



KAREN'S EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING NUTRITION PRIORITIES DURING RECOVERY



One cold December day, snow began to fall in huge fluffy flakes.

I held out my mittened hand to catch some flakes and marvel at their intricate patterns. Gazing at the delicate flakes, I thought - Even at dark times of our lives, there is always beauty to be found. I tried to hold this reflection close to my heart as I stepped back into the house. The past few weeks had been especially tough for our family, with Sonia's illness holding her in a relentless grip. She was on yet another wait list for hospital treatment, with no support available from the program. Her weight had dropped again and she was barely able to eat.

Christmas was coming, a season that I usually love - the music, the lights, the gift-giving and the special food. Although I've drifted away from my Christian roots, Christmas is still a spiritual time for me, when I to ponder the symbolism of this festival - the rebirth of hope in a dark time. But this year I was dreading our family gathering. I knew that for Sonia, Christmas was a time of intense anxiety. She hadn't joined in any family celebrations for many months, avoiding social interactions even with our closest relatives. The special foods that filled the house at Christmas caused her great distress.

On Christmas Eve we had the first of two special holiday meals, shared with my 92-year-old mother and my three brothers. We lit a crackling fire in the fireplace, listened to Christmas carols and sipped on hot apple cider. My mother is of Norwegian heritage, and one of the traditional foods we eat at the Christmas Eve dinner is a special type of rice pudding.

“Sonia, please join us for the Christmas Eve dinner. Everyone wants to see you – it’s been so long since you met any of the family. You don’t have to eat much - just have a little of Nana’s rice pudding. It means a lot to her.”

“You know I can’t do that! Just the sight of all that food is a huge trigger for me. It literally terrifies me! There’s no way I can sit at the table with everyone.”

I felt a familiar feeling of frustration. Why couldn't she at least make the effort to join this special family gathering?

Christmas Eve was awkward. Sonia did not come downstairs at all, and I had to say that she was feeling unwell and couldn't join the gathering. On Christmas Day we went to my mother's house for a big turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Sonia stayed home. I promised myself not to get into another argument with her about her choice to skip both family gatherings. But the atmosphere in our house was electric with tension. I sighed. Sometimes we can argue without even saying a word.



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After the holiday was over, I visited a dear friend who was aware of the struggles our family was facing. She gave me a magazine article which described the concept of a “food story” – the relationship a family has with food. I read the article with fascination. These food stories begin in childhood and evolve over a lifetime, shaped by influences from the society and culture in which we live. In the article, one woman described growing up in a household where both parents were often on diets and who made frequent remarks about their children's eating habits and their bodies. A man reflected about the intense focus on sports and fitness in his childhood family, in which food was only an afterthought, something grabbed quickly from a fast-food restaurant on the way to a game. A third person described growing up in poverty where food scarcity was a constant threat. The author of the article also explored the cultural meanings of food. When love is expressed through food, family members may be expected to eat large quantities of food at celebration dinners, sometimes far more than they'd prefer.

Trying yet again to unlock the puzzle of Sonia's eating disorder, I thought about our own family's “food story”. When I was growing up, my mother was a good cook who prepared healthy, well-balanced meals. She had no issues with food, weight or body image, nor did she advocate dieting. My mother also enjoyed gardening and often served fresh produce at dinner. A fortunate food story indeed! However, I was a tomboy as a child, not interested in cooking or gardening despite my mother's attempts to teach me her skills.

After I got married to my Indian husband, he and I moved to a small town in the Himalayan foothills. We were extremely busy with medical work and had little time to think about food. Our diet consisted primarily of simple meals of lentils, rice and vegetables. When we moved back to Canada, we continued this basic

way of cooking and eating, supplemented by take-out meals from local restaurants.

This was so different from the examples I'd seen from my mother and from my Indian mother-in-law. Indian vegetarian cuisine is astonishingly varied, and Pradeep's mother was an excellent cook. She would make delicious meals made with fresh vegetables, lentils or beans, rice and roti. The spice combinations made each dish unique, and food was never wasted.



I didn't adopt good food habits from either my mother or my mother-in-law.

In our family, food was just something to keep our bodies fuelled. Perhaps we never modelled respect for food in the way we should have, nor did we teach our children how to select and prepare good food. I felt a familiar feeling of guilt arising in my body. Yet this time I managed to stop the spiral of that agonizing emotion. Although I didn't model a love of food and of cooking in my family, it still doesn't mean that this caused Sonia's eating disorder. I realized how important it is to balance a reflection about one's food story with the fact that the past cannot be changed.

~Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar

