

When Healthy Eating Goes Wrong

By: Tracy Williams

We now know all food is not created equal. In recent years, dietitians and other health professionals have focused on the quality of the food we ingest. The simplest message is shopping the perimeter of the store, focusing on whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits and veggies, as well as beans, nuts and legumes. Since processed foods cannot be avoided, purchasing food items with the first five ingredients not being chemically created is common practice.

What happens when these common nutrition recommendations rule someone's life? The extreme focus on "eating right" or "clean eating" is known as orthorexia nervosa (ON). This extreme fixation can be due to misinformation. Blogs, social media postings and commercials, are often written by people who are not educated on health and nutrition and have no scientific evidence.

ON is not a true eating disorder diagnosis, but there are compulsive behaviors towards healthy eating. A fixation on healthy eating may make a person feel superior to others. In our world of instant gratification, society bombards us to find "quick fixes" to a healthy eating plan. These "quick fixes" can include fad diets or an exclusionary "clean" eating plan, which may restrict gluten or dairy products in the name of health. The actual cause of ON is unclear, but decisions are motivated by healthy choices. Restrictive behavior varies from person to person depending on life events. Some people use compulsive behavior as a distraction from negative emotions and fears.

Dietitians have shared a variety of solutions to compulsive behavior of eating healthfully at all costs. According to Maria Rago, national vice president of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, "Foods like Oreos and Cheetos may not make the list of the healthiest foods, but if they bring extra enjoyment into your life they are worth having sometimes." Rago adds, "All or nothing thinking about certain foods is dangerous because it can lead to restrictive eating, binge eating and bulimia. The best idea is to never be ashamed about what you eat, or who you are." Finding balance in eating and in life is filled with complex choices. We should not make it more complicated. "Implementing moderation in flexibility can pave the way to reasonable freedom with food choices, while offering an opportunity to maintain a sense of good health and quality nutrition", explains Ilene Wynn, RD, LDN who works at Yellowbrick Counseling Center, in Evanston, IL.

- Tracy Williams is a graduate of Dominican University's Nutrition and Dietetics program. She enjoys debunking myths in her writing, as well as speaking about all things related to childhood and family nutrition.