

Better Nutrition Part 3 - A Process for Better Nutrition

The last couple of episodes of this Better Nutrition series have focused on your mindset and your environment. In this episode, we get into how to actually implement the action steps associated with improving your nutrition habits. Making the changes to live healthier is a process. In order to live healthier, your actions have to *be* healthier. In some of my recent reading, I came across an old Japanese proverb. It says “A vision without action is a dream. Action without a vision is a nightmare.” I love it.

But what actions do you take to achieve your vision? Well, the first step is to be clear about *who* you want to be. We often tend to think in terms of “I need to do this” or “I want to do that,” but those types of goals only last so long and only get us so far. I’d like you to think about your goal and then reframe it to be someone who embodies that goal. For example, instead of saying, “I’m going to add more fruits and veggies to my diet this month,” you could reframe it as “I’m going to do the things that someone who eats fruits and veggies on a regular basis does.” It goes back to the Seth Godin mantra of “people like us do things like this.” To reach your goals, start with who you want to be. It’s much easier and more realistic to visualize yourself as a changed person vs. the same person who does different things.

Once you have an idea of the type of person you want to be in your goal for healthier living, what is it that will actually get you there? Here’s the secret...I need you to lean in here. The answer is actually the same for any positive change you seek to make. It’s healthier habits practiced consistently over time. Healthier habits practiced consistently over time. Healthier habits are key here. Not only do they play a primary role in our health (because people who are deliberate about practicing healthy habits are generally healthier), but they also define who we are. And we just talked about why focusing on who you want to be is important. Practice healthier nutrition regularly. If you’re just starting out, choose something that is fairly easy to change but will have an oversized impact. Increasing your water intake is a great place to start (as I talked about in the last episode).

So, once you have the basics of understanding who you want to be as a healthier individual, and realizing that healthier habits practiced over time will get you there, it’s important to think about what I call your “true why” for wanting to make a change or improve in the first place. This is your internal, or intrinsic motivation. Positive changes are more likely to stick when the desire and motivation come from within.

External motivators such as someone telling you or advising you to change will only take you so far. It's better to anchor yourself in those deep-down drivers that are tied to things we value. Perhaps you want to be around longer for your kids. Or maybe you want to improve your health so that you can do more activities with those you love. Those types of things tend to provide more motivation when the going gets tough, or when we don't see changes as quickly as we thought we would. Identify your true why to keep you driven toward your goal.

So now you've laid the groundwork in determining the type of person you want to be, focusing on consistent healthier habits and identifying your intrinsic motivation, let's step into a bit of a nutrition fantasy world for a second. Imagine that there are no healthy diets published. There are no programs to follow or calories to count. No one judges you for what you eat, and there's no guilt associated with indulging from time to time, because again, there's no standard published. This would mean your friends wouldn't run over to tell you about the new craze they're trying and about how it's working so wonderfully for them. It would mean no celebrities would be on TV endorsing one diet over another. But instead, everyone, including you, would be perfectly fine with the way they're eating now because no one is telling us to think any different. Now, of course this is a stretch, but it's an exercise in removing those external influences around you that pull you in one direction or another when it comes to improving your diet. I want you to focus on your way of eating now. This is your diet. So often we attempt to drastically change how we're eating and shape our lifestyle to fit a new way that just isn't us. Now, I preach behavior change, but perhaps a better way to say that is behavior improvement. There's a difference between improving and wholesale change. Improvement is something that sounds sustainable and tends to work over the long term. But the notion of change can be somewhat daunting, and can cause the yo-yo effect, where you try something new, have moderate results, revert back to where you were and do it all over again. I want you to think about your current way of eating, your diet, as "pretty good" right now. I mean, it's at least sustaining life, right? But also think about one or two ways you can alter your diet to improve it. Take that approach going forward. Start from where you are. One of the sayings I've picked up in my military flying career says "you have to navigate from where you are, not from where you want to be." If you do that, start from where you are, you will find that healthier eating is something you *can* do, and something that will continue to improve over time.

Now, I realize that asking you to start from where you are is easy in some ways and harder in other ways. It's a bit freeing to know that you're already ready and equipped to improve because your diet is already set (it's the one you're on now, with a couple of tweaks). But that approach is daunting for some of us who want a plan to follow, or who like to be told exactly what to do. That's what we rely on the experts for, right? That's why we pay dietitians and health coaches. Well, let me encourage you to consider this as you look to improve. First, no one knows you like you know yourself. Therefore, the best person to advise you in what's in the realm of the possible when it comes to starting your small, incremental changes is you! Pick something that you think you can do, but that also presents somewhat of a challenge. That way, when you're successful, you'll feel a sense of accomplishment. The next thing to understand is that involvement in your plan for improvement creates buy-in. When you're a part of the process, you're more likely to stick with it. And finally, and this is the point that we so often miss...it's not actually about whether you were successful this week, or whether you lost 3 pounds last month. It's about *learning* how to improve. It's about getting better with your process for improvement. It's about long-term change, not short-term solutions. That's how we continue to improve...over time.

Now, I realize that a lot of what I've talked about up to this point is about different ways of looking at things and approaching your better nutrition plan. But maybe you can still use some help on how to go about choosing what to do next. Do you choose something easy or something that will yield the quickest, most healthy result? Do you choose something that gets you to a goal that you're already close to? Or do you take an approach that you're most excited about? Well, the answer is "yes" to all of those. This is all a part of *your* plan, and there is no wrong answer. You decide the next step. The key is to decide and act. Perhaps you already have a fairly balanced diet but you know that you can stand to add a few more fruits and veggies. Ok, then try that. Maybe you've really been wanting to experiment with this intermittent fasting concept that you keep hearing about, but you haven't found the time to do it yet. Well, make time now. Or maybe you know that being better at drinking water will make you feel better and drop a few pounds almost immediately. You could start to add water to your diet today. These are all options, and there are many more. But again, you are in the best position to know which is right for you at this moment. Trust yourself. There isn't a wrong answer. We need to get out of this mindset that our *attempts* at healthier living are wrong because they're not necessarily what someone else or what some other diet

plan recommends. But I'm here to tell you that if you're doing something today that was healthier than yesterday, you're on the right track. The key is to choose something to act on, and start.

This actually brings me to my next point, that improving your diet is not about being perfect. It's not about "eating right" seven days a week. It's not about super strict diets. In fact, it's not about restriction at all. And it's not about perfection all the time. Rather, it's about consistency over time. This is one of the most important things to remember when we talk about healthy change. What does that actually look like? I'll refer back to the last episode in this series when I talked about those three or four key areas of nutrition that I focus on. As I look at a couple of those through this lens of imperfection, what comes to mind are *my* efforts at adding more fruits and veggies to my diet, and my method for controlling calories. When it comes to adding healthier foods, the fruits and veggie habit, I don't aim for a certain goal every day. Instead, I set a weekly goal to make over half of what I eat come from fruits and veggies on 4 days a week. Which frankly leaves me with the freedom to not worry about that goal on the weekends, for example. When it comes to managing calories, I practice intermittent fasting for 14 hours a day, but I only do that on weekdays, 5 days a week. Again, I don't try for a perfect 7 days. I think there's a lot to be said for this type of approach. Think about the difference in how you'd feel if someone told you that you have to get a 100 on the test vs. if they said you just needed to score above a 90 or 95. The difference in your outlook and the level of stress when perfection is required is different than if you have a little bit of room for imperfection. So, think about this as you look to improve your eating habits. As Winston Churchill said, "Perfection is the enemy of progress."

Now remember, healthier eating and healthier living is about consistency over time. Well, the things that I'm pointing out here are ways in which you can make healthier habits more sustainable, because if they're more sustainable, you can be more consistent with them. So, another way to do that is by taking small, manageable steps as you look to improve. Going back to my fruits and veggies example, why did I choose to make over half of my daily intake on four days a week come from fruits and vegetables? That equates to about 20 servings of fruits and vegetables a week, or an average of less than three servings a day. The USDA actually recommends five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day. I'm falling short with my goal of three per day. But (and this goes back to starting where you are) 20 servings per week is more than I was eating, and my goal is to continue to get better. For me, this is a

smaller step along my improvement journey. Long-term changes start small and develop through consistency. And in order to be consistent, your habits have to be sustainable. Three servings a day is more sustainable *for me* than 5 servings a day.

Ok, Let me point out one final approach or technique in making your attempts at healthier living and healthier eating more sustainable. That technique is to enlist outside help. What I'm talking about here is some form of an accountability mechanism, group or partner. You may have benefited from having a workout partner or a diet partner or diet group in the past, right? There is a huge benefit to the partner and group dynamic when trying to improve on an individual level. That benefit is real. And a big part of it is the accountability you get. I eat better when someone is holding me accountable. Period. And if it isn't *someone*, it could be *something*. I don't have a nutrition accountability partner or group at the moment, but I do have a way of tracking my habits that allows me to look back and see how I've done and how I'm doing. That's a form of accountability for me. Accountability partners, accountability groups and other accountability mechanisms work.

Alright, wrapping up this episode, the central theme here is that self-improvement boils down to practicing healthier habits in a more consistent manner. That's it. In order to do that, it helps if your habits are more sustainable. Understanding that you don't have to be perfect, taking small, manageable steps toward your goal, and having an accountability mechanism are some effective ways to make those habits sustainable and to increase your level of consistency.

So, in this episode we talked about the who, what and why of healthier nutrition. That's deciding who or the type of person you want to be, knowing what to do, which is to practice healthier nutrition habits on a consistent basis, and determining the true why to fuel your motivation. We also hit where to start, which is where you are right now, and how to go about making your healthier nutrition habits more sustainable.

Remember, my goal is to help you improve your nutrition and other health habits. I hope this has been helpful.

If you like this, I'd love a rating or comment, and would I would love for you to spread the word. And if there's something else I can provide, give me that feedback as well.

Finally, if you're looking for a tool that can help you out with simple ideas on where to start, head to tdfitness.net where you can download my "25 Healthy Habit Ideas for Busy Lifestyles." That's all for now. Take care and have a blessed one! Coach T. out.