

Congratulations to Another Star McDougaller

Star McDougaller: Teresa Rodriguez Learning to Love Myself Again

I love candy, especially Skittles. Sometimes I would even fall asleep with a mouthful of them. In the morning I would look in the mirror and hate the obese person I saw, yet I never connected the two. So, I stopped looking in the mirror, thinking that if I didn't see the problem it wasn't really there. This was in 2005. I was 30 years old, stood five-foot-eight, and weighed 245 pounds.



Aside from the Skittles, my diet consisted of processed foods, such as Hamburger Helper, macaroni and cheese, and canned pasta and rice dishes. My exercise program consisted of walking to the kitchen to get food and back to the living room to watch TV. Because I would eat so much, I would often exhaust myself and need to lie down after meals. Eating a lot of food was my way of dealing with how bad my life had become: I had no job, a less-than-perfect past, a seemingly dead-end future, and very low-self esteem. I felt that I was literally eating myself to death.

Growing up, my mom did encourage me to eat vegetables and fruits, but I lived in the microwave age and was soon using it to cook everything I ate. I remember thinking that microwaving bacon was healthy because the drip tray would catch all the fat. Things got even worse when I moved out on my own and was able to buy all the foods my mom never bought, such as Chef Boyardee Raviolis, steak, chocolate milk, ice cream, and cheese. If it was bad for me I ate it because now I could.

In early 2006 my poor eating patterns led to my health deteriorating even further. One night I woke up in excruciating pain so I called for an ambulance to take me to the hospital. After being examined I was told that I had a kidney stone. No one at the hospital asked me about my diet, so I didn't think to change it.

Things continued to get worse. My diabetes, which had been diagnosed in 2000, was beginning to worsen, although I kept telling myself I didn't have diabetes. Again, denying the problem meant it didn't exist. But all of these problems did exist, and they were also taking a toll on my mental health.

I was beginning to withdraw from my friends, and felt very depressed and often paranoid. After consulting with a psychiatrist, I was told that I was suffering from "schizoaffective disorder" (having symptoms of both schizophrenia and depression). I was devastated. She told me that I would never be able to work and that I must learn to redefine success. It was hard not to notice how heavy I was, but she never asked about my diet or suggested that I lose weight. A lot of the medications they prescribe for depression and schizophrenia cause weight gain and the first ones I was put on did exactly that. When I hit the 260-pound mark I went crying to the doctor who told me "Well you're a big girl there is nothing wrong with that." At 31 my life seemed to be over. I no longer wanted to live.

Mental illness is so difficult. I gave up.

From that point on, any little mood change would result in me running to the hospital, begging them to “fix” me. When I did have real symptoms, their willingness to help me was lacking since I had “cried wolf” so many times before. At one point a staff member at the hospital remarked that they were like my family since I was there so much. I was sickened. It was like a reality snap for me, and I vowed never to return to the hospital unless I absolutely had to. That was the night I decided to do something about the mess my life had become.

Reclaiming my health and life

Comments were being made to me about my weight that hurt more than I could bear. “What are you eating? I want to be a football player too.” So I bought a treadmill and vowed to eat healthier. Initially a few pounds were shed, but it was slow going. I then decided to cut out red meat—that being done, I continued on. After sharing my thoughts about changing my life with my mother, she suggested that I read a book called *The China Study*, and from there I read *The McDougall Program for Maximum Weight Loss* and things began to change even more than I could have hoped for.

I stopped eating meat and dairy, as well as oils, and refined foods. I also stopped eating candy, gave up caffeine, and quit smoking, cold turkey. I had finally stopped living in a state of denial. All my time spent walking alone in the mornings provided me with a chance to reflect on my life. This ritual was meditation as well as exercise for me.



Starting to feel better about myself, I found a new doctor and therapist, people I felt could give me the care I needed and deserved, and would see me as a person; not just my illnesses. It has worked out well, and I have made good on my promise not to return to the hospital. My anxiety is almost completely gone since I stopped drinking coffee and consuming refined sugar. I take no medication for my diabetes now, as it is considered to be “diet-controlled,” and I only take low doses of medication for my hypothyroidism and schizoaffective disorder.

Well into my new way of eating, I went to the doctor to have my blood sugar checked, which was in the healthy range. In fact, I hadn’t remembered to fast before my test, and it was still in the normal range; a good sign indeed. My new doctor congratulated me by telling me I had beat diabetes by changing my diet. He no longer tries to convince me to eat butter with my potatoes to slow the absorption of sugar into my system.

My family and friends are all very encouraging, although a few people were concerned that I would not be getting all the necessary nutrients from my new diet. When I explained to them that I had researched my information and would actually be eating healthier this way, they became more supportive, and always complimented me on my progress.

I was told I have a permanent disabling mental illness by my doctors and that I would never work. I now know that is not true. My journey to regain my life has provided me with purpose and drive, two things that I have been lacking for many years. My dietary changes have also helped my once ravaged mind gain some peace and clarity, and boosted my self-esteem. The 96 pounds I have lost over the last year—I now weigh 164 pounds—has helped me tremendously too. I have now been accepted to college and plan to study nutrition. I would like to be a registered dietician. Not surprisingly, I want to do research into how a plant-based diet affects mental illness. After wandering through life for so long I have now found a goal. It is an unfamiliar, but an uplifting feeling.

Another thing all this change has helped me do is to redefine success. Success is coming through the battles I thought I had lost and moving on to help others fight the battles they thought they had lost too.

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Dr. McDougall's Comments

This is a chicken or egg question: Which came first, Theresa's mental or physical illnesses? I suppose, it does not really matter, since both were primarily due to malnutrition and fixed by a healthy, starch-based diet. Obesity and diabetes are common in people with schizophrenia and depression. Worldwide, the same kind of dietary intake known to predict the development of coronary heart disease and diabetes—the Western diet—also predicts the development of schizophrenia and depression, according to research published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.¹ More specifically, they found dairy products and refined sugars predicted a worse two-year outcome for people with schizophrenia and an increased prevalence of depression. Starchy vegetables (potatoes, pasta, etc.) were associated with better mental health. The authors of this work also recommend a dietary approach be tried to treat both of these mental health problems.

Schizophrenia, a mental illness commonly manifesting as hallucinations, (hearing voices, seeing visions), delusions (false beliefs about commonly held views of reality) and bizarre thought patterns, affects roughly 1% of the population. The mechanisms by which diet causes schizophrenia (and a similar condition of children called autism) are explainable.²⁻⁵ Diet, and especially dairy products, can produce an excess of opium-like compounds, which affect the brain.⁶ In addition, an unhealthy diet can damage the walls of the intestine, increasing their permeability; causing what is commonly referred to as a "leaky gut." This permeable gut-wall now allows the passage of neuro-active substances into the blood that can cause hallucinations and delusions—similar to the effects of psychedelic street drugs. Eliminating casein, a protein in cow's milk, and gluten, a protein in wheat, barley, and rye products, from the diet reverses these effects—with studies showing a drastic reduction, if not full remission, of schizophrenic symptoms after the complete removal of casein and gluten.²⁻⁵

Depression is a common psychiatric disorder, characterized by a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, low energy, and poor concentration. Two studies using a low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet with a primary intention of reversing cardiac disease have shown significant improvements in mental health and quality of life, as well as significant reductions in heart attack and stroke risk.^{7,8} One of these studies showed response rates of approximately 90% for clinical depression, 85% for stress, and 87% for mental health.⁷ Changes in brain chemistry account for these benefits. A meal high in carbohydrates increases the rate that an amino acid, tryptophan, enters the brain, leading to an increase in the level of the neurotransmitter serotonin that improves mood.⁹

(For a review of the simple, highly effective dietary and lifestyle changes that can cure depression see the March 2004 McDougall Newsletter).

Therefore, like Theresa, you should expect improvements in body and mind when you change your diet, giving up both the chicken and the egg (and the cheese, milk, beef, and fish). Contrary to popular opinion, giving up eating fish may also be beneficial for relieving depression.¹⁰ Better mental health will cause you to want to make even more changes to improve your physical health. The end result is an uphill spiral, rather than the downhill one that everyone else following the Western diet is on.

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