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Eating healthy when my partner doesn't ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am very interested in nutrition and enjoy eating a well-balanced diet because it makes me feel healthier, happier and more energized. I also have a terrible sweet tooth, which I combat by simply not buying junk food when I shop for groceries (although I will indulge on rare occasions). This strategy has worked for me very well — up until now.

I am living with my boyfriend who, despite even his doctor's warnings, has a rather unhealthy diet. In an effort to nudge him in a better direction, I have offered to cook most of our meals at home myself, but with little success. He's a picky eater and often declines the meals I prepare in favor of pizza or Chinese take-out instead. I would just give up and let him clog his arteries, but his unhealthy habits are starting to affect me. When he brings home tacos, or especially bags of candy, I inevitably eat them also. I am a decent cook, but a greasy pizza always tastes better. If I can't change his habits, how do I at least keep him from changing mine?

Sincerely,

Nancy Nutrition

Answer

Dear Nancy Nutrition,

Feeling energized and happier are just some of the great benefits you can experience when you have a healthy relationship with food! And, it's certainly thoughtful of you to want your partner to join you. But, you're right that you might need to make peace with your different lifestyles and relationships with food, at least for the time being. Trying to change your partner's behaviors if they're just not ready might only frustrate both of you. But, your own health goals don't have to suffer. The first step toward establishing happy, healthy relationships with both your dinner and your date might be to have an honest conversation with them about your eating goals (if you haven't already). Your partner may not even realize how much of an impact their behaviors are having on you. You can also explicitly ask for their support as you try to eat a well-balanced diet.

Just like anything in a romantic relationship, it takes two (or sometimes more) to tango. There are

ways you may suggest that your partner might be able to support you in your eating goals, and there are also options to consider that you yourself can try to set yourself up for a healthier relationship with food and eating. Some ways your partner might be able to help you may include:

- **Pizza for one, please.** If your partner really wants to get take-out, consider asking them to get only one serving. For example, rather than ordering a whole pizza, your partner could just get the slice or two they want. Your partner is entitled to their relationship with food, as you are with the food you choose for yourself. Setting these boundaries may help meet both of your needs and wants.
- **Out of sight, out of mind.** For those tempting foods not in alignment with your current dietary goals that do find their way into your house, you could consider asking your partner to stash them away in a secret spot. If you can't see them — or if you don't even know where they are — you simply can't eat them!
- **Pass the support, not the snacks.** Even around a mouthful of fries, your partner can offer words of support and encouragement. Just because your partner doesn't make the same choices as you doesn't mean you can't ask for verbal support! A few words of encouragement could go a long way in supporting your endeavors.

Additionally, there are some ideas you can keep in mind as you try to maintain your eating patterns while living with a partner who has different habits:

- **Balance:** Balance is key to many aspects of eating. This means eating a wide variety of foods and consuming them in moderation. It also refers to balance in eating for hunger and eating for pleasure. Both are critical for your health and ensuring that you practice a balance between the two is recommended.
- **Flexibility:** This means being able to accept deviations from your desired diet without judging yourself or your self-worth for it. It also means having the ability to make unplanned food choices that may not have been your top choice every now and then. This might mean going to an event and being able to live in the moment and enjoy the food you want to eat at a given place in time. There may also be times that you consume more or less food than you would on an average day. This is part of life and can be part of a balanced eating pattern.
- **"Preference over position:"** Everyone has preferences, and not every preference may be appropriate for every situation. Having the flexibility to make appropriate choices given the situation you're in is key. You might have a favorite food, but if that becomes the only food you eat, you might develop an unhealthy relationship with that food. Sometimes, these preferences can become foods around which habits are built. In this instance, the preferences can become a position, which is an inflexible spot where you feel like you can't deviate from your habit or routine. Instead, it can be helpful for eating to be a balanced, flexible activity where preferences are just that, and you're not overly reliant on any single food or eating habit.

Ultimately, striving for a healthy relationship with food and eating can be integral to health, and it can be the foundation at the core of setting any dietary or nutritional goals. It's also crucial to note that some folks may have dietary needs or conditions that benefit from working with professionals such as a health care provider or a registered dietitian to create personalized dietary plans. Others may find their support helpful simply to make changes or to learn about new types of

foods. No matter the dietary needs, working collaboratively with providers to develop plans that strive for balance, flexibility, and account for "preference over position" in whatever ways possible can help support and nourish healthier relationships with food.

Seeking your boyfriend's support and keeping these ideas in mind, there may be ways to work together in meeting both of your dietary needs. While your beau might seem rooted in his ways, you never know what lifestyle changes he might be open to, now or in the future. There could be small ways you could invite him to join you in deepening your healthy relationship with eating and food. You might consider going on a walk or jog together before or after you eat. Or, you could make cooking into a date night activity, so that he can start to develop some skills to make his own tasty and healthy meals. You might also offer to give him a small taste of your delicious home-cooked food (rather than expecting him to eat an entire home-cooked meal) — perhaps he'll reconsider knocking it once they try it! Over time (and after some tasty samples of your cooking), your partner might start to see the merits of your food choices and the healthy relationship that you've developed with food, and he may want to engage in a similar process. And, adding that dimension of each of your relationships with food to your larger relationship may add even more meaning and fulfillment to your relationships and lives as well.

Alice!

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