

END THE NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION DIET MANIA

NUTRITION AND EATING HABITS FOR LIVING A WELLNESS LIFESTYLE



Christmas and the New Year celebrations have come and gone, and if you listen to the conversations being had by those back at work, they are dealing with the fact that they ate and drank too much over that period. They are now in the aftermath of making some kind of New Year's resolution about their diet or exercise; one that they are already struggling to keep or, while they may not say it, was so unrealistic they have already resigned themselves to the fact that they won't be able to achieve it. Welcome to the world of being human – another year rolls over, we reflect and look on what did or did not happen last year, and we make all kinds of declarations and statements about how we intend to act this year – commonly referred to as New Year's resolutions – mostly with very little thinking about how we will actually achieve them. Often, at least one of those statements or declarations is about health, namely diet or exercise...

WORDS BY DREW KNOWLES

The last article I wrote was about movement and physical activity, and how to develop long-term habits to have sufficient movement for a healthy brain and body. In this month's article I wanted to describe what it is to have the kind of nutrition and eating habits that are consistent with a wellness lifestyle. And by discussing this, to indirectly help you rid yourself of any guilt or constraint about the pressure you are now putting on yourself to magically transform your eating habits in the next month to make up for all of your sins over the holidays and not keeping to the resolutions you made last year. By all means, you are welcome to be making any changes you see you should as fast as you like, but I warn you not to now launch into action (again) to try and alter things overnight and take on some ridiculous diet or pattern of eating that is designed to make you thin in 10 days. Why? Because this is *not* how you create long-term change, and the habits you need to have healthy nutrition and eating habits require long-term commitment.

Whether you are in the above category or not, the intention of this article is to have you examine and observe how you behave in this area of your lifestyle, and to create a world or paradigm to start to think and act from that in order to promote wellness. I have written this from my own experience, observations, reading, study, research and personal experiments in the area of food and nutrition. Managing your nutrition and eating habits to give you a lifestyle of wellness takes practice and a willingness to bring a certain amount of self-discipline to your life, given the amount of opportunities we are presented to make unhealthy choices and eat foods we know don't nourish our body-mind. Keep in mind that, as I said in a previous article on living a wellness lifestyle, you are not expected to be aiming for living a wellness lifestyle 100 percent of the time which includes your nutrition and eating habits. If you are eating wellness-providing foods 80 percent of the time, I am saying that you will be giving yourself an adequate environment for your body-mind to experience wellness, as well as make room for the foods you like to indulge in that don't necessarily nourish you – but for certain nourish your soul, which is an important part of a wellness lifestyle.

While reading this, I request you keep examining your own nutrition and eating habits from your past, your upbringing, your family habits, your environment, and the people with whom you interact regularly. This will give you the greatest access to see why you have the current nutrition and eating habits you do, and give you the opportunity to take responsibility for however it has been. From there, you can open up the space to create new habits where you see necessary, to continue to enable you to be on a path to living a wellness lifestyle.

THE SOURCE OF YOUR EATING HABITS

Food and beverage are, for most of us, one of the great joys in life. Not only does food nourish us and provide the building blocks and energy source for our body-mind to function, it also

makes us feel good, and is the centre point of a lot of our social interaction in life. I am asserting that for each of us our eating habits are a product of some combination of our environment, the people we regularly interact with, and how we were brought up. To test the validity of this proposition, look at your own life and look at the foods you eat regularly (or used to eat regularly). Look at the ways in which you eat those foods, your reactions and behaviour when food is available in a social setting; how you behave when eating with your family (e.g. at Christmas time); the kinds of foods you eat and why you eat them. It is likely you will see very clearly that this proposition is completely valid for each of us.

If you and I were brought up on a farm or in a community where the only available food sources were fresh and direct from their source, and we lived in that environment, and interacted mostly with people in that environment, then you would only eat that way. The point is that our nutrition and our eating habits are directly correlated to the environment we are in (past and present), the people with whom we regularly interact, and the availability of the food and beverage.

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So given that most of us do not live in such an environment with fresh and direct sources of food, we are confronted with the challenge to try and get the right nutrition from a modern, industrialised environment churning out processed foods for convenience, where on the most part, unless we are well planned and prepared, we are not given many nutritious and healthy options.

CREATING SOME ROOM FOR NEW HABITS

What I want you to keep looking at is what is already in your mind about nutrition and eating habits when you think about it. We have all been subjected to our family eating habits, what others have said works, the latest diet, what we have seen

someone else get results from, our own reading, trial and error, TV ads, and so on. We are filled with so much in the area of diet that it clouds our judgment when it comes to living a wellness lifestyle. So there is little room to create a new view of nutrition and eating habits. As such, you will need to get a lot of that stuff out of the way by acknowledging it for what it is, and being willing to put it aside to see what else might be possible. We all have our own history and story in this area, and I would assert most people have not really taken a lot of time to actually create habits around nutrition and eating. I would also assert that even if you have done some thinking about your nutrition and eating habits and have made whatever changes you may have made (if any), at best it has been a reaction to some conversation that is rooted in looking good, being thin, not getting fat or sick or “trying” to be healthier because you know you *should*.

Mostly from my observation and from the evidence of the thousands of different nutrition and diet books and information being constantly offered — not to mention the ever rising level of obesity — you, like most people, are like a pendulum swinging back and forth: from one thing to the next or good to bad eating patterns. For some of you it has just been an area

you have never dealt with. It is rare to meet people who have demonstrated regular and consistent nutrition and eating habits over a long period of time that promote wellness.

It is important that you take some time and keep examining why you eat the way you do, when you do and what you eat. Unless you have diligently and consciously created your eating habits to be consistent with living a wellness lifestyle, it is likely that your habits are a jumbled up product of your upbringing, family habits, partner's habits, your own findings of what works and what doesn't work and what others have suggested or you have observed worked for them. It takes unlearning and deconstruction of the ethics and habits of your eating and nutrition thereby creating something new. And through practice until it becomes a habit, you will reach a point where you don't have to think about it much.

There will be things you do and ways you behave around food that you have inherited or learned that you are very attached to and will want to hold on to. I am not out to have you get rid of these things. I would simply invite you to keep examining them against what I have to say about nutrition and eating habits for living a wellness lifestyle. It is up to you to choose whether you want to keep or replace those habits.

A NEW PARADIGM FOR NUTRITION AND EATING HABITS

Nutrition and eating habits in living a wellness lifestyle is not about giving you some particular diet or a big list of foods you can and cannot eat. It is about educating yourself in what kinds of nutrition your body-mind needs to give it enough purity and sufficiency to be well. It is about understanding how and when to eat food that gives you wellness and sustained energy levels. I am committed that we simplify this whole business of nutrition and eating habits and you are left with a powerful context and new view to guide your thoughts and actions.

If you can understand that most of what is peddled to us in the marketplace is processed — even if it is proclaimed to be healthy, low-fat, low-sugar, low-cholesterol, magic no-calorie foods and such — then you know that such food is not going to create the environment in your body-mind to be well. While the advertising and labeling will make bold and arbitrary unsubstantiated statements about the “healthiness” of the product, in my view (and of many reputable nutrition experts) if it has more than five ingredients and a bunch of numbers on the ingredient list with things you can't even pronounce, then it is not something we were designed to eat, and should be a “sometime” food. There is nothing wrong with eating some foods that just taste great and make us feel good, even though they may not nourish our body-mind so well — they just need to be strictly “sometime” foods. Food is an important part of our lives and brings comfort, joy, good moods and relaxes us, so we all need our “sometime” foods to indulge in now and then.

The main habit required to live a wellness lifestyle is eating clean, fresh and whole foods at least 80 percent of the time. It really is simple and does not have to be complicated.

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Unprocessed food as close to the original source as possible is best, and the fewer ingredients the better. Regular eating patterns and eating smaller meals 4-5 times a day also help. This is of course completely debatable, and there are many different ways you could choose to structure your eating habits. Regardless, what's certain is that a healthy eating pattern does not have to be difficult to maintain long term. I believe it really is about choosing this way of managing your nutrition and eating habits most of the time and structuring in some other pleasures and indulgences that are, for sure, part of living a wellness lifestyle. But bear in mind that these foods won't provide the right nutrition if they are consumed too frequently.

Do you need to count calories? No, though I personally recommend doing it for a while like a food journal so you can really measure what is going in your mouth and the quality of it, which will have you learn about the amount of energy and nutrients in the foods you eat. I recommend using www.caloriecount.com to measure the amount of energy you are consuming and burning on a daily basis. But I only recommend doing it for a short term as your own social experiment to gain insight into your own eating habits and what you are eating and what is in it.

Nutrition and eating habits for living a wellness lifestyle is about developing awareness of what you are eating, how you feel when you eat the foods you eat, and finding out what works for you. Most importantly, I think, is being conscious of your behavioral patterns in this area of your lifestyle so you can keep evolving and refining your habits to be consistent with living a wellness lifestyle. If you practice this over time, you will begin to find yourself naturally choosing to eat foods that promote wellness, and become

proficient at catching yourself reacting to stress by intervening when resorting to comfort and unhealthy foods.

COMMON BEHAVIOURS TO CHANGE

Overeating is a common habit many of us have, sometimes without even knowing it. This is very obvious when you look at the statistics of almost half of adults being overweight or obese in New Zealand and Australia. We are taught from a very young age due to a very inaccurate food pyramid diagram that we need a lot of starchy (and often processed) foods and that otherwise we won't be healthy or get enough energy. So we get into the habit of consuming a lot of processed starchy foods and get addicted to the feeling that they give us without knowing it. This is a false view evidenced by the fact that our ancestors who did not have these processed carbohydrates in huge supply got sufficient nutrients and energy to go about their active lives.

I can tell you from personal experience that you do not need to eat as much food as you may think to give you high energy levels and sufficient nourishment. If you find yourself needing to have bread, rice or other forms of carbohydrates to “fill you up”, I invite you to experiment with reducing these, and replacing them with whole foods (vegetables, fruits, unprocessed grains).

You may feel hungry at first, but I assure you it is more like your body having withdrawals from your carbohydrate habit rather than you actually being hungry. I exercise and am physically active at a moderate to high intensity for 60 to 90 minutes most days (sometimes more with extra walking), and my diet consists of vegetables, meats, eggs, fruits, nuts and about once a week some more high carbohydrate foods like chickpeas (hummus), sweet potato and occasionally whole grains. I seldom eat bread, rice, pasta or any other processed carbohydrates and I have high amounts of consistent energy every day. I am not against you eating carbohydrates as they are needed and critical for your brain and body to have the sugars it needs for energy to function – the whole “low carb” or “no carb” diets is in my view (as well as many nutritional and wellness experts) a fad and unsubstantiated as to the effectiveness of “cutting out” carbs. A lot of vegetables are full of carbohydrates! What contributes to obesity is not carbs *per se* – it is the amount of carbohydrates we are led to believe we need to eat, and especially the more processed forms of them as well as the large portions we think we need to have (or get served and feel compelled to eat).

A simple way for you to start giving yourself consistent and high energy levels (especially if you are working hard and have stress to manage) is to eat smaller portions at your main meals and have some smaller meals throughout the day, and don't just keep eating until you “feel full”, unless it is one of your “sometime” indulgences and you are choosing to overeat for the pure pleasure of it. In essence, eat smaller meals more frequently throughout the day. I believe it is a myth that you need to have a “huge” breakfast to start the day so you have energy or to have large lunch or dinner. When I work with people and we examine this notion of having to have big meals at breakfast or lunch, it is usually something they inherited and have not stopped to think that they do not have to eat this way. Also, for some people they don't like to eat breakfast and have never eaten breakfast. If this works for you and you don't find yourself lacking in energy, don't feel you should have to bow down to the common narratives in the marketplace that say you *must* have breakfast. Not having breakfast in some areas of current research is the equivalent of an intermittent fast (if you have not eaten since the night before) and can potentially have health benefits for you. So do your research and homework and experiment and find what works for you, your body type, your personality, and the way that you like to manage yourself to have sufficient nutrition to function at your best. I have had many discussions and arguments with dieticians and nutritionists about so many differing views and research results that I now firmly believe that there are some fundamentals that we should all follow with regards to the nutrition we need for optimal function and wellness – namely what I have said about quality of food and as little processing as possible, but the rest is up to you using your common sense and not taking what others say around you as gospel, and what you should do just because it worked for them.

If you have read my previous articles you will have a good understanding of the human stress response, as I now want to address reactionary eating habits. One of the things that happens to us when our fight or flight response is triggered

is that stress hormones get released and we stop thinking rationally, and our emotional, irrational and instinctive parts of our brain take over. This can really impact our commitment to living a wellness lifestyle as our brain will override all logical behaviour and have us go for foods that appear to deal with how we are feeling. These are almost always cravings for sweet and fatty foods in response to the body telling us we need those foods for energy in the stress response cycle. Our ancestors 100,000 years ago only had access to whole, complex and healthy carbs and fats to replace their energy. Because of the easy supply of processed sweet and fatty foods around us, we will find our self reacting to the stress response by indulging in these “sometime” foods in amounts that are not in line with our commitment to living a wellness lifestyle.

This is why it is critical you keep studying and learning about how the stress response affects your physiology, and to recognise the indicators and signs of being stressed so you know when to stop and deal with reducing your stress levels as well as avoid sweet and fatty processed foods when you have stressors in your environment or lifestyle that have you out of balance. This is what I have talked about in recent articles when you misinterpret your physiology and your brain tells you,

through some narrative or interpretation in language, that “you need to eat or drink XXXXX because XXXXX happened.” For example, because something is stressful at work or someone upsets you, that means you need to have a drink tonight, or eat some chips tonight to calm down or get it off your mind – no, it does not mean that. And you would have made up that narrative or story somewhere in the past to deal with a stressor and a stressful event, but that does not need to be how you react to that stressor every time.

In conclusion, and especially for most of us in the working world who are stressed on a daily basis, you have the power to reprogramme yourself such that

you stop in those moments of stress. You have the power to choose the kind of nutrition that is going to work for your body-mind and have you living a lifestyle of wellness. It takes practice and developing habits over long periods of time. You are simply deluding yourself and being swept up in the common marketplace fads and trends if you think that doing diet after diet and having it be all about weight or staying thin is going to give you long-term health and well-being. Lifestyle by definition means “typical way of life”, so to have inconsistent and irregular eating habits and ways that you manage your diet is most certainly not typical and not a “wellness lifestyle”. A wellness lifestyle means that wellness is the typical way of life, not just when you are responding to some threat about your weight, image or health crisis. If you are willing to take on living a wellness lifestyle as a life-long endeavor that is going to be better at times and get out of balance at other times, depending on what life throws at you, just keep chipping away at building consistency and practice good habits more than bad ones, then you will find it easier and easier to maintain over time – and be happier for it! 

Drew Knowles is a Mind Coach who trains and coaches people to manage their mind and deal with stress to improve their performance, productivity and overall state of mind.

