

***Time-Honoring Intention: Take Your Holidays from
Frantic to Food-Friendly in 37 Easy Steps!***

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Are you one of those people who binges from late November until early January, planning to straighten up and get serious about diet and exercise come the first week back at work after the new year? Do you indulge in food or habits you know aren't "good for you" with the rationalization that "it's the holidays?" On the inside you're quietly muttering to yourself, "This is probably going to go straight to my hips" as you reach for your third cup of egg nog.

One of my clients was recently "shoulding" all over herself about what she should eat and should not eat, what she should be buying to have in the house for her family, how she should be working out more consistently, and wondering how she should support her husband's recent choice to eat more healthfully without getting stark and stringent about sugar and snacks around the house.

She was interested in how to minimize the stress of the holidays and not indulge in stressful eating, the kind that creates the weight gain that's just as expected this time of year as the tension at a holiday family meal.

We talked about the fact that the body has two parts to the autonomic nervous system, the part of the nervous system that runs the automatic functions of the body. They are called the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous system.

I'm sure you've heard of the first half, the sympathetic nervous system: the fight or flight response. That's when your body instinctually performs functions necessary for your survival. This is a very strong response, and it always wins. A lot of us in the DC area are frequent fighters and flyers. To put it in modern day terms, it's the white-knuckle gripping of the steering wheel, the automatic slamming on the brakes, and your heart practically beating out of your chest as some knucklehead on I-95 swerves in front of you unexpectedly.

The second response, which truly is secondary to the survival "get me out of here" response, is the feed and breed response, ruled by the parasympathetic nervous system. That's when you get relaxed, happy, hungry, playful, creative, and the desire to become intimate increases. Picture, if you will, the lazy sleepiness that takes over after a big, delicious holiday meal. Some of that may be tryptophan and the after effects of a sugar crash, but a lot of it is simply the normal response of the body to shuttle attention to the digestive system and away from the brain and periphery of the body. (Hands cold after eating? Normal!)

What's interesting about this, and how it applies to weight gain and stress, is that when the body is under the influence of the fight or flight response (the sympathetic nervous system), it is NOT under the influence of the feed and breed response (parasympathetic). Now that might sound like a big "duh!" Stay with me.

If you are under stress, your body cannot process the food you're giving it. Think about that. If your body is doing the adrenalin and cortisol thing, it CANNOT do the digestive enzymes and absorbing nutrients thing. So, eating under stress yields calorie intake but not nourishment. Ever eaten a whole bag of something while glued to an exciting movie? Do you remember the chips? I doubt it, but your hips and abdomen do (that's where most undigested remains of a meal end up).

So what are these 37 steps? I've broken them down to two easy parts to increase your nourishment, decrease your undesired weight gain (and guilt!), and switch from frantic to food-friendly. Ready? Here they are: breathe and chew.

1. Take five deep breaths. Deep breathing reduces the amount of adrenalin released and shifts the body's response from stress to relaxation. Oxygen is the bridge between the stress response and the relaxation response. We've established that the body cannot do both at the same time.
2. Chew each bite 32 times, one chew for each tooth (even if you don't have all of them anymore). Chewing produces enzymes which help digest the food. The longer you chew, the more enzymes you produce, and the more complete the absorption of nutrients.

As you're considering your gift list, consider that Time is the greatest gift we can offer another BE-ing Human. It's also the most wonderful thing you can give yourself. Allow. Be mindful of your choices. Eat whatever you're going to eat with joy and gratitude. Release the guilt. If you're going to choose the pecan tassies over the celery sticks, celebrate and enjoy them. Take ONE. Slow down. Smell the nutty sweetness and get into it. Savor it. Get mindful and purposeful about each thing you put on your plate. It'll change your eating habits, and it'll increase your enjoyment of food. You might even eat less!

Slowing down and enjoying our food is actually a movement across the globe with the Slow Food Movement (www.slowfoodusa.org). Taking the time to enjoy every moment in your life enhances the quality of the time you have. So put time on your side rather than fat on your sides. And have a fabulous holiday.

If you're looking for more tips on living full out and healthfully at the same time, consider giving yourself a gift of free subscription to Words of Wellness, Sally's mostly-monthly newsletter. It's a healthy helping of high content, high value ideas, delicious and simple recipes for healthy food, and nutritional research information that makes a great side-dish on your buffet of life.