

Sick Enough to Stick to the Diet

By Armi Sevilla Rowe

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Would you go on a diet that guaranteed you would stick to it, no matter the cost and inconvenience it would subject you to? Find a husband who convinces you one year that he has wheat and gluten sensitivity and then, a couple of years later, he identifies all raw vegetables as the culprit to his chronic ulcerative colitis. Or maybe an elimination diet and a detailed food journal shows that beans need to be excluded from the chili or cornbread and popcorn is fine but corn-on-the-cob is definitely off limits. You see, there's a difference between soluble and insoluble fiber. The skins of beans and apples and husks on corn can aggravate the condition.

If that isn't enough, adopt a young boy who doesn't take in enough fiber, has a strong aversion to green food and drinks way too much milk so he has the opposite condition. He pushes like he's giving birth all the time so you'll have to keep him away from the bagels, grilled cheese, French toast and macaroni & cheese. Treat those like candy instead.

All my life I felt sorry for people who forced themselves to diet. I prided myself on the fact that I could always eat anything I wanted in moderation. To me, a salad could never be a meal. In fact, my husband always warned me. "Don't eat salad. Look

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around you. Do you want to end up looking like them?" And sure enough, more often than not, it was the heavier people on the steady leafy diet.

I grew up on a wonderful all-American diet. Bacon, eggs, pancakes, meat and potato stews. The only difference was rice. That was my bread. Fried chicken, fried fish; even the vegetables were batter dipped and deep fried sometimes. No matter how poorly I knew I was eating, it never showed up on my thighs, hips or belly. I thought I was invincible.

Maybe it was all the caffeine and late-night Chinese food or three-night pizza dinner marathons I used to have in my 20s. I was busy proving myself to the demanding, fast-paced business world. Food was an afterthought. I heard my stomach growl only after 8 p.m. as I took car service home because it was too scary for a young, single female to be roaming the underworld of New York.

My body ran on pure adrenaline all day long. Those years brought me to the emergency room a few times after gastro-intestinally induced bouts of heart palpitations, fainting spells, anginal-like chest pressure and hyperventilation.

Once I got married, my relationship with food changed. It was no longer just me I was going to abuse if I continued on the same path. So I discovered the joys of steaming and all-day-simmering in the crock pot. Thanks to my husband, my eyes were opened to a whole world of flavors and seasonings that were not previously in my food vocabulary: curry, cumin, honey, fresh basil, chili and paprika. Yes, there was more to life than soy sauce, garlic, salt and pepper.

And I learned to make my own Chinese dishes at home in the wok with 50 percent less soy sauce (and therefore sodium), 100 percent less MSG and 75 percent less oil. At this point, I realized, it could be done. You can reasonably eat whatever you want so long as you are super-conscious about the makeup of what you are ingesting.

For example, salads can be just as lethal as fried foods. We must watch out for salad dressings containing oils as the first ingredient, which can be up to one-fifth fat.

I have joined the millions of Americans who are desperately trying to eat low fat diets because, all of a sudden, I must. My doctor tells me I have biliary sludge, a precursor to gall stones.

No one talked to me about trying a strict low fat diet or managing my stress levels better. But I realized that if I did this to myself after years of cholesterol abuse and perpetual motion, I could get myself out of it too. If I learned to be nicer to myself, learn to meditate, take time to relax and eat a low fat, high fiber diet, I had a chance at feeling better.

But wait, I haven't mentioned the fourth member of my family who has serious food issues. I did not understand the ramifications of having a child with food allergies until it hit home. After my daughter suffered a severe allergic reaction to whole milk during her first sip introduction at 12 months old, I immediately had her tested to prevent other potential food sensitivities from worsening over time. Her food allergy test results were positive for five out of

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the top eight common food allergens, including milk, egg, soy, wheat and nuts. As a precaution, the allergist suggested that we also avoid shellfish since it would likely affect her. "So what in the world is there left to feed her?" asked many concerned family members and friends. Good question. Even better question: how was I going to cook for my family without making someone ill?

That, my friends, is how one manages to stick to the strictest of diets. The problem is most people are just not sick enough yet. You must have no choice in the matter, and there must be other loved ones' lives at stake. Believe me, you rise to the occasion. There are food allergy support groups, committed and caring people who have been down a similar road who willingly share their recipes and ingredient substitutions. There are specialty natural food stores who stock up on organic, healthy, allergy-safe foods. There are whole industries dedicated to supporting the needs of people with food issues.

So it turns out that the most food-challenged eat healthiest, so I have avoided becoming a short order cook on most days by cooking according to the lowest common denominator: my allergic daughter's high-fiber, high-protein, low-carb diet. She eats as much meat, fruit and vegetables as she likes. Her carbs basically consist of rice or potato. I have found her allergy-safe versions of rice-based pasta and snacks and have become aware of practically every ingredient that enters her body. It turns out that the entire family eats wisely by following her diet, and so should the rest of America.

This is the opinion of Armi Sevilla Rowe, who lives with her family in Waterford.