper, more intensive exploration of a research topic
- The use of semi-structured learning discussion guides, designed to allow for a free flow of ideas and thoughts as connected by participants (instead of focusing on pre-formulated questions assumed relevant for a study)
- The use of rich descriptions and other non-verbal forms of communication, as a means to understand deeper motivations
- The commencement of analysis during interviews, with the interviewer acquiring, classifying and probing participant responses according to the morphological research framework
- The further analysis of all interviews individually and collectively in order to properly diagnose and describe the impact and effect of morphological tensions in the field of study

## References (1):

Salber, W. (1989). *Der Alltag ist nicht grau*. Bonn: Bouvier.

Salber, W. (2001). The Everyday Cure: Everyday Life and Therapy. In W. Schirmacher, & S. Nebelung (Eds), *German essays on psychology* (pp. 272-308).

London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Salber, W. (2007). *Wirkungseinheiten*. 3rd ed. Bonn: Bouveir.

## References (2):

Frank, D., Riedl, P. (2004). Theoretical Foundations of Contemporary Qualitative Market Research. Forum: *Qualitative Social Research*, 5(2), Art. 30.

Ziems, D. (2004). The Morphological Approach for Unconscious Consumer Motivation Research. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 44, pp. 210-215.

## References (3):

Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied Mind and Its Challenges to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books.

Zaltman, G. (2003). *How customers think: essential insights into the mind of the market*, Boston: Harvard Business Press.

The use of Morphological Research has allowed us to go beyond facts and figures and, as a result, has given us the means to understand the emotions and feelings behind family meals.



# Understanding the *Family Meal*

In order to properly understand and encourage family meals, there is a need to move beyond facts and figures and explore the feelings and emotions of families. This is not to downplay the value of facts, or to disregard the volume of pre-existing research on this topic. These existing facts have built an impressive foundation of knowledge and have clearly established the link between eating meals together and a multitude of significant health, mental and social benefits.

However, what the facts have missed and often failed to explain are the feelings and emotions that underlie actions and drive family behaviour. *Why do families and friends gather together at barbecues? How does it feel to bake with a grandparent? What happens when you have children who are picky eaters?* These questions are at the heart of family meals and hold the key to understanding and encouraging families to eat together, because meals are much more than just food and function, facts and figures. Meals are about culture and tradition. Meals are about love and harmony. Meals are about friendship and fun. And most importantly, meals are about family.

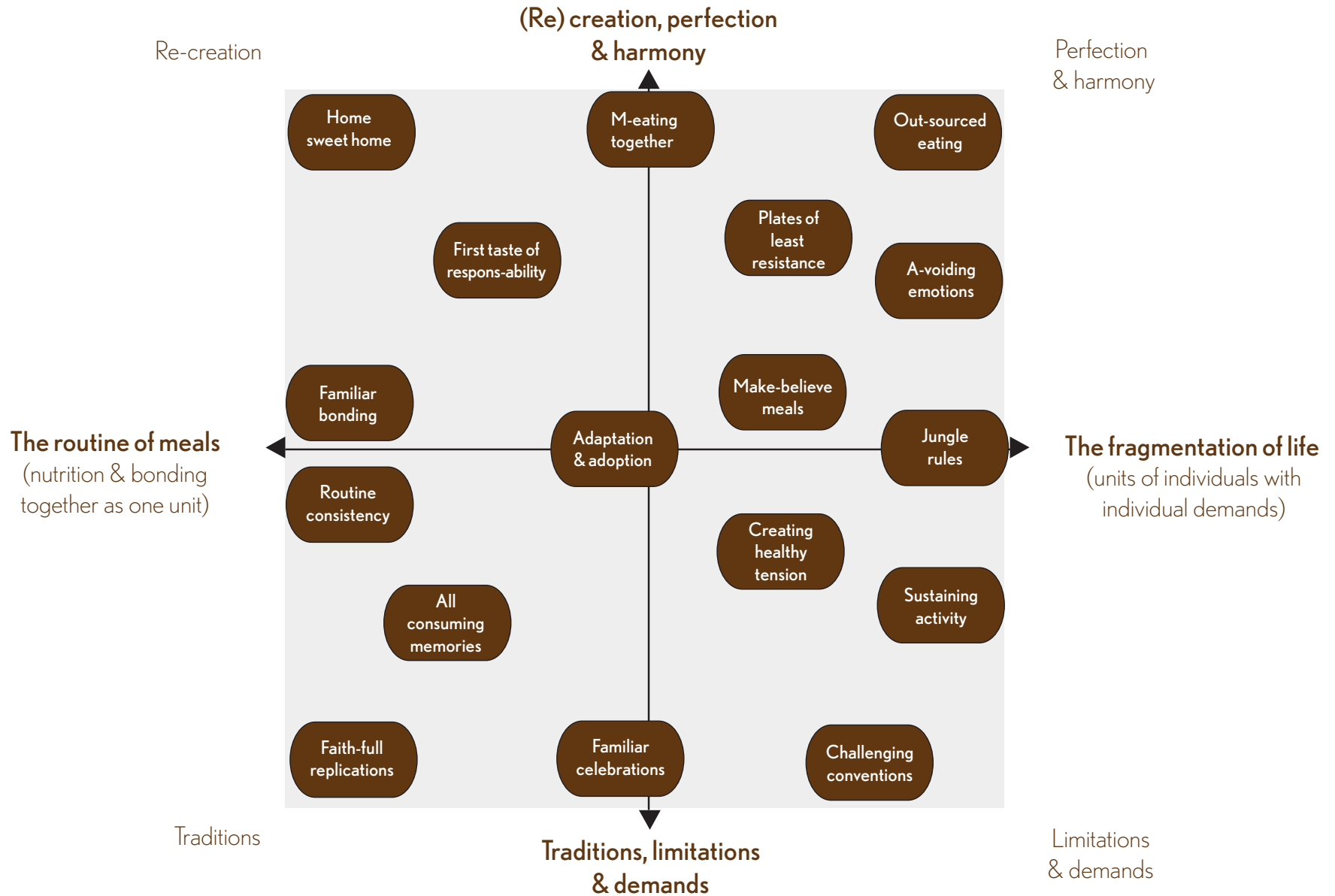
The use of Morphological Research has given us the means to understand the emotions and feelings behind family meals. Using Morphological Research, we have managed to uncover three psychological tensions that explain the underlying (often unconscious) motivations behind family meals. In addition, our research uncovered seventeen meal modes (or ways of eating) that help families manage, or move through, their psychological tensions.

Together, these research results have been used to develop North America's first ever **Family Meal Model**. But more importantly, these research results will help pave the way for further family meal policy and practice development.

For more information about the meal modes, please visit the Better Together website at [www.bettertogetherbc.ca](http://www.bettertogetherbc.ca).



# Family Meal Model



# Key Insights

Family, food and feelings are bound together through one important action, the family meal.

Below the surface of family meals lies a boiling pot of emotions. The process of discussing these meals lifted the lid off this pot and resulted in an incredible mixture of tears, joy, anger and guilt. Although no report can do justice to the depths of these emotions, the following insights attempt to summarize the findings from this research.



## Insight 1: The Link Between Meals and Emotions

Exploring the role of meals in everyday life.



## Insight 2: The Shifting Family Dynamic

How shifts in family units are leading to shifts in family meals.



## Insight 3: Reconnecting Food and Fun

The importance of reconnecting food and fun.



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# The Link Between Meals and *Emotions*

From a very young age, meals and emotions are linked together in our minds and our lives. In fact, for most people their first meals bring together nutrition and emotion as one inseparable process.

Through our research, we have found that many family meals can act as a re-creation of this first meal, bringing family members together and providing them with an opportunity to share meals and emotions:

“The first thing when you go home is you have a home cooked meal. You feel great, you have a hug and you feel great. It naturally equates to love...It’s not often you equate food with hate.” - Father

For example, meals are often used as a way to pass on the traditions of culture and religion through symbolic objects and actions:

“That’s an old traditional Chinese thing...When you’re served the meal, you’re told how much attention is in it. It was a warm soup with warm feelings in it. Love was in it.” - Mother

Meals can also provide a way to keep intergenerational memories alive:

“Food is a link to the people we care about. Growing up we always got this one sort of cookie from our grandmother. That cookie helps us remember her, it reminds us of those times.” - Mother

And meals can help provide a sense of safety and nurturing within family environments:

“My grandparents never hurt me, she [grandmother] taught me to bake...When I was growing up, every couple of months I was living in a new family member’s place. But each time I came back to her home she’d bake with me...She made me feel like I was wanted. They were the only ones who made me feel like I was wanted.” - Mother

All of these meal examples illustrate the important link that exists between meals and emotions. They also highlight the fundamental importance of encouraging and supporting family meals in British Columbia. Beyond their functional purpose, or nutritional value, our research has shown that family meals play a pivotal role in maintaining culture, memories, religion, bonds and love.

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- Mother



## The Shifting Family Dynamic

Change is a part of life and a continuous part of any family. However, in recent times, families in British Columbia have experienced some rapid changes in eating patterns and family dynamics.

Through our research, we have found some fragmentation of bonded family units into units of individuals with individual demands. As a result, family meals are often being de-prioritized in favour of individual entertainment, sporting, work and educational demands.

This shift is placing enormous pressure on families, who are often struggling to maintain harmony amongst their units of individuals:

“My life is absolutely a fiasco; you don’t know what to do first. Work, play with your children, provide everything perfectly like a super mom. And these days people are judging [you] so much.” - Mother

This shift is also reflected in the eating patterns of many families, with meals becoming subservient to individual demands:

“I’m not a cook, so I need food that is fast and immediate...My son loves chicken cordon bleu, but there’s no way you’d catch me making it!...It takes so much time out of my schedule and then it’s gone in 10 minutes. If I spend time on something I want it to last.” - Mother

In response to this shift, a range of new meal modes are emerging, the majority of which are not associated with eating together. For example, in an attempt to maintain harmony, many households are producing *à la carte* meals for family members:

“When you’re cooking for other people, you have to cook for them the way they want it. It becomes a chore. If you give them something they don’t like, they won’t eat it. It’s hard to please everyone, so I end up cooking different food for everyone.” - Mother

Additionally, many families are choosing to avoid meals altogether, instead preferring to snack, or eat fast, pre-prepared food:

“My son is a very picky eater; if it’s something new he complains. Being a mom and dealing with all his emotional issues, I don’t want to deal with meal issues. I’d just rather cut up snacks, have him munch them, and play computer games.” - Mother

These examples illustrate a shift that has been occurring in family eating behaviour and dynamics. They also highlight the tension, pressure, and guilt that this shift is causing many parents. Confronted by unrealistic demands, limited skills, and restricted time, our research has built our understanding of why many families eat fewer meals together.

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## Reconnecting Food and Fun

Family meals may generate emotion, but they also require time and effort. When making a meal starts to feel like a chore, a distraction from pleasure or quality time, food and fun can often become disconnected.

Through our research, we have uncovered an important link between families re-creating in the kitchen and their likelihood of eating meals together. Re-creating involves having fun with food (recreation), but also involves preparing meals together (re-creating).

For example, instead of being treated as a showcase for the exclusive use of adults, kitchens need to become family spaces where food and fun can mix together:

“Cheese, sauces, dough; it’s like a fantasy for kids. They get to make their imagination.” - Father

The process of mixing food and fun creates positive meal associations, which in turn encourages families to continue repeating the process:

“My grandmother was more into the pastries, we’d spend hours back then rolling out the dough. That was fun, they were nummies. It’s the smells, when you’re cooking a pie or cookies, the smells of anticipation make it fun.” - Mother

Just like sport, family cooking can also help teach children valuable skills like teamwork and responsibility:

“The child feels independent and it’s kind of a milestone... They think: OK, if I can do this, if I can just mix this, then I can do that too. It’s baby steps towards bigger things.” - Mother

Although most beneficial if started when children are young, it’s never too late for families to start re-connecting food and fun:

“I cook when I have my kids over. It’s something we can do together; they get excited about it and it makes me feel good...It’s a feeling of empowerment...Anytime you learn something new it’s a good feeling.” - Father

These examples illustrate the importance of reconnecting food and fun, and how cooking together is an important precursor to eating together. Our research has shown how being involved in preparation provides a means for children to bond with their meal (overcoming issues like picky eating) and helps encourage families to eat together as a team.

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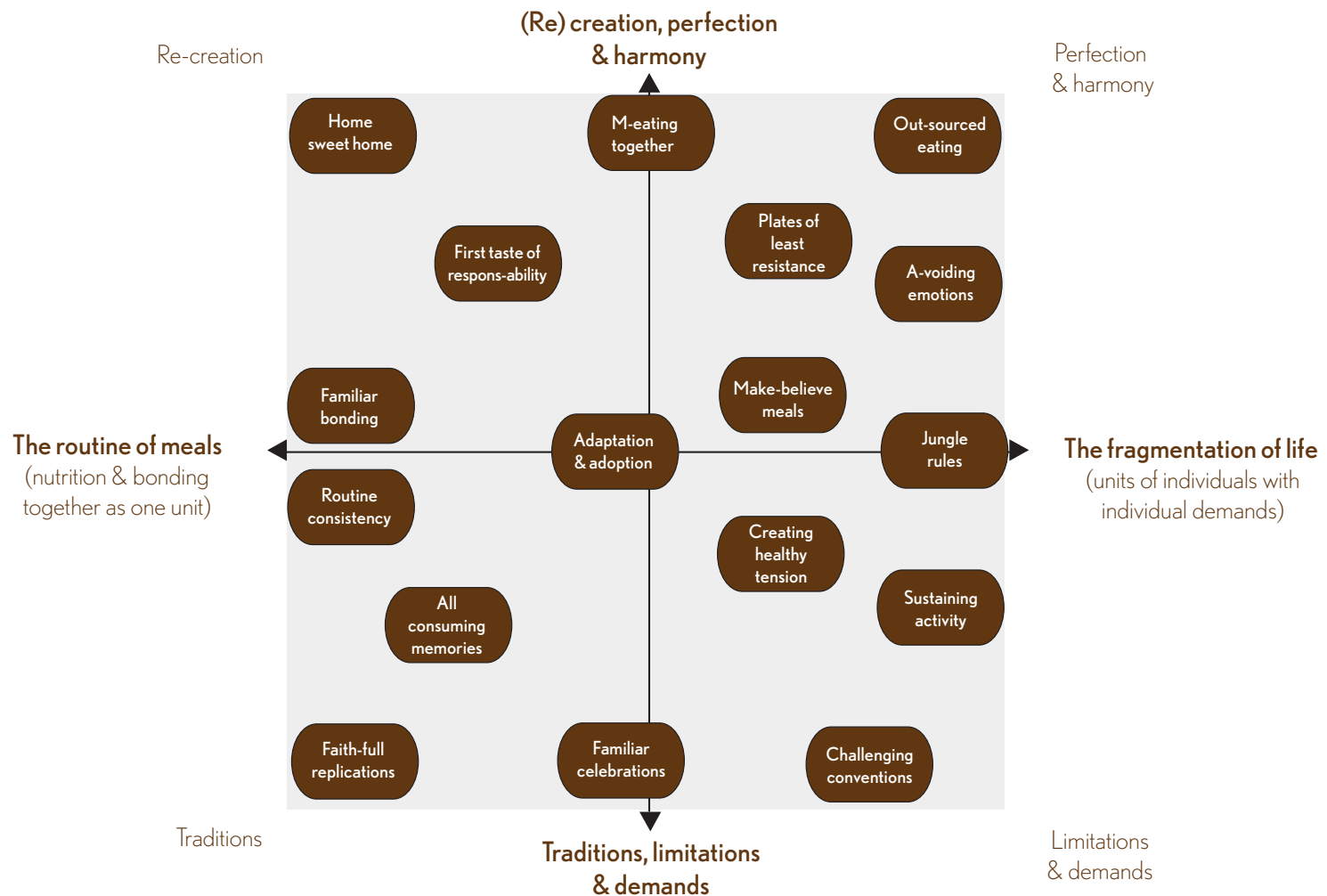


# Understanding the *Family Meal*

From the outset, the objective of this research was to properly understand family meal behaviour in British Columbia. We have achieved this objective by building a **Family Meal Model** that can not only understand, but also explain trends and patterns in family eating.

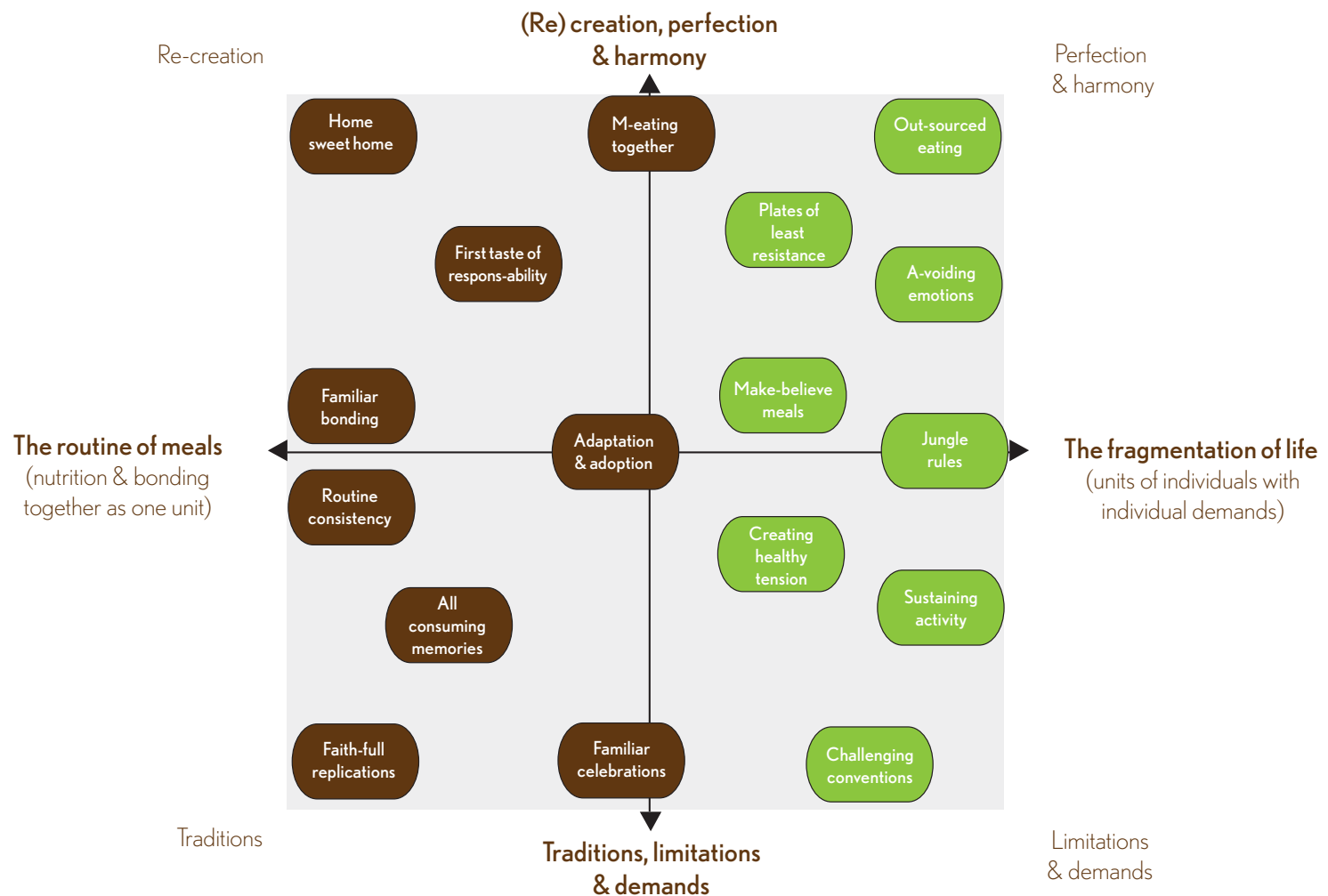
## THE LINK BETWEEN MEALS AND EMOTIONS

The link between meals and emotions involved uncovering links between meals and deeper emotional motivations. These links are explained in our model, and play a role in all three psychological tensions and seventeen meal modes.



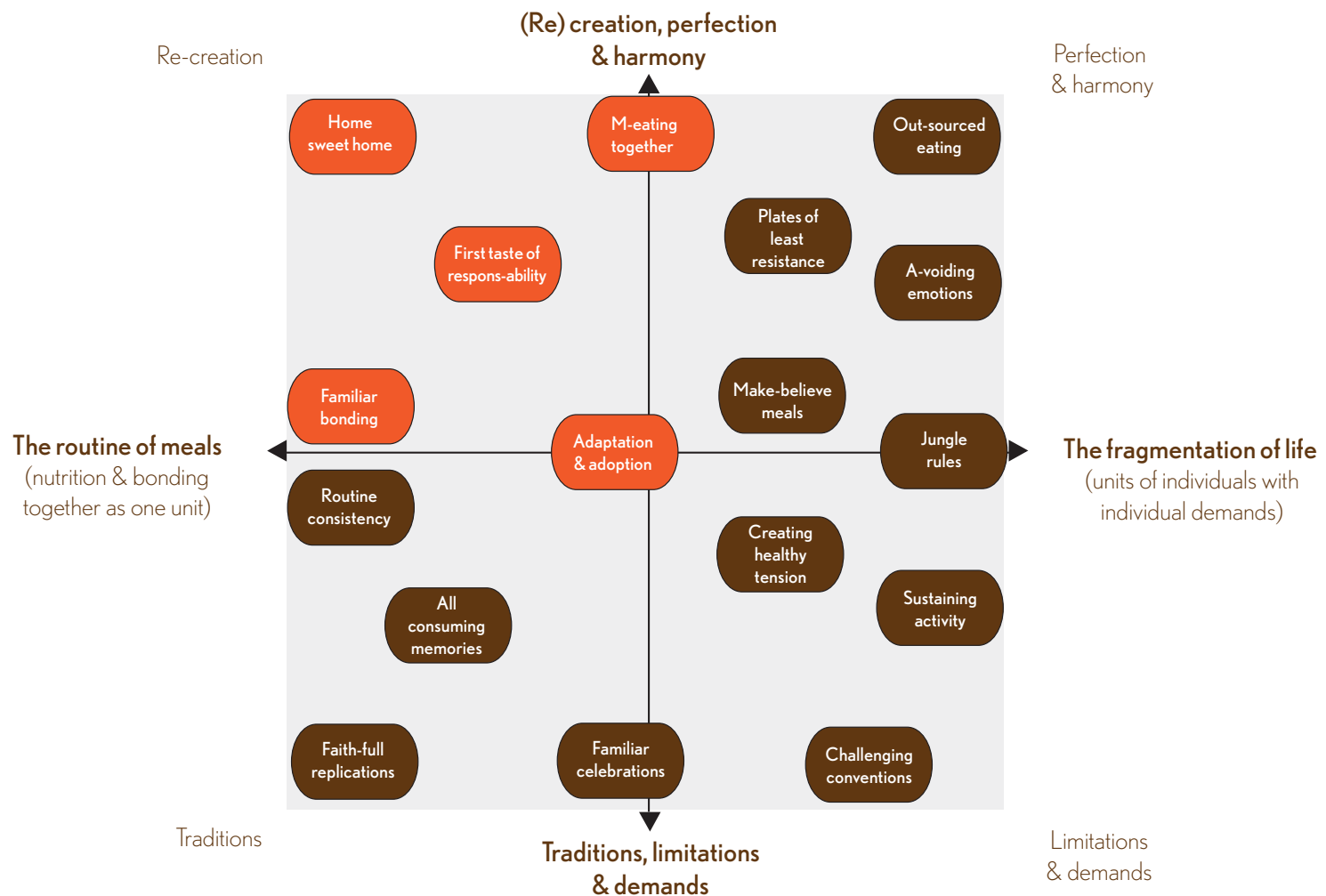
## THE SHIFTING FAMILY DYNAMIC

The shifting family dynamic explained trends in family eating behaviour that helped build our understanding of why many families eat fewer meals together. This shift is reflected in the tensions and meal modes on the right-hand-side of our model.



## RECONNECTING FOOD AND FUN

Reconnecting food and fun uncovered a psychological starting point for family meals, and an important precursor to families eating meals together. This is reflected in the tensions and modes on the top left-hand-side of our model.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING THE FAMILY MEAL

Beyond understanding family meal behaviour, our research has also provided clear direction for initiatives and messages that aim to encourage family meals. This can be summarized in four key recommendations:

1. When it comes to meals, guilt paralyzes parents. Focusing on the words like *eating together* or *family meals* can create guilt and cause parents to shut down, deny and even ignore communication.
2. The process of encouraging family meals starts by encouraging families to re-create together in the kitchen. When food is fun and preparation is pleasurable, meals tend to be shared and eaten together.
3. Children may be better custodians of the family meal than parents. By helping them connect food with fun, we can create powerful internal advocates for the family meal.
4. Finally, changing meal behaviour involves taking 'baby steps towards bigger things.' Making pizza together on a Friday night, or mixing together a 'random salad' may seem like small steps, but those small steps generate positive emotions and memories that can contribute to long-term behaviour change.

Using these four recommendations as a framework for encouraging family meals, our mission will be to:

**“Help families re-create together in the kitchen,  
by reconnecting food and fun.”**





For more information, please visit the Better Together website at [www.bettertogetherbc.ca](http://www.bettertogetherbc.ca) or contact the BC Dairy Foundation directly at 604 294 3775.



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BC Dairy Foundation is a not-for-profit organization funded entirely by the dairy producers of British Columbia. BC Dairy Foundation has been providing innovative nutrition education programs to schools for over 30 years and resources for the community distributed by health professionals.. [www.bcdairyfoundation.ca](http://www.bcdairyfoundation.ca)



This project was made possible by a grant from the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport.