

Diet of facts the best antidote to binge-fast cycle

By Ruth Ostrow

WHEN I was a young girl I got caught on the binge-eating and fasting cycle. My childhood was permeated with the same sorts of eating disorders that plague so many of today's teenagers.

Planning to go on a diet every other week, I'd eat awful rubbish, rationalising that I would soon be burning it off. But often the diet didn't begin for months.

"I'll start tomorrow," was the catch-cry among my girlfriends as we'd all put on weight, trapped in our gastronomical holding pattern until the diet would eventually start.

Most were dreadful. The fabled Israeli Army Diet was the worst, where the eater lived on apples for two days, then cheese for two days, then chicken for two days, or some such combination.

The weight loss was supposed to come from the chemical reaction of those particular food groups, but even blind-Freddy could see that the reality had more to do with the absolute nausea involved in putting a piece of dry chicken in the mouth at 7am, and thereafter for every meal over 48 hours.

There were diets that flooded the body with unhelpful amounts of protein, and diets that deprived the body of helpful amounts of protein, and fasts that lead to fainting and vomiting.

And then finally the moment of surrender, when feeling deprived, under-nourished and generally very depressed, we yielded to the warm, oily bag of chips that our cold, neglected bodies craved.

We were like little kids on a seesaw, swinging from one extreme to the other.

I would not reminisce were it not for the disturbing statistics that keep hitting my desk about the high incidence of childhood obesity. Equally awful are the other figures on eating disorders that plague young girls who are starving themselves or subjecting their bodies to the same cruel Gothic-horror practices that I put mine through.

Bulimia, anorexia, or simple bad dieting habits, are rife among young women. My own daughter, at nine years of age, is already beginning to fall prey to the manipulations of body image in magazines, owing in part to the bean-pole models she has pinned up on her wall.

Though I have tried to explain that culturally, coming from central-European stock, she is never going to be a tall, lithe goddess of Anglo-Saxon aesthetics, and that she should be proud of her ethnicity, it is a losing battle as negative body image is reinforced at school.

While efforts have been stepped up to combat childhood obesity and SeDS (Sedentary Death Syndrome) with compulsory sporting activities, and private organisations like The Bluearth Institute travelling about talking to kids about the joy of physical activity, educators don't seem to realise that the two problems are

one and the same, and that eating disorders at either extremes need the one strategy.

The strategy is education. I have just finished a private course with Dr Arne Rubinstein called Anatomy and Physiology for Yoga Students, which he teaches in Byron Bay and Bali.

I did the course in order to better my yoga practices and to learn exactly what I am doing to my bones and muscles while I'm moving. I also figured it would be good to know what is happening inside my body as I get older.

I was surprised at how much I actually learned and got to understand about the digestive system and the way the body works, things that we didn't learn in school, or at least not until biology much later on when it was too late to stop my diet-binge cycle.

I learned in detail about the relationship between food and health, the various systems that govern our sense of wellbeing.

Had I known then, as a young girl, what I now know, my whole life would have been very different.

I can see the damaging effect starvation diets can have on our hormones, energy levels, bones, kidneys. I can see the effect lack of exercise and obesity has on our blood pressure, arteries, heart and liver. I understand what fat is, how muscles are formed, and the importance of oxygen, the latter being a very significant pointer in educating kids about the perils of smoking.

And I can now see what effect drugs and alcohol have on the body and brain.

These are the sorts of realities we need to be passing on to our kids before they take up drugs, before they develop eating disorders, or become bullies who persecute kids with different body types.

These are the lessons kids should be bringing home to parents so that we adults, in turn, can understand the delicate ecology of the human bodies we are feeding and nurturing.

I remember being taught a lot of useless information at school that I never ever needed in my practical life.

A thorough series of physiology and anatomy lectures offered to youngsters in their formative school years would go such a long way to combating many of the problems we develop over a life time.

The body is the temple of the soul, and we can't afford to neglect it until bad thinking is already engrained.

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