

Food as Medicine: Utilizing Dietary Change to Catalyze Personal Transformation

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Many of us utilize dietary change as part of our treatment regimen for patients. The ways in which this can benefit health on a biochemical and physiological level are clear; however, there is potential for it to go beyond working solely on the physical body. By engaging our patients in the process of this change, a more holistic change can take place; a revolution in the way a person experiences their world and their body.

I have always been reticent to use the word “healer” in reference to myself as it seems to carry so much weight. There is a distinct difference between the definitions of the words “healer” and “doctor.” Doctor refers to a certain level of educational attainment, or the ability and qualification to diagnose and treat disease. Healer, on the other hand, derives from a Germanic root meaning “to make whole.” It infers the healer has a connection to a power that can bring another living being to a state of wholeness. We all can be doctors; we all aspire to be healers. Realistically, when people seek medical advice, most want the logic of their treatment to be sound; however, what each of us truly desires is to be healed.

For this reason, regardless of how successful we are at facilitating healing, people in the medical profession live in a dichotomy of being trained to do one thing (doctor) and being perceived to do another (heal). Despite our efforts to practice medicine that is scientific and reproducible, the process of transforming illness into health remains mystical; medicine is collapsed with magic. This perception remains intact when we utilize pills, potions, salves or physical medicine. Regardless of the physiological or biochemical processes catalyzed by our tools, they also serve as symbols of a healing power transferred from healer to patient.

If medical professionals are perceived as healers who utilize medicines containing the power to heal, what then happens when patients are instead trained to use those tools themselves? Instead of being the recipient of that healing power, each person becomes able to wield that power to effect their own healing. Dietary change can act as the catalyst for this. By offering our patients the choice to eat differently as a means to improve health, the nature of medicine can be profoundly changed. Now they are in charge of the direction of their own well-being.

It is in this context that using dietary change as a treatment modality becomes incredibly interesting. When we recommend specific dietary choices, the scientific underpinnings of these changes must be sound. However, the implications of these go far beyond simple changes in a person's internal biochemistry. If we truly wish to practice medicine that addresses the whole person, it is important to understand how these dietary changes affect the whole. In turn, we must also recognize the profound potential for healing the whole by asking our patients to give conscious attention to the act of eating.

When we talk about dietary change as a catalyst for holistic healing, it is necessary to go beyond simple food changes. The act of eating itself must be approached as an opportunity for healing. We recognize the potential for eating as a sacred act; most religious holidays throughout the world center around food. Certain foods are ascribed with sacred properties for the purpose of ritual; taking them into the body elevates the physical as well as the spiritual self to a higher plane. In this culture, however, daily eating falls into the realm of “unconscious eating.” That is, eating generally falls into the categories of necessity, social, habit or even addiction. At best, we pay atten-



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tion to the nutritional or caloric content of food in order to benefit the physical body. But there are deeper levels of healing that can be accessed through eating.

Anyone who has clinically utilized dietary modification as a treatment modality understands that more than physiological change is taking place. The act of attempting to change the diet can elicit euphoria, frustration, confusion, anger and even pain, usually long before any biochemical transition starts to occur. It takes a person outside of his or her comfort zone and can trigger some of the most primal responses such as lack and deprivation. By removing or changing those habitual behaviors surrounding the act of eating itself, a person is forced to think consciously about it. Our opportunity as clinicians is to frame this conscious thought in such a way that it becomes a part of the healing.

By bringing intention into these new food habits, people can start to better understand their bodies and how they interact with their surrounding world. When I was still a student I had a patient complaining of psoriasis. She was 24 years old, and had suffered from this ailment for over 17 years. Her lesions were some of the largest I've seen; confluent patches on her arms, legs, and trunk, some of which covered the entire body part. We started simply: I prescribed fish oils and a multivitamin and recommended experimenting with taking wheat and dairy out of the diet for four weeks. We spoke periodically over the next few months, checking in every two weeks or so.

Over the course of working together, our conversations focused less and less on her psoriasis and more on how the foods she ate affected her body. She discovered certain foods made her itch, others affected her sleep, and some made her feel wonderful. As she embraced this process, she was able to develop an ever-increasing awareness of her body. She learned to pay attention to how her body interacted with its environment, and began to foster a consciousness of how to heal herself by paying attention in a way she had not previously known. After three months, I received a phone call saying "I can see my elbows — I haven't seen them in ten years!"

By shifting the focus to looking at food as a vehicle for increased wellness, the act of eating becomes medicinal. In this context, three to six opportunities arise every day for a person to intentionally act in a way that promotes health. The aspect of ritual can be invoked each time eating takes place by applying the concept of taking food that is blessed into the body for the purpose of elevating or healing the whole. We can weave the fabric of our everyday lives into a series of sacred and intentional moments. The act of recognizing, giving thanks for, and taking the time to give food our full attention is in itself revolutionary. It

creates a time, place and context for healing to occur.

Recently, a 76 year-old woman came to my office seeking nutritional advice. She had abruptly switched from a very standard American diet to veganism, and wanted to make sure she was getting everything she needed nutritionally. Her story is compelling; over the past 40 years, she had battled thyroid cancer, breast cancer on two separate occasions, and had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure five years earlier. She was taking no medications, and had not received any medical attention since that diagnosis five years prior. She had a distinct fear of going to the doctor; her encounters with the medical system had inevitably been painful. Starting a vegan diet was a conscious choice to take control of the direction of her health: "I'm not giving up anything; everything I love is in my refrigerator. If not eating cheese means I choose health, that's no sacrifice." She was doing yoga, walking, and riding her bike daily, feeling energetic, happy and as healthy as she had ever been.

Each of us has this ability to wield the healing power of nature to be our own healer and bring our own bodies to a state of health. As clinicians, we can help our patients discover and hone that ability. Dietary change has the power to alter a person's internal environment, but it has the potential for even more. It can help facilitate greater understanding of the body and how it relates to the surrounding environment. It can bring the body self-empowerment. Finally, it can help to create a space and time for healing to occur by bringing the ritual of wellness into everyday life. By passing on the tools to create this, the clinician can help each patient realize his or her own power to heal.

