

How Can I Get Other People In My Life to Understand? Making the Social Adjustments

THE GOOD NEWS: You can't! What's more, you don't need to! ALL you need to do is change your eating to what is ideal for your body, and keep on eating that way forever. (I will grant you, that is one big ball of "ALL")

THE BAD NEWS: It's gonna take some serious time for the others in your life to come to their own terms with the changes in you.

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE BAD NEWS: The more quietly consistent you are about staying with the changes you've decided to make in your eating, the less difficult it will be for others in your life to adjust and the more effective and painless for *everyone* the change will be. The way to jerk others around and demonstrate that you don't "deserve" to be taken seriously is to keep wavering on and off your supposedly permanent commitment to change.

WHY DO WE THINK IT'S OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO GET OTHERS TO UNDERSTAND? Because as a culture, we have slowly become more and more blurry with our personal boundaries.

I think I now see and understand most of the forces that have fueled these cultural changes (short answer, "the media has taken charge"), and maybe someday I'll do a piece on that. But like so many other facets of this simple eating style change, the whys aren't really that important, and frankly there's not much that we as individuals can do about the confusing and sometimes contradictory forces in our society. And that's not what has to change anyway.

Although it may seem crazy at first, because most of us eat with other people often, the bottom line is that no one else, including the people you regularly eat with or prepare meals for, needs to *understand* much about your decision to eat differently (whatever that might mean for your body), for you to make big changes in the way you eat. Essentially this has nothing to do with anyone else, and perhaps more importantly, generally you do no one, including yourself, any favors by inviting them into a discussion of your decision by attempting to (over)explain it. Discussion, especially early on, most often leads others to the assumption that you are seeking input and opinions—even some kind of permission or approval—from them. But assuming you have truly made a decision, you don't want or need any of that.

In this context it's usually a good idea to approach this more like an incidental little change than a big deal when it comes to mentioning it to others. It's about as important and announcement-worthy as the fact that you are switching brands of laundry detergent...except of course we don't all gather regularly to do our wash. All anyone else needs to understand about this is that you decide exactly what goes into your mouth 24-7-365, which, when you get right down to it, has ALWAYS been the

case. All that is changing are the criteria upon which you will be making those choices.

All we are really doing when we make and then enforce this decision for ourselves is setting a personal boundary. This IS an unusual and somewhat firmer boundary than others generally set for themselves within our culture. Still, that's *all* it is.

But because this is an unusual one, and because as a culture we have become so blurry with our boundaries, most of us will get some reactions from others when we first begin enforcing these new boundaries. Others are entitled to their reactions, to their feelings; we simply decide (by our actions) not to let their reactions, large or small, overt or covert, impact our decisions. In fact, that's exactly what being an emotionally mature adult entails. Emotionally mature people can set and calmly enforce appropriate boundaries on themselves and others, emotionally immature individuals cannot.

In setting about to calmly enforce these new boundaries, what's most important is that we assume total responsibility for fulfilling them. We can't insist that others eat how, when, what or where we eat, or even that they eat only at establishments where we can effectively take care of our own needs. We can only insist on or take care of that for ourselves. Doing so is going to translate into some occasional social limitations and awkwardness. Enforcing these boundaries involves some skills that will take some time and some trial and error to learn.

For instance, let's say you're traveling out of town with a group and the plans for the evening come up late one afternoon. Someone in the group suggests a popular bread bakery.

CALMLY: "There's nothing I eat at Tony's Pizza Shop, so that's not going to work for me. How about I meet you guys at the movie after dinner?"

First, I don't say there's nothing I CAN eat there. This may seem minor, but I think important in that it draws a distinction—this is not something I want anyone to try to work on or give me approval or permission that oh yes I CAN eat there. In SOME cases I am willing to “manage” through a not-great-for-me restaurant, but I usually need time/preparation to do that well (such as eating beforehand and only having some coffee and/or a small salad at the restaurant with the group).

In doing this, I haven't insisted that it's my way or the highway, I've just stated my facts, and a way I will accommodate my own needs if that's the group's decision. If they are—and often they are—willing to make an adjustment to a restaurant that will work for me, that's terrific. But if not, that's fine too—I didn't turn this into an emotional issue because it's not about my emotions, it's only about my body's needs. I only stated why I'm rejecting that part of the plans.

One of the simple but BIG changes I had to make to was stop agreeing to whatever anybody else wanted and just meekly go into an unsuitable restaurant at dinnertime,

HUNGRY, just HOPING I could find something that was marginally okay, even though I already knew that wasn't possible, especially as the basis for an entire evening out with friends, which is my most vulnerable time of day. That invariably spawned the internal bargaining that eventually led to the oh-what-the-hell-I-might-as-well refrain stumble-then-tumble.

Here's another situation: *"Gosh thanks. You know, dinner parties are tricky for me—I'm tough to feed—I have some fairly peculiar food requirements. Could we meet sometime at a restaurant instead?"*

This would be in the getting-to-know someone better socially stage, and if this relationship is going to move forward that way, sooner or later they're gonna need to know this about me. If this "costs" me socially, if it stalls or ends the relationship, so be it. I don't believe it has yet....but if it came to that, well I guess this just isn't going to be a workable social match. That's okay. There are and will be ample others.

Yes, occasionally dinner parties come up in some of our lives that are almost impossible to decline (although I am seeing less and less of that in my own life, in this sense the trend of pot-lucks and eating in restaurants together is helpful, not harmful). Nonetheless, there are a few strategies you can put into place to manage through those if you have to. #1 is to enter with a full stomach!

This brings up the type of person that I have found the most challenging to deal with along this journey. There is this "Martha Stewart" driven cultural practice of it being considered an obligation or even a "gift" to provide food for others on certain occasions or situations. To momentarily (and "festively") take the supposedly heavy burden of deciding what we will eat off our supposedly weary shoulders. This cultural practice has morphed itself into a way many people, especially women, have come to elicit praise and stoke their own self-esteem—by providing "special" foods for us to eat. Choosing not to accept these "gifts" will often seem like an affront to the giver, it can be a socially risky, scary thing to do at first. So for a time at least, we have to buck some pretty basic elements of our own culture. We congenial pleasers have to learn to temporarily displease others. That is no small task!

But again, this is what setting boundaries is all about, and as part of the learning you will find that these "Martha Stewarts" can and will usually be able to come to their own terms with you.

Then there are the little day-to-day eating landmines, such as several co-workers inviting you to come along with them to an impromptu restaurant lunch:

"Gosh, I brought my lunch with me today, I'm already set. Why don't you two go pick something up for yourselves and come back here and we can eat together? (Assuming they say no?) Thanks! We'll have to do that another time then!"

You already had a plan; all you need to do is follow it. Will your whole social life *really*

fall apart or change in any significant way if two of your co-workers go out to lunch together leaving you sitting in your office eating alone? Again, emotionally mature folks can abide that type of occurrence, that type of “rejection”.

Once, when discussing the social challenges of traveling, a lowcarb poster said *“I’m thinking of just not going. It’s just too soon to expect so much from myself. I’m just now back into the full swing of lowcarb day in and day out.”*

Of course some of this depends on the situation. I AM a little more socially choosy now, and I don’t know that that’s a bad thing. There are some good reasons (financial, for instance) for avoiding excessive or unnecessary dining out. And yes, when you are in the first few weeks of lowcarb eating, it is probably best to avoid unnecessarily difficult challenges such as going out of town with a group of friends.

But beware, decisions like this can make this "diet" you've chosen a kind of punishment, a prison sentence, and long-term that is not likely to be a workable solution. In some situations it might seem appropriate to lightly mention your concerns ahead of time to the people you will be with. If this is, indeed, going to be a permanent change in you, these people are going to need to be aware of it, and maybe even make some tiny little adjustments of their own about their ideas and expectations when you are with them.

For instance: *“I have been struggling so long with my weight, I have just gotten myself rolling on lowcarb eating. I feel SO much better when I eat this way. This trip is going to be a little tricky for me that way. I hope I can count on your support with this.”* It’s not necessary to dwell or wax dramatic with it, just state your truth, your facts. And be aware that in the end, it’s **you** who needs to set and enforce the boundaries, even if it is temporarily difficult, awkward or painful.

Another perhaps surprising but really important thing about traveling and other challenging social eating situations—especially the winter holidays!—I had to learn was to be certain I had an eating plan (and the food to fulfill it) set for the 2-3 days after I returned home. Over and over I'd do just great navigating through the challenge—the trip, the party, the funeral, the hospitalized relative, whatever. And THEN I'd come home and have such BIG emotions about having gotten through it unscathed that those strong feelings would provoke what I now call a "relief binge." I see people struggling with this a lot. [Interestingly, if there’s a single thing that sets emotionally addicted eaters apart from their more physiologically addicted counterparts, it’s that non-addicted eaters have no idea what I’m talking about when I refer to a “relief binge”. Addicted eaters know *exactly* what I mean.]

To come through the social challenges of changing my relationship with food, all I could do was, as calmly and unthreateningly as possible, continue to hold my eating boundaries steady until my family and friends made whatever internal adjustments they had to make to come to their own terms with the simple fact that I don't participate in a lot of the common ritualized eating activities anymore. That's ALL I don't do...I still attend the occasions, I still love, admire and respect the many terrific people in my life. I

do most everything else that is culturally expected—I send cards, give gifts and show up at the gatherings. I don't expect them to forego the foods or activities they enjoy, and I don't expect them to provide me with what I need to eat on these occasions. I take care of myself—sometimes by bringing an acceptable dish to the pot-luck, and other times by eating before I go, sometimes a combination of both.

If you calmly and consistently stay the course, the feelings and attitudes of others toward you will simply HAVE to adjust. What is sometimes hard for us to accept is there is little we can do to hasten or take charge of their adjustments in any way, that's beyond any healthy boundary. Isn't it even a bit arrogant and insulting to take on the responsibility for other's perceptions and feelings? Isn't that operating on the assumption that they're not capable of figuring it out for themselves?

These are not challenges most of us expected to be facing when we decided to go on a diet or change our eating. After more than 14 years on various diet lists, I can see that attempting to mediate (bargain!) our responses to these situational and cultural challenges is what ends up thwarting a lot of what would have otherwise been success. We can either ride all of this out, including all the uncomfortable and surprising feelings that go along with it, or we can go back to using sometimes—whether we use the excuse of sparing the feelings of others or the excuse of please ourselves since we are "done" now and shouldn't NEED to be so strict or feel deprived.

In addicted eaters, wagging the diet, no matter what excuse we give ourselves OR others, no matter where we are in the weight loss journey, opens that all-too-welcoming door to that all-too-familiar abyss where we used to dwell. The place that beckons, "come on back down, gosh, we've sure missed you down here."

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