

## Escape from the Pleasure Trap

*Unhealthy choices nearly destroyed my career. Now, I'm helping others recover from the same mistakes.*

by Anthony Streutker, MD



**T**here was a time in my life when I was running up tabs that I couldn't afford, physically and mentally. I was out of shape, overweight, and depressed over a personal tragedy. From outward appearances, I was a successful, well-connected doctor. But inside I was stressed out and insecure. I felt like I had lost touch with myself.

Looking back, I was caught in the "pleasure trap." That's the title of a book written by Dr. Alan Goldhamer and Dr. Douglas Lisle that describes the things in our culture that make us susceptible to dietary and lifestyle excesses. I was making bad choices about what I was eating and how I was living my life—and I knew it wasn't going to be easy to get out.

This is the story of how I escaped the pleasure trap, thanks to good friends, a strong support network, and rethinking what it means to live a healthy lifestyle. That may sound strange coming from a doctor, but if you knew me back then, you might not recognize me today. I've lost weight—a lot of weight—and I've kept it off. I also feel more energetic and secure in



who I am and what I want to accomplish. When I make my rounds at TrueNorth Health Center today, I can't wait to meet my patients and help them with their treatment plans.

One of my specialties is treating and reversing diabetes, from which I recovered myself by following an exclusively whole-plant-food diet and undergoing medically supervised, water-only fasts. When I tell my diabetic patients about what I went through in the pleasure trap and what it took to get out of it, they realize they can do it themselves. For many of them, the only way to cope with pain or stress is through their drug of "no choice," whether it's food or alcohol or cigarettes. I know what it's like to feel that way. I'm living proof that people can break out of the trap and turn those dangerous behaviors into healthy habits.

### From Dreams to Devastation

When I look back on my youth, I realize how blessed I

was. My father was a successful dentist of German descent and my mother was a nurse and the Greek dynamo who directed the family. At a very young age I knew I wanted to be a doctor. In college I earned a degree in biochemistry; I was fascinated by the power of chemistry to reveal how life worked. When I finished my residency in 1999, I immediately found a dream job at Eisenhower Medical Center in Palm Springs. With a strong background in urgent care and workers' compensation and my family history of long-tenured medical professionals, I was primed for a prosperous career.

My life was almost too good to be true. I was in charge of nearly all the Eisenhower medical properties in some of the most affluent parts of Southern California. My patients included celebrities, socialites, and members of President Gerald Ford's Secret Service team. I was the only medical review officer and workers' compensation "guru" in Coachella Valley. I was also proud of my golf game; I had a single handicap and enjoyed playing the world-class courses in the area.

And then tragedy struck. On Valentine's Day 2010, I learned my niece had been killed in a car accident. I was devastated. I stopped answering my phone, I stopped seeing my friends, I stopped playing golf. For years I had kept a disciplined schedule, planning out my days in precise order, but not any longer. I started making poor choices about my diet and lifestyle, and I began to burn the candle at both ends. My health suffered. I could see the changes every morning in the mirror. There were times when I tried to get back on track, but I couldn't stay with it. And every time I had a relapse, I would turn my anger and frustration on myself.

And then early one Sunday morning in August 2014, the earth shook. I mean that literally. One of the strongest earthquakes in Northern California in decades knocked me out of bed and left me stunned. I can't explain what happened, but when I woke up, I felt different, as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt like my old self, with new strength and confidence.

I moved back to Santa Rosa, California, where I grew up. Santa Rosa is a bustling city an hour north of San Francisco in

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the heart of Sonoma County wine country. It's a popular tourist destination, but it's also home to a progressive community of health and wellness facilities. A friend introduced me to Dr. Goldhamer, who ran TrueNorth Health Center, which specializes in medically supervised, water-only fasting and whole-plant-food diets.

At the time I met Dr. Goldhamer, I was pushing 250 pounds. I was eating a lot of restaurant food, rich sauces, sweets, and processed food loaded with salt, sugar, and oil. During my physical exam, I was diagnosed with diabetes and metabolic syndrome. Within a week, I started my first water-only fast. I tolerated the fast well and almost immediately felt more energetic. The combination of water-only fasting and eating a plant-exclusive diet paid off: after six weeks, my lab results showed nearly normal blood sugar levels, and they've continued to improve. Today, my levels are below the diabetic range, and my lipids have also dropped.

The cumulative effect of fasting, losing weight, and adhering to an exclusively whole-plant-food diet free of salt, oil, and sugar transformed my outlook on life. I realized you can have a great job, a successful career, and a loving family, but if you don't take care of your diet or lifestyle, you put everything in jeopardy—your physical health, your mental health, and your emotional well-being.

Regaining my health also changed my viewpoint on practicing medicine. As a conventional doctor, I was trained to help patients manage their symptoms with medication and other therapies. Now I'm helping them get well and stay well. That might sound like a contradiction. Aren't doctors supposed to do that, you might be asking? Yes, we're trained to heal people and do no harm, but sometimes the conventional approach to treating disease may not be the cure.

## Getting to the Root Cause

Now, for the first time in my career, I'm seeing patients getting better because we explore the root cause of their problems. I have the opportunity to see them every day and can take the time to get to know them instead of having to meet a new patient every 15 minutes. Now I get to see the results in real time.

Since my first fast, I've completed three more. I'm continuing to lose weight and build momentum. My most recent fast in March coincided with California's shelter-in-place orders to combat the spread of the coronavirus. It was a wonderful opportunity to be here with my patients. Where else would I have had the chance to eat delicious, healthy food every day and continue to do my job in such a supportive environment?

One of the things we've all learned during the pandemic is the importance of maintaining our health. Fueling our bodies with a good diet, staying active, and getting plenty of rest doesn't guarantee that we won't get sick. But we know that people who suffer from metabolic syndrome and have issues with obesity and hypertension are much more susceptible to COVID-19 and other viruses like it.

One of the ways we're staying connected with our patients who are unable to travel or who prefer to speak to us from the safety and security of their own home is through remote telephone- and video-conference coaching. I've been surprised at how powerful the telehealth coaching with my patients has been. People are absolutely loving it for its convenience and safety. This is definitely the wave of the future, whether it's in business or in health.

In some ways, I feel like I've been given a second chance, and that makes me more determined to help patients who are struggling to overcome the same challenges I had. With the perils of the pleasure trap behind me, I'm focused on being the best doctor I can be, and bringing those hard-earned lessons into my practice. I think I have what it takes to make TrueNorth Health Center a better place, and I know it will make me a better and healthier person. 



Dr. Anthony Streutker and Dr. Alan Goldhamer at TrueNorth Health Center

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**Dr. Anthony Streutker** has nearly 20 years of experience in primary and urgent care medicine, with a recent emphasis on the treatment of diabetes. After graduating from UC-Davis with a BS in biochemistry, he earned his MD at Wayne State University School of Medicine and completed his family medicine residency at UC-Davis Medical Center in Sacramento in 1999. He began his career as a staff physician at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, CA, and was promoted to Medical Director of Occupational Health Services in 2002. He went on to serve in positions throughout the Northern California region and in Palm Desert, CA. In April 2018, attracted by the prospect of solving medical problems at the root cause, Dr. Streutker joined TrueNorth Health Center as an attending physician. When he is not taking care of patients, Dr. Streutker enjoys connecting to the great outdoors, playing tennis, golf, and table tennis.