

When the Journey to Health is a Roller Coaster

A member shares her ongoing struggle toward her health goals

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I first discovered plant-based eating at 23 when I read *Diet for a New America* by John Robbins. Appalled at how animals were treated, I vowed to stop eating animal products, but unfortunately, I took the junk-food vegan route. Without the right people or environment to guide me, I returned to what I knew: food that was high in protein and fat, processed, or from restaurants.

My unhealthy relationship with food probably began in my teens. When babysitting, I'd rummage through the fridge for goodies like cheesecake or exotic fruit. Working in restaurants then proved to be the perfect environment to feed my growing love for unhealthy food.

Jump ahead 20 years to when I stumbled upon *The China Study* by Dr. T. Colin Campbell. Instantly, I went plant-based. Finally, at 45, I was paying attention to my health. After five months of eating WFPB, though, I ended up with a mysterious virus that made every joint in my body so painful I could barely walk. Uncertain and inexperienced, I was doubtful about continuing with my plant-based diet.

I turned back to familiar protein- and fat-laden animal products. And wine—let's not forget about alcohol. Though I know very well that the World Health Organization says there is no safe level of alcohol, for me poor eating and alcohol go hand in hand.

As I struggled with weight gain, sore joints, and the beginning of high cholesterol, I revisited what I knew was the optimal way to eat. When I consumed real, unprocessed foods like vegetables, fruit, grains, legumes, and nuts/seeds, I lost weight, felt terrific, and was full of energy.

The problem was that I couldn't stay with this wonderful, healthy way of eating. The artery-clogging stuff of the modern world was alluring, and it was everywhere. My stressful teaching job, combined with being a wife and mother, left me tired and stressed, and I escaped with food and wine.

Here's the pattern: I eat well, feel great, and lose some weight. My clothes fit better, my skin looks healthier, and I have more energy. I'm on top of the world! Then I have just a little bit of something unhealthy. That slip might lead to only a day or two of veering off track, but it often leads into weeks or months of eating calorie-dense, nutritionally poor food, even when I tell myself, "This time I'm determined, and I know I can do it."

The weight comes back on, my health begins to deteriorate, and I feel awful. I feel disappointed in myself. It gets to a point where I can't stand it, and I start the process again. You can imagine how my mental health has suffered after years of being caught in this cycle. I've been filled with doubt, sadness, depression, anger, worry, fear, and shame.

So, why not stick to a plant-based diet if I feel so good when I eat that way?

For people like me, high levels of fat, sugar, and salt in animal products and processed foods ramp up our dopamine levels, temporarily giving us the comfort we seek. Some of us really struggle and get snared in the pleasure trap over and over again. (Read *The Pleasure Trap*, by Dr. Alan Goldhamer and Dr. Doug Lisle.)

Even with all I've learned from Dr. T. Colin Campbell, Dr. McDougall, Dr. Esselstyn, Chef AJ, Drs. Goldhamer & Lisle, and Dr. Brooke Goldner, I haven't been able to stay off the roller coaster ride of eating well and losing weight, then eating poorly and gaining it back.

Fortunately, in the last few years, I've learned to no longer berate myself when I falter. Instead, I speak to myself with compassion, and then move on and try again. This is key. I keep trying and refuse to give up on me.

For some of us, sticking to plant-based eating is like giving up cigarettes. It can take many attempts before we're able to give up our addictive substance. I tried 5–10 times to quit smoking before I had success at the



age of 40. I had smoked for 26 years, but my perseverance finally paid off!

Although we might feel alone, there are many of us for whom certain foods are just addictive to our brains. We have to work much harder to abstain from them. Even with a breast cancer diagnosis three years ago, I haven't been able to consistently stick to a plant-based diet. I've made progress by losing and keeping off over 20 pounds, but I'm still carrying an extra 25 to 30 pounds. In the back of my mind, there's worry about the cancer resurfacing.

It's also easy to feel like a failure when I see so many people transform their health and bodies after going plant-based, or when I notice before-and-after pictures of people who've changed their diets overnight and never looked back.

If you don't follow a WFPB lifestyle perfectly, that's okay. You're not alone. What matters is the continued commitment to pursue a healthy lifestyle and never giving up.

I'm getting closer and closer to achieving my health goals, and as a member of the NHA, I'm not only reminded of the importance of eating a plant-based diet, I can also rely on valuable health-related information from an organization that "gets" it. It was such a delight to find the NHA *Health Science* magazine and discover insights on topics like stress and aging with a WFPB philosophy behind it.

Now 58, I'm a retired teacher, blogger (alisoncarrey.com), and newbie TikToker (@liveyourtruelife), sharing the ups and downs of my health journey. I'm on my way to reaching a comfortable and healthy body and weight. I feel confident that I'll enter my golden years with vitality while being free of the shackles of chronic illnesses, medications, dependence on others, or fear. I feel confident because I'll always work towards aligning my actions with my beliefs.

I will never give up on me. 🌱