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Make all the short jokes you want about February; it certainly knows how to kick the door open and make a snowy entrance! As usual, another January has quickly come and gone, and I hope it was a happy and healthy month for you, as well as productive. If one of your goals this year is eating better and dropping some extra pounds, let's dive into that topic a bit.

Statistically, it's not uncommon for New Year's goals to hit some turbulence around now, as in: "I've been on a diet for a month already, and all I've lost is 30 days". Strava, the social fitness network, has the world's largest online community of athletes who upload their workout data. That shared information provides Strava a unique vantage point to see the big picture. By analyzing member activity trends, Strava can determine when the new workout resolution wheels fall off. They actually came up with a name for the annual occurrence: 'Quitters Day,' which they have chosen the 2nd Friday in January as the day for that dubious honor. For example, in 2020, January 19th marked the day when Strava determined that based on the over 30 million January activities, that day brought the largest collective plummet. They have found that is the point of no return which typically signals the end for many of the newly minted users that stuck with their 2020 workout goals for almost three weeks. My point being, starting to second guess your plan to get in shape this year is not uncommon but that doesn't mean you need to go looking for the Quitters Club sign-up sheet!

If your first month did not match up to the expectations you set for yourself, it's no reason to lose confidence in your goal, but it may be an excellent prompt to consider refining your eating technique to hit your target weight goals.

We often overlook (or underutilize) applying a substitution method to our existing diet plan. One of the reasons this technique can be so effective is that it allows you to continue eating the types

of foods/meals you enjoy but makes them a better, healthier version. These small changes and modifications can deliver significant results. Unlike many of the typical diet plans, it does not introduce radical changes that prove to be a short term effort that isn't sustainable. There's an old saying that "the best diet plan is the one that works for you," and often failed attempts are simply because that particular plan wasn't a sustainable fit for you. The diet industry is a highly competitive market where a full spectrum of different methods competes for the attention and money of the people looking to lose weight and keep it off. The 'keep it off' part is where so many end customers end up disappointed and frustrated when their weight drops only to come back with a vengeance months later.

That's the beautiful simplicity of substituting. You are essentially still enjoying your preferences but just ratcheting up the quality level and, in doing so, reducing calories and sugar intake. I'll pause here to say sugar is a whole topic unto itself, but it's without question one of the leading causes of the obesity epidemic we have here in the US. Simply put, we are inundated with sugar in virtually every aisle and cooler in the grocery store, and we are consuming entirely way too much of it unless we actively try and limit our intake of it. (For a very enlightening 22 minute TED Talk video on the subject by Dr. Robert Lustig just Google: 'Sugar: The Elephant in the Kitchen')

As a simple first step at upgrading your everyday food choices, you can take a pen and a pad, and on the left side, write down what you usually eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, drinks, and dessert. On the right side of the page, write down a healthier alternative using a food substitution reference chart. My go-to suggestion would be the "On Target Living" Food Target, which is available as a free PDF download on their website. It does a fantastic job of providing a massive list of common fats, proteins, and carbohydrates ranked by poor, fair, good, better, and best and is a very easy to use chart. (I have had one on our refrigerator door for years).

Let's use breakfast as an example and look at some common choices:

Coffee with Cream and sugar

Bagel with cream cheese

Sweetened yogurt

Bacon/sausage

Eggs

Here's a similar menu substituting healthier choices:

Coffee with skim or oat milk (no sugar)

English muffin with almond butter (or a small amount of light cream cheese)

Nonfat Greek yogurt with some added berries

Turkey bacon or turkey sausage

Egg whites

That's just breakfast, obviously, but you get the idea. This approach can be applied to virtually everything you eat and drink. If you're looking for healthy substitution resources and recipes there are plenty of them online (for example, www.eatthis.com has a ton of great info), but the main takeaway here is to look at the individual items you usually eat and identify a way to improve it. Default ingredients found in packaged and processed can be super high in fat and sugar (and all the other ingredients with mystery names that sound nothing like something we should ingest). When you start thinking creatively about how to arrive at flavor, you'll find a whole world of options out there that make your food much healthier but don't leave you feeling like you're torturing yourself. This new approach of slightly modifying all the things you usually eat will quickly turn into the very positive habit of automatically thinking about improving your meal.

Having a sandwich for lunch? How about making it on a wrap instead of bread and using mustard instead of mayo? Dessert? Instead of ice cream, toss some frozen banana pieces, a little skim milk and cocoa powder in the blender and, voila, a healthy ice cream alternative.

The fantastic thing about this approach is your tastes will quickly adjust to the small changes, unlike other diet plans which want you to swap that delicious ½ lb. cheeseburger for a rice cake. Those radical changes tend to grind our gears psychologically and are prone to failure because

unless we learn to love rice cakes, it's a daily endeavor to avoid the things you actually want to eat.

This substitution approach can help you achieve your goals through slight but continuous improvements in your favorite food choices. What we're really talking about here is not a diet. It's a change in how we think about what we eat, an approach that evolves into the new lens that all of your meals are seen through.

Getting back to that cheeseburger for a second. How about swapping out the ground beef for 99% fat-free ground turkey meat, using low-fat cheese, and having it on a wrap, 100 calorie English muffin, or open-faced with half the bun? Have fun getting creative and let me know how it goes at info@bar40.org!