

Can Overemphasis on Eating Healthy Become Unhealthy?



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WHAT EATING
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Obesity has become a growing problem in the United States and with this high trend, more children are becoming overweight. The reality is that a high percentage of adults and children have been struggling with weight issues almost their whole entire lives. But the ironic thing is while overweight people are battling with this issue, there are some who are taking serious and extreme measurements against unhealthy food, putting their emotional and physical health at risk. *What factors are contributing to the escalation of obesity? Why are people taking extreme measurements against unhealthy food? Is there a specific solution to these concerns? Could there be any adverse effect if people focused on healthy habits? Can eating healthy really become unhealthy?* Studies have shown that obesity is a serious and alarming concern in America, but recent trends suggest also that trying to eat too healthy (Orthorexia) can be just as prejudicial as eating unhealthy.

Lindsey Getz' View

In this issue, Lindsey Getz, author of the article *Orthorexia: "When eating Healthy becomes an Unhealthy Obsession,"* confirms Dr. Steven Bratman's statement that Orthorexia is a condition that makes a person strive for a perfect diet. While she acknowledges that Orthorexia is not yet a recognized term, she remarks that it can lead to malnutrition and negatively affect many areas of an individual's life, just like anorexia or bulimia. She also adds that the most alarming trends associated with Orthorexia is that overly obsessed parents are leaving unhealthy impressions on their children, causing them to develop unhealthy eating habits. Finally, Getz states that it is important for dietitians to watch for such behavior and to inform their clients about the value of all foods; so they can gain a healthy relationship with food, preventing them from taking healthy eating to dangerous levels.

Chris Woolston's View

Contrary to Getz' opinion, health and medical writer, Chris Woolston makes some interesting observations about the American diet. In his article, *What's wrong with the American Diet?* He states that the problem of the typical American diet is its excessiveness in calories, fat, and sugar. He also notes that even though Americans as a whole are obsessing about weight loss, obesity continues to be a major health concern. Woolston names unbalanced portions and a culture of convenience as two main influences that have led to an obese society. He states that in order to cut with this food chain, we need to take control of our diets in order to become a healthy country. He says we would be much healthier if we opt for a Prudent Diet which included eating more fish, poultry, cruciferous vegetables (cabbage and broccoli), greens, tomatoes, legumes, fresh fruits, and whole grains. He advises people eat from time to time on fatty or calorie-rich foods, such as red meats, eggs, high-fat dairy products, French fries, pizza, mayonnaise, candy, and desserts, but don't make them the main attraction. He finally adds that although this decision is not easy to make, we should take the first step and start little by little without affecting our enjoyment in life.

Supporting my Personal View

While becoming obsessed over eating healthy and centering our life around it is dangerous, not eating healthy is risky as well; it can affect our way of life. Nowadays, it is common to see people turning towards healthy eating. They are opting for organic foods, avoiding sugar, transfat and anything that may be unhealthy for their body. Certainly, we live in a society that make strenuous effort to be better; however, striving for "better" doesn't always mean it is the appropriate choice for us. According to Steven Bratman, MD, author of *Health food Junkies--Orthorexia Nervosa: Overcoming the Obsession with Healthful Food*, the desire to eat healthy food is not, itself a disorder, but the obsession for these foods together with the loss of moderation and balance and the withdrawal for life caused by this food habit can then lead to Orthorexia." **(Donini and others authors, pg. 154)**. Some of the experts who corroborates his statement is Joshua Rosenthal, founder and director of the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York City, who counsels individuals to look beyond diet as a source of health, *"This condition can impede other important elements of life, including relationships, creativity and just feeling part of a community. You can eat all the kale in the world, but if you feel disconnected, how healthy and happy can you be?"***(E Magazine, Tsoukanelis)**

But there are doctors and nutritionists who don't agree with this new term. *"It is a refusal to eat healthy that's a national problem, not the reverse,"* they say **(E Magazine)**. It is true that Orthorexia is not an official medical or psychiatric condition due to a lack of significant data and research, but it should be a wake up call when our healthy habits are taken to an extreme. It can not only affect us physically, but mentally and socially as well. Physically, according to Sondra Kronberg, co-founder and nutritional director of the Eating Disorder Treatment Collaborative Nutrition Counseling Specialists in New York, it can lead us to malnutrition and weight loss because we are eliminating certain nutrients in our daily diet, such as carbohydrates or fats. Socially and emotionally, we may loose the control of the rhythm in our lives (quality life and wellness) **(Chicago Tribune, Haupt)**. Our personal relationships may be affected and we may become socially isolated, putting aside other valuable things in life. According a 2004 study at the University of Rome made to 400 students, 28 students were found to suffer from orthorexia (6.9%); men (41.9%) and those with lower level of education show the highest prevalence in physiological, the socio cultural and the psychological behavior; those who have tendency from Orthorexia shows a strong and uncontrollable desire to eat when feeling nervous (48.2%), depressed (44.4%), lonely (40.7%), happy (37.0%), guilty (25.9%), and excited (22.2%) **(Donini and other authors, pg. 152-154)**. Although this data doesn't show a high percentage of people suffering from Orthorexia, the trend can raise through time. We shouldn't wait until this becomes a major concern.



So, *why are people in our current days taking extreme measurement against unhealthy food? Are the nutritionist experts and the government agencies encouraging this obsession as a result of the high trend obesity in America?* Tom Monte of Amherst, health and nutrition author and teacher in Massachusetts states, that Orthorexia is a very real problem and one of its causes is an imbalance of neurotransmitters, leading to a decrease in joy and an excess of fear. He adds that the more severe this imbalance, the more the obsessed individual contends against the environment, becoming more aware of external impurities. He agrees that to get into this idea comes with the explosion of negative foods **(E Magazine)**. But, *from where we are getting this notion?* According to experts, Orthorexia is becoming more common, due to a rising volume of information about the dangers of obesity and the beneficial quality of a selective, choosy way of

eating (**Chicago Tribune**). Certainly, some websites, health TV programs, health magazines and newspapers often launch new information about the negative effects of eating unhealthy food, sometimes to the point of scaring us. But, adding to these causes, people may also fall under this condition due to their education, culture, susceptibility and lack of self control.

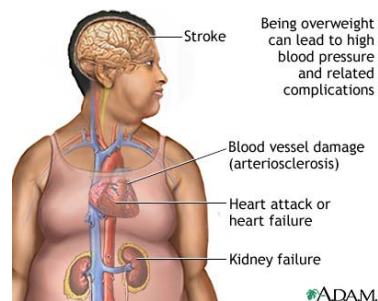
Besides those important points, there is one of Geltz' arguments that caught my attention and which to certain degree, I don't share: The most alarming trends associated with ortorexia is that it is dangerous for children to see their parents obsess about the foods they eat; it can effect negatively one's children and how they look at food. While I disagree with parents that instill extreme healthy eating in their children to the point that the children don't develop a well relationship with certain foods, in my opinion, as a parent, it is our responsibility to teach our kids as they get older about the proper nutrition our body needs in order to be mentally and physically healthy. It may sound difficult to do it in this contemporary world in which people are busy most



of the time by factors of education, work, consumism, technology, etc. But we as parents, shouldn't let our busy life have a repercussion on spending quality time with our children by fixing home meals regularly. In fact, this family time could serve to inform in a very simple way about the nutrients that our body needs, without being extremist to one way or another. It takes effort and learning to break the bad eating habits, but I truly believe that educating ourselves and being a role model for our children is the key to confront obesity as well as

Orthorexia. We should acknowledge that our children are in the process of growing and they need to have a complete and balanced diet in order to develop their physical, intellectual and emotional health. If we do not take the time to educate our children to understand what is healthy without going to the extreme, we would probably regret its consequences later on in our life.

While I agree with Lindsey Getz that there are individuals that could go overboard with their healthy lifestyle, I support Woolston' statement that obesity and its side effects have on individuals are also the predominant concern. In his article, he points out that sixty-six percent of all Americans are considered overweight, and in this trend, over the last decade, children have been the most vulnerable to hit this epidemic proportions due to the content of high calories in the typical American diet (**Taking Sides, pg 83-84**). While I agree with Woolston that the problem lies in the too high content of calories in the typical American Food, calories are not the entire problem to our unhealthy habits. According to Claudia Kalb, senior writer for a Newsweek magazine and author of the article, *Culture of Corpulence*, urbanization, modernization, technology, and the globalization of food markets, which includes the exportation of sodas and burgers, has created a crisis of "epidemic proportions," and it is America who has become the world's preeminent fat-making machine. She adds that this multiple innovation which has been developed to improve our life, in some degree, it is changing our lifestyle for the worse. Fast food is a quick fix for hungry working families. Cars and buses get kids to school faster than sidewalks. She points out that we have grown used to a world order of speed and convenience. High-calorie, low-nutrient foods are everywhere, at gas stations, at airports, and at school, where it matters most for our kids. She alarms us that this epidemic is causing, especially in obese kids, diseases that were once monopolized by adults: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes which is linked to heart attack, stroke, blindness, amputation, and kidney disease (**Newsweek**). Certainly, how can we cope with this



epidemic if we are often demanding for big proportions of food that contain high calories, additives, transfat, salt, etc. Unconsciously, we, by buying this fast food oftentimes, would be paying a high price in exchange of our health in the long run.

Ways to Overcome Orthorexia

As everything that comes with extreme behaviors, first, it is to admit the problem which is especially hard with those who suffer from Orthorexia. As Amanda Mellowspring, a registered dietician in Miami who specializes in eating disorders says, *"They usually don't acknowledge that they develop this condition. To the contrary, one of the things that is tricky about our culture is that orthorexia is socially acceptable and often even heralded as a great statement of self-control and doing the right thing for your health"* (**Health Magazine, Schildhause, pg 1**). Andrea



Watcher, LMFT, a co-founder of Inner Solutions Counseling Services, co-author of *The Don't Diet, Live-It Workbook*, and an expert who evaluates and treats patients with eating disorders as well as patients who has problem with substance abuse, depression, anxiety, grief and relationship struggles, states that the key to overcome extreme eating habits is to gain emotional coping skills. For her, the best way is to be willing to step out of our comfort zone just a little bit. She adds, simply taking one small step outside our safe, self-made comfort zone, can help us develop new skills and prove to ourselves that our safety does not lie in food control, but in self-care and self-soothing (**Huffington Post**).

Certainly, I agree with Andrea, we should acknowledge that health is about balance in our lives and part of that balance is to enjoy what we do individually and socially. If we step out of our comfort zone, we would learn to cope with new things. I believe that members of our families, friends, as well as the therapists are willing to make this process less difficult for us. Everything lies in disposition, self control, and moderation as Rosenthal advises us about being flexible with our healthy habits, *"We should develop a moderate diet, he calls the 90-10 plan, in which healthy whole foods are eaten 90% of the time and the other 10% of the time, people eat whatever they feel like eating"* (**E Magazine**).

Ways to Overcome Obesity

Dealing with obesity takes times and effort for each of us. This is not someone's else problem, it is everyone's problem. Although industries are taking steps to reduce calories in their products, those efforts are still far away of improving our (kids) health nutrition. We should acknowledge that Orthorexia as well as Obesity rolls many kinds of problems from the specific to the general; it not only affects the individual, but the society as a whole. It can destabilize the physical and mental wellbeing of our citizens, the nation's economy (healthcare expenses) as well as its development (our children' development at school). For the reason we, the government, parents, the health communities, industries, and the community in general, should be involved in finding better outcomes to decrease the high trends of obesity. As Kalb said, *"We've battled public-health crises before by collecting data, raising public awareness, and passing tough laws. Everybody must now wear seat belts, kids must be buckled into car seats, and drunken driving is an offense punishable by jail. Winning the war on obesity demands the same kind of big-think solution and the determination to take on and also collaborate with powerful interests. It will require time, money, and both individual and political will to undo or rework what got us here"*(**Newsweek**)

In conclusion, I agree with both authors, Getz and Wooltons. They made valid statements. While an overemphasis on eating healthy can become unhealthy, exceeding our diet

in the long run can affect us for the rest of our lives. I believe a balance portion and self control is the key solution to Obesity and Orthorexia. If we educate ourselves by including different foods from every part of the pyramid in our diet without going overboard, then we would develop a better and healthy life and help reduce the Obesity and Orthorexia trend that this country is facing with. If we do this, the industries would fit our new demands. We would become less dependable on healthcare, and the government would invest to better our children's food programs at schools. Therefore, we would outlast longer and healthy, savour a lively lifetime and improve America's development.

You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control your attitude toward what happens to you, and in that, you will be mastering change rather than allowing it to master you."

Bryan Tracy - - a Canadian motivational speaker and author.



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