



Focus on Wellness

So, You Want to Change Your Eating Habits?

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WHEN IT COMES TO MATTERS OF HEALTH, MANY

people's first thought is to their eating habits — after all, “you are what you eat,” right? While changing our eating habits seems like it should be straightforward, it's no coincidence that one of the most common complaints that I hear as a dietitian is, “I know what I need to do, I just need to do it.” Here are the steps that I walk through with my clients who are trying to change the way they eat.

1. Why do you want to change your eating habits?

First, it may be helpful to articulate why you want to make a change in the first place. As a dietitian, my clients are generally interested in changing their eating habits for health reasons, but wanting to make a change for any reason — whether it's financial, environmental, ethical or simply for novelty, is just as valid. Remembering why you'd like to change can serve as a motivator; it can also help identify what change(s) to make, as well as what outcomes to expect.

2. What eating habit(s) would you like to change?

There are two categories of changes that you can make: 1) Food choices, and 2) Behaviours. Changing our food choices means increasing or decreasing our intake of certain foods or nutrients, while changing our behaviours can involve changing when we eat, where we eat, how we eat and/or how much we eat. It may also be helpful to change behaviours around meal planning, food shopping and/or food preparation. Thinking of potential changes in terms of these categories can help make them more specific and less overwhelming.

3. Will making this change help move you toward your goal?

Check in: will the changes that you identified in step 2 move you toward the goal that you identified in step 1? This question may be difficult to answer as the relationship between nutrition and health is not always straightforward. This is partly because most nutrition studies are observational, meaning that they can only show correlation, not causation. Additionally, there are lots of factors that can influence health, many of which are beyond individual control.

If you came up with a number of different eating habits in the previous step, then this step can be helpful in narrowing down what strategies to try or prioritizing which ones to try first. This is also an opportunity to reflect on whether it may be helpful to get support from a dietitian or health provider if you're unsure whether certain eating habits will help move you towards your goals, and to consider factors outside of nutrition — sleep, movement, mental health, etc.

4. Will this change work for you?

This may sound cliché, but change is often easier said than done. This next step invites you to consider possible barriers that may keep you from making lasting change. Some questions to ask yourself:

- Do I have access to what I need to make this change happen?
- Is this change financially feasible?
- How will this change fit in my current schedule/lifestyle?
- How might this change affect others in my household? (If applicable)
- Is making this change something that I would enjoy?

This is also an opportunity to identify what supports you might have for making this change. Are there people in your life who would be supportive? Are there other habits that you engage in regularly with which you can pair this habit? Are there lessons you can glean from other times in your life where you have made a lifestyle change?

5. Try it on!

One strategy that I often use with my clients is to “experiment” with a new behaviour for a few weeks rather than committing to a lifestyle change right away. Allowing yourself to experiment without commitment allows you to truly assess whether the changes you had in mind would work for your goals and for your lifestyle. If things work out, then hopefully it will allow you to feel more confident about changing your eating habits. If not, then there is space to troubleshoot and try again, or move on to something else without feeling like you've “failed” at something.

Change isn't easy...

I am someone who believes that we all do things for a reason, even if the things that we do only benefit us momentarily or are more unhelpful than helpful in the long term. When we are keen to make a change, it can be easy to get into the mindset of rejecting the habit that we're trying to replace. I've even had clients shame themselves for some of the eating habits that they're trying to change. Sometimes, acknowledging how our old/current habits might have served us, as silly as the reason may seem, can make change easier. Not only can it help us get to the root of some of these “bad” habits, it also allows us to address the parts of us that might be more resistant to change.

I hope that considering some of these steps and strategies might be beneficial the next time you are looking to make a habit change, eating or otherwise.

About the author: Vincci Tsui (she/her) is a former bariatric dietitian turned certified intuitive eating counselor and body-liberation advocate. She is the author of *The Mindful Eating Workbook: Simple Practices for Nurturing a Positive Relationship with Food*. Vincci practices out of Calgary, AB. Learn more at: vinccitsui.com