Helping a friend to eat healthier [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a friend who drinks nothing but Diet Pepsi, eats foods such as top ramen, Triscuits, processed cheese spreads, bbq potato chips, microwaveable dinners, and fast foods. What kind of health problems will she have from this kind of diet? She's always been overweight and her version of exercise is walking to the mailbox. How can I help her change her eating habits?

? In a quandary

Answer

Dear In a quandary,

Your friend definitely isn't alone, but in order for her to change her behaviors or ingrained patterns, she needs to acknowledge that a problem exists, or see a benefit from making a change. Because food and eating habits are such a personal aspect of our lives, it can be a sensitive area of discussion. To answer your first question, diets that are high in fat, sodium, and calories, and low in fruits, veggies, calcium, and other nutrients, may contribute to the development of diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and osteoporosis, among others. If this factor is a concern to your friend, she may consider changing her patterns. However, if she is healthy now, the thought of developing any of these conditions in the far off future may not be motivation enough for her in the present time to change habits with which she's been comfortable.

One thing is for sure ? criticizing and nagging don't work! So, what can you do? First of all, you can suggest spending time together doing some sort of activity. If you can get your friend moving, she may become interested in eating more healthfully. Try to disguise exercise into a fun pursuit. Some ideas include:

- Going for a walk
- Swimming
- Hiking
- Bike riding
- Flying a kite
- Playing Frisbee
- ice skating
• Borrowing a dog to bring to the park (or bringing your own) and playing ball

Another tactic you can try is to determine something that is important to her, and show her that eating better can help improve the matter. While many people aren’t motivated by diseases they can’t relate to or that seem intangible, immediate concerns can hold more relevance. For example, skin problems, low energy levels, or stomach discomfort can promote a greater incentive or inclination to change. If she complains about any of these conditions, some appropriate suggestions could include drinking more water than diet soda, substituting a juicy piece of fruit for the chips, or heading over to an enticing salad bar rather than making a quick trip for fast food. Considering and implementing any changes or new patterns are only part of the challenge; maintenance is also key, and can be easier to follow-through when done together with a peer than by one’s self. Your can demonstrate your support by bringing over some farm fresh apples, cooking a healthy meal together, going to lunch together at an eatery where healthy choices are available, walking together regularly during lunch breaks, etc.

Remember, gentle suggestions are better received than harsh criticism. Advice that begins with "You should..." may fall on deaf ears. Instead you can try to initiate a discussion, saying something like, "You know, I just read an article that said drinking water is important for keeping skin healthy... and I'm drinking more water as a result." Having a conversation about this subject may get your friend to think, and perhaps try, to take steps leading to healthier patterns of eating and activity. Then again, she may decide not to pursue anything at this time. If this is the case, you can express your concern to your friend, and let her know that if she would ever like to pursue healthier eating habits you are ready to support her. In the mean time, remember why you’re friends in the first place and enjoy your time together!

Alice!
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