Could You Have "Orthorexia"?

We have all seen depictions of the first Thanksgiving: Pilgrims and Native Americans enjoying together the bounty of a New World harvest. They sit around a table heaped with waterfowl, venison, lobster, clams, pumpkins, berries, and more.

In November 2017, *The New Yorker* published a cartoon by Roz Chast titled "The Last Thanksgiving." It shows 10 people with glum expressions sitting around a table with no food and empty plates. Over each head is an identifying sign, such as: "Can't have salt," "Lactose intolerant," "Vegetarian," "Vegan," "Macrobiotic," "Fanatic traditionalist," "Allergic to gluten."

I find it harder and harder to cook for more than one or two guests because so many people today have dietary restrictions. Others tell me they have the same problem. Here is the response a friend of mine received from a couple she invited to dinner: "We would love to get together. We are vegan and gluten-free. We are also avoiding all sugars (honey, stevia, etc.), vinegar, nightshades, and cayenne pepper."

In 1997, Steven Bratman, MD, introduced the term *orthorexia nervosa* for an eating disorder marked by excessive preoccupation with eating healthy food. He coined the word *orthorexia* from Greek roots meaning "correct appetite" and added the *nervosa* to suggest a psychological imbalance. (The term resembles *anorexia nervosa*, a well-known, potentially life-threatening emotional illness characterized by loss of appetite, often driven by obsessive fear of gaining weight.) Orthorexia nervosa is not yet recognized as an official diagnosis, and experts are divided as to whether it is a true eating disorder. Nevertheless, the concept is catching on—and infuriating some who follow rigid diets, particularly the Paleo and Keto crowds, as well as some vegans and those with food sensitivities.

A Growing Concern?

Of course, people may choose not to eat animal foods for ethical or religious reasons or avoid gluten because it gives them distressing and measurable symptoms. Others may experiment with restrictive diets that are promoted for beneficial effects on metabolism. These are reasonable eating strategies. The concern of Dr. Bratman and many of his medical colleagues is that some people who limit their food choices may do so to a degree that impairs both physical and psychological well-being, leading, possibly, to social isolation, anxiety about eating, and even malnutrition.

In the 1970s and 1980s, dietary fat was demonized as the main cause of obesity, atherosclerosis, and premature death. This was the era of extreme low-fat diets and a profusion of low- and nonfat foods (during which North Americans got steadily fatter). As scientific evidence discredited the belief that dietary fat was evil, we moved on to blame carbohydrate for all our ills. There is better evidence for this, but it seems unwise to toss any macronutrient under the bus. Avoidance of fat leads to deficiency of the essential fatty acids needed for optimum physical and mental health and reduces the bioavailablity of key micronutrients. People who shun carbohydrate often eat excessive amounts of protein, increasing the workload on the liver and kidneys. Recent research places greater emphasis on the need for the various types of dietary fiber. Most people do not get enough of them, especially those on strict Paleo diets.

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Eating disorder specialists say they are seeing more and more patients with orthorexia nervosa and the problems associated with it. They say also that it is important to distinguish people who merely follow a non-mainstream theory of healthy eating from those whose disordered eating patterns lead to impairment of physical, psychological, or social well-being.

I was recently in Okinawa, famed for its abundance of centenarians and healthy seniors. In Ogimi Village, reputed to be a focal point for longevity, I talked with a group of Okinawans in their upper nineties and lower hundreds, all looking vital and happy. I asked them for any advice they had about aging well. The first answer from all of them was, "Eat everything!"

In countries with the best food—Italy, France, Japan, for example—people eat everything. They regard eating, first and foremost, as a source of pleasure, best enjoyed with others. They do not approach the table as a minefield, where one false move might be disastrous. Their relationships with food are much less neurotic and much healthier than ours. Become too focused and limited about food choices and you will end up like the unhappy folks in "The Last Thanksgiving." SH

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