Particularly picky eater needs help eating fruits and veggies

Dear Alice,

This may sound a little weird but... I've never eaten an apple, never tried an orange, won't eat a salad, won't even taste a grape. I'm scared of fruits and vegetables. I don't know what it is, I haven't touched a fruit or vegetable since I was force fed baby food by my mom. When I was 8, I was pressured into trying a banana and I threw it right back up.

To make matters worse, I refuse to eat animals, this is more recent. I've been vegetarian (I guess you would call it that, but I don't eat vegetables) about a year now. I eat Boca burgers and meat substitutes and take one-a-day vitamins, but that's now 3 food groups that I'm lacking.

I want to be healthy. I don't wanna die when I'm 30 years old, but I just can't make myself eat fruits/vegetables. Is there ANYTHING that I can do??

Answer

Dear Reader,

Eating from all of the major food groups, predominantly fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in particular, is essential to maintaining a healthy body and mind.

Kudos to you for wanting to expand your eating patterns. When a negative experience or trauma in relation to food and/or eating is experienced at a young age, it is common to end up avoiding situations and/or foods that were associated with that event/person/food/time. With education, support, and time, you can learn to expand your options, enjoying additional foods. The way to do this is to incorporate new foods gradually, until you feel comfortable with the balance, variety, and moderation found in a healthy eating plan.

To help you work toward this goal, let's explore some possible strategies:

1. You can start by recording your observations with a food journal. Notice and describe how you feel before, while, and after trying a bite of a fruit or vegetable. You might find, to your surprise, that you really enjoyed the food? for its taste, texture, aroma? beyond what you were feeling.

On the other hand, this activity may yield certain feelings as memories begin to surface and
flood your consciousness. This is common when emotions and feelings have been subdued and/or repressed. Your challenge is to alter your associations from negative to positive, replacing the emotional connection with pleasurable reinforcement instead. Again, the purpose of the food journal is to allow for reflection, and to monitor your consistency and progress.

(2) You can also set a goal of tasting one new fruit and/or vegetable daily, every other day, or once a week, whatever timeframe is doable for you. It may be fun to choose among a variety of fruits and vegetables—native or exotic, chewy or crunchy, sweet or savory? the options are limitless. Clearly, you don't have to eat the entire food. You can slice a cucumber into small pieces or have 1/2 of a berry. You can cut it, look at it, smell it, lick it, pop it in your mouth, let it melt, chew it, and swallow it. Gradually, at least some of these veggies and fruits can become part of your daily eating pattern. You probably won't like everything you try and that's fine. People are different, with preferences that extend to what they eat. Start small and be patient with yourself, as the process of working through your ingrained eating preferences may not always be comfortable and can take time.

In addition, being a vegetarian does not designate a person as unhealthy. Many individuals are able to fulfill their daily protein, iron, and calcium requirements from a vegetarian and/or vegan lifestyle. The key is food selection and combinations. However, considering your current, extreme food restrictions, a healthy vegetarian eating plan is premature and taking daily multivitamins to make up for your lack of variety, balance, and moderation does not substitute for getting nutrients from food, which is healthier. Try talking with your primary health care provider, or perhaps a mental health professional to begin working towards developing healthier eating habits. Your primary health care provider may recommend a registered dietician that can work with you to develop a specific eating plan.

Taking time to reflect on your childhood associations with the help of a mental health professional may further ease and expedite the process of adopting fruits and veggies on your own terms that are comfortable to you.

Alice!
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