Eating healthy when my partner doesn't

Dear Alice,

I am very interested in nutrition and enjoy eating a well-balanced diet because it makes me feel healthier, happier and more energized. I also have a terrible sweet tooth, which I combat by simply not buying junk food when I shop for groceries (although I will indulge on rare occasions). This strategy has worked for me very well up until now.

I am living with my boyfriend who, despite even his doctor’s warnings, has a rather unhealthy diet. In an effort to nudge him in a better direction, I have offered to cook most of our meals at home myself, but with little success. He’s a picky eater and often declines the meals I prepare in favor of pizza or Chinese take-out instead. I would just give up and let him clog his arteries, but his unhealthy habits are starting to affect me. When he brings home tacos, or especially bags of candy, I inevitably eat them also. I am a decent cook, but a greasy pizza always tastes better. If I can't change his habits, how do I at least keep him from changing mine?

Sincerely,

Nancy Nutrition

Answer

Dear Nancy Nutrition,

Feeling energized and happier are just some of the great benefits you get when you're eating healthfully! And, it's certainly thoughtful of you to want to let your boyfriend in on the secret that eating well equals feeling well. But, you're right that you might need to make peace with your different lifestyles, at least for the time being. Trying to change his behaviors if he's just not ready might only frustrate both of you. But, your own health goals don't have to suffer. The first step toward establishing happy, healthy relationship with both your dinner and your date might be to have an honest conversation with him about your eating goals (if you haven't already). He may not even realize how much of an impact he is having on you. You can also explicitly ask for his support as you try to eat healthier.

Just like anything in a romantic relationship, it takes two (or sometimes more) to tango. There are ways you may suggest that he might be able to support you in your healthy eating, and there are also options to consider that you yourself can try to give yourself a better shot at reaching your nutrition goals:
Ways he might be able to help you:

- **Pizza for one, please.** If he really wants to get take-out, consider asking him get only one serving. For example, rather than ordering a whole pizza, he could just get the slice or two he wants, so that you won't be tempted.

- **Out of sight, out of mind.** For those tempting, but not-so-healthy foods that do find their way into your house, you could consider asking him to stash them away in a secret spot. If you can't see them? or if you don't even know where they are? you simply can't eat them!

- **Pass the support, not the snacks.** Even around a mouthful of fries, your partner can offer words of support and encouragement. Just because he doesn't make the same choices as you doesn't mean you can't ask for his verbal support! A few words of encouragement could go a long way in redirecting your hand from the cookies to the carrots.

Ways you can support yourself:

- **(Portion) size matters.** If you want to indulge in a treat, you might consider portion size. Rather than taking the whole bag with you when you want a snack, portion out just a handful or a serving, and then put the bag or container away. Consider reading Food guidelines? how much is a serving? \(^2\) to get a sense of how much is too much when it comes to portion sizes.

- **Give healthy foods the spotlight.** Consider keeping healthy choices, like fruit or veggies, in an easily accessible location like out on the kitchen counter or at the front of the fridge.

- **Learn to love lunch dates.** If you're having an especially hard time avoiding the junk food around home, consider inviting a like-minded friend to grab a healthy lunch or dinner with you. Of course, you could also invite your partner along!

While your beau might seem rooted in his ways, you never know what lifestyle changes he might be open to, now or in the future. There could be small ways you could introduce healthy changes. Consider going on a walk or jog together before or after you eat. Or, you could make cooking into a date night activity, so that he could start to develop some skills to make his own tasty and healthy meals. You might also offer to give him a small taste of your delicious home-cooked food (rather than expecting him to eat an entire home-cooked meal)? perhaps he'll reconsider knocking it once he tries it! Over time (and after some tasty samples of your cooking), he might start to see the merits of your healthy choices and want to try them himself. If and when that day comes, you might point him towards healthy eating resources to help him get a jumpstart on forming new habits. You might want to check out Dining out's effect on health \(^3\) and What to eat? \(^4\) in the Go Ask Alice! archives as a starting place.

In a world of tempting, but sometimes unhealthy food choices, you've managed to establish healthy eating habits for yourself. This is quite an achievement! Keep it up. When the going gets rough, though, or if you feel like you're all alone, consider making use of the many other healthy eating resources out there. Consider speaking with a registered dietician or seeking out some cooking or nutrition classes in your area. These could help keep you connected to supportive resources as you reach for your goals.

Alice!

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