

Even though change is an unavoidable part of life, the mere thought of altering our routines or habits can trigger anxiety in many of us. Whether changes are simple, challenging, or viewed as a welcome relief, face them we must if we intend to move forward. As Benjamin Franklin once said, “When you are finished changing, you are finished.”

Changing life-long dietary habits can be especially challenging. I’ve met hundreds of people who intend to adopt a healthier diet. They’ve decided that the momentary pleasure of eating unhealthy foods is no longer worth the weight and health struggles that come along with it. They’re convinced by the research that a whole food, plant-based diet will be of benefit. They plan to find new recipes and learn to shop and cook differently. But sadly, those intentions are often short-lived.

Even when people have a deep desire to change, I’ve observed several common roadblocks that can keep people stuck in a pattern of unhealthy eating. The below list is certainly not all-inclusive, but perhaps this nutshell version will serve as a springboard for those who would like to explore one of these barriers more deeply.

The Fear of change. When change disturbs our deep-rooted perceptions or asks us to do something unfamiliar (such as new ways of shopping and cooking), it might be difficult to step out of our comfort zone. We may fear that changing our diet means life in general will be quite different; we’ll be label reading, learning to cook without added fats, and familiar restaurants may no longer be an option. Our bodies are going to change too, and perhaps our friendships will be affected. We might even fear another failure if we’ve been unsuccessful with diet change in the past.

Helpful tips: When fear of the unknown becomes an obstacle to making change, it’s important to first get a handle on what those fears are. If achieving good health is the goal, what is it about making any required adjustments that’s causing such apprehension? Taking time to deeply reflect and identify any fears is the first step. Write them down; examine the underlying reasons for those concerns and evaluate if they’re truly legitimate. Would those fears pose a danger to you or anyone else if they actually came to fruition? My guess is they probably would not. If the number of needed changes seems too momentous to overcome, breaking them down into smaller, achievable steps will help alleviate the fears.

The Avoidance of Pain. This common barrier doesn’t relate to *physical pain* per se, but rather anything that appears too much of a hassle to deal with. Changing one’s diet means that taste buds are going to recalibrate, bowel habits could be affected, and a few detoxing symptoms might occur as the adverse foods work their way out of the system. A period of withdrawal may occur for those addicted to certain foods. A commitment of time and effort will be needed to get through the learning curve, as it is with any new endeavor. People who view these possible occurrences as problems to be dodged, or

those who are unwilling to endure the short-term trials which are necessary to achieve results, are most likely pain avoiders who unfortunately may never experience the long-term payoff.

Helpful tips: Remember that anything of value has this rhythm: Pain First, Payoff Later. That's a quote from a book by Dr. Henry Cloud, titled *Never Go Back: 10 Things I'll Never Do Again*; he devotes an entire chapter to the topic of choosing short term comfort over long-term benefit. We mustn't allow the avoidance of pain to keep us from the healthy lives we long for. Successful people will do the hard things to get what they want. Those willing to endure a short season of *possible* trials will experience the long-term enjoyment of having a healthy, functional body.

Engrained Habits. Most of us are creatures of habit, I know I certainly am. From the recipes I choose to where I park at the grocery store, I definitely follow a pattern. But when habits become so deeply engrained that they're difficult to break, then it may be time to re-examine the importance we've allowed them to have. Habits become an issue when the dependency on unhealthy eating patterns prevents us from making changes.

Helpful Tips: Habits can work in our favor! There's nothing wrong with being a creature of habit when those habits promote good health. In fact, healthy habits are a *key factor* to success with a new lifestyle. The goal is to redirect our energy toward the new positive habits rather than the old negative ones, and the best way to begin is by implementing a new routine. Write down what the new routine will look like, and develop a plan to begin the necessary steps. When we perform the same actions repeatedly day after day, the need for conscious attention is reduced and the activity soon becomes second nature.

Family and Social Pressure. There's no doubt that the diets of those around us can have a major impact on our own food choices. People often tell me the reason a plant-based diet won't work for them is because their family members would never go for it. Social butterflies who love to fit in might also find it difficult to stay on plan when they're surrounded by friends eating buckets of chicken. When the people closest to us are eating the Standard American Diet, our resolve to stick with a healthy diet can definitely be compromised, especially if we're being scrutinized or somehow being made to feel guilty.

Helpful tips: The first line of defense should be a frank discussion with our loved ones to assure them they're not under attack and won't be forced to change their own eating patterns. It's best to explain what's motivating us to eat better and ask for their support by sharing exactly how they can be of help. Discuss the negotiables, such as who's going to do the shopping and cooking? Are they willing to store their unhealthy foods in another room or out of sight? Are they willing to join us once in a while, or create meals together with a common base (such as pasta or rice dishes)? If the family discussion falls on deaf ears, remember that we do not need our family's support to change our diet; yes, things would be much easier if we had it, but we *can* succeed on our own, especially when we engage with like-minded local groups and online communities. I know many divided families when it

comes to food who have figured out how to make it work; it takes conversation, negotiation, and sometimes trial and error.

Emotional eating. In our hurried, distracted society, emotional eating is a common barrier that typically occurs when we deal with the stressors of life by turning to food for comfort. Although some people actually eat *less* during times of difficulty, most emotional eaters impulsively try to soothe their distress with the distraction of food. Emotional eaters use food to soothe anxiety, sadness, anger, boredom, or in order to delay dealing with problems. Even happy emotions can send us to the pantry; one example would be when we use food to reward ourselves for good behavior, such as exercising, completing an overdue chore, or dealing with a difficult client.

Helpful Tips: Emotional eating can wage war on our physical and mental well-being, and any war battle requires a strategic plan. By developing a plan of defense, which includes identifying our weak spots and recognizing which emotions send us to the kitchen or the drive-up window, we can then determine alternative coping methods that don't involve food. Some suggestions to stay out of the kitchen might include organizing a drawer or closet, taking up a hobby, working a puzzle, going for a walk, having a cup of tea, journaling, breathing exercises, listening to music, prayer/meditation, or reading a good book. Another suggestion is to sit still for just five minutes before surrendering to a knee-jerk response; recognize what's happening emotionally and press the pause button. Instead of trying to suppress those emotions, allow them to be front and center for now. Remember that food is a poor substitute for emotional support, and those current feelings *are* going to subside. This too shall pass.

Physical Food addiction. This common barrier results when we've lost control over the ability to stop eating certain foods – especially the highly palatable ones which trigger the release of dopamine in the brain's pleasure center. Sugar, chocolate, refined carbs, cheese, meats, salts, and fats all fall into this category. If we obsess about certain foods or crave them to the point where we'll go out of our way to get them, a food addiction might be in play. Other telltale signs could include compulsive overeating, feeling anxious over the thought of giving up a certain food, and experiencing withdrawal or negative emotions when we go without.

Helpful tips: One of the first ways to deal with food addictions is to “decontaminate” the environment by removing the foods we cannot control. Physically and mentally struggling to overcome a food addiction is going to be extremely difficult if the refrigerator, pantry, car, and office are filled with trigger foods. If sugar is a trigger, having a vegan cherry cheesecake in the freezer is going to throw our resistance into a tailspin. And trying to eat just one sugar cookie a day will continue drip-feeding the addiction until it rears its ugly head and takes over again. Granted, there are some folks who can slowly wean off their trouble foods, but in my experience, those who go cold turkey have the greatest success. Addictive foods are quite powerful, and when we underestimate their physical impact on our bodies, our choices of breaking free are lessened. Always have compliant foods on hand, and remember to drink lots of good, clean water.

When venturing outside the house, *planning ahead* is another key factor in dealing with food addictions. Family gatherings, office parties, church events, and meeting with friends usually have one thing in common: foods that can trigger a relapse. When headed to a family gathering, bring a healthy casserole, a crockpot of soup, a salad, and/or a plant-based dessert. Consider eating a small meal at home before you attend so you're partially full when you arrive. If the office brings in glazed donuts for the Wednesday meeting, pack a healthy alternative or avoid the break room altogether. This is where *planning ahead* pays off. If this seems like a lot of trouble, remember why we're doing this. Let's remind ourselves that food addictions which lead to serious disease are a lot of trouble, too.

As mentioned previously, the above list provides only snippets of information with the hope that anyone who recognizes a potential barrier will be prompted to take a deeper look. Other barriers addressed in my book include apathy, false perception, denial, rebellion, spiritual conflict, and finally something I refer to as the "Barrier Combo Pack." Human behavior is very complex, and many of these barriers overlap or may be so intertwined that it's difficult to separate them.

For example, seeking comfort foods can result from emotional eating, food addiction, or engrained habits. Complacency about making changes could result from fear of change, avoidance of pain, or apathy. Having a negative view of healthy foods may stem from false perception, denial, or pride. For that reason, I recommend reading *all* the helpful tips as they can be useful in overcoming more than one barrier.

Lastly, one thing that stood out to me as I wrote these helpful tips is the number of key words that reflect the need for *intentional thought and awareness*. Words such as Reflect, Identify, Examine, Engage, Determine, and Plan Ahead. All of these words indicate that our minds must be fully engaged if we intend to overcome the mental and physical barriers that can keep us stuck. Mindfulness is crucial to win the battles which often lie directly between our ears.

The good news is that with the right mindset, strategies, and commitment, the roadblocks that prevent us from moving forward can be things of the past. To quote Benjamin Franklin once again, "You can do anything you set your mind to." So stay encouraged! Barriers *can* be defeated.

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