

GOING DEEPER THAN DIETS

Keeping your New Year's Resolution Interview
with health Coach,

Frances Keogh

By Leela Vera Morales



The party is over, folks, and the ugly lights are on. The holidays have come to a screeching halt. The Christmas cookies, chocolate truffles, turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, eggnog lattes, and dozens of sugary, artificially-dyed martinis have ended their fiesta in your gullet and are now resting soundly in your gut. Once again, you face the New Year challenge: how to shed the baggage and return to (or finally begin) healthy, sane living?

A study published by the Journal of Clinical Psychology in 2012, shows that weight loss is the number one New Year's resolution. Despite the overwhelming interest in losing weight with the coming new year, few succeed. According to Dr. Avya Sharma of the Canadian Obesity Network, setting unrealistic goals and expectations is a major reason for widespread failure. The question then becomes how does one make key changes in their lifestyle and diet without overreaching?

To answer this, I've invited Frances Keogh to share what she's learned as a certified health coach. Keogh is a laughter and hatha yoga instructor and recent graduate from the Institute of Integrative Nutrition – the world's largest nutrition school founded in 1993 by Joshua Rosenthal.

MORALES: Frances, you've gone through the IIN one-year training, and by the sounds of it, you've learned a lot! But tell us, what exactly is health coaching?

KEOGH: My role as a health coach is, essentially, to help people create a vibrant healthy life. That can mean different things for different people – more energy, a balanced lifestyle, a healthy body, and a more joyful life. I customize my programs to meet each individual's needs. For example, if weight loss is the goal, we work through lifestyle adjustments, rather than diets.

MORALES: Why not diets?

KEOGH: Most diets are based in deprivation and guilt – ineffectual methods for humans.

Diets may work, but they work temporarily. Many people end up bingeing and feeling guilty. Health coaching is about bio-individuality: your needs aren't necessarily the same as mine. I've looked at over 100 different diets, and while many have helpful components, they still have the same problem. I help people to make incremental adjustments in their lifestyle: rather than aim to lose 20 pounds in two months, you look at what is sustainable over time to give gradual weight loss, but also reduce stress, increase energy, and create stronger community and connections.

MORALES: It sounds like a much more holistic approach. What lifestyle aspects do you focus on that affect one's food choices?

KEOGH: Almost every eating issue is connected in some way to what we call primary foods. Primary food is the food that is not on our plate. It's our connections, our spiritual beliefs, our work, our exercise. If we eat brown rice and kale every day, but our primary food is out of balance, we won't necessarily have good health. It's important to balance your primary foods so that your secondary foods function at their optimum levels. In exploring client's dietary issues we invariably come across primary food issues.

For example, comfort food. Some people turn to certain foods when stressed. As a health coach I create a safe space for people to open up and make the connections. We look at what their trigger points for stress are, and search for healthier ways to release some of that stress. An extreme example of this might be a client that is obese who isn't losing weight because she was sexually abused. She doesn't want to lose weight because, at a deep psychological level, she believes it will attract men. Of course, that kind of counseling is out of the realm of a health coach, but by first recognizing the source of the problem, she is able to seek out other avenues of help.

MORALES: Now that you've explained it, it seems so obvious, doesn't it?

KEOGH: Yes! A lot of money is spent on fad diets, unusual techniques, and fancy gadgets, but it's really not that complicated. At many levels we could all be healthier just by making some simple changes. Reducing processed foods, crowding in, not crowding out: we don't try to rid our diet of bad foods, we try to put more good stuff into our diet.

Also mindful eating – being conscious of what you're putting into your body, as well as the environment in which you eat: eating under stress, being distracted, or engaging in negative conversation all affect our digestion and overall health. So much of it really is common sense, but you need to understand the basics first. Spend

the bulk of your life eating what's good for your body, and a certain percentage eating what you want without feeling guilty about it. It's also about understanding where cravings come from.

MORALES: What have you discovered as a health coach? What has surprised you?

KEOGH: I was amazed to discover that just about every American I have talked with has a carbon copy of childhood diets: processed foods, lots of sugars, low on vegetables - especially green vegetables - sodas and dairy drinks. Their diets as adults are usually significantly better. It's particularly interesting to me because my childhood diet growing up in the UK was radically different. We went to the green grocer, the butcher, the baker the candlestick maker... Everything was fresh.

Part of the problem is when you have a tight budget and you're trying to feed a family. It's so much cheaper to buy a burger and fries than healthy food - even at a fast food restaurant you spend a lot more on a salad (which is still not very good for you). Almost invariably it is healthier to eat at home than to eat out... as long as you're eating whole food.

MORALES: What do you see as some of the biggest obstacles to health in the USA?

KEOGH: First, we need to understand that we are in a major health crisis in the US. We have the second highest rate of obesity in the world; type two diabetes is now an epidemic. The good news is that a lot of it is fixable with education. Knowledge about how processed foods affect our health, for example. For me it's about empowering the people. You have to educate people to understand they can make significant changes and improvements to their health. We have a huge industry of processed and fast foods. If you educate the individual to ask for something different, those companies will start producing better quality, healthier foods. We have to know as individuals what we are eating, we have to be self-responsible, and we have to create a demand.

The quick fix mentality is another major problem - "just pop a pill!". Preventive medicine is sustainable

and effective in the long term. Everything else is short term and has negative side effects. And it's expensive! Medical care costs are out of control! We all have to be held accountable. It's not just the big businesses and the fast food companies - we all have to be responsible for our choices. It's about education, understanding, and being accountable for your own health and wellness.

MORALES: You mentioned that as a child in the UK, fresh food was the norm. Do you believe the organic and local food movements we're seeing today in the US play a role in health?

KEOGH: Oh, God yes!

MORALES: How has your training and work as a health coach influenced your life?

KEOGH: Significantly. It's put into perspective so many things I've already known. It's allowed me to connect with more interesting people around the country and abroad. It's helped me on my own personal journey, to identify what my own contribution is with my work, to be accountable with myself, and to know that I am not alone - there are so many interesting people out there with a lot of good intentions and that it is possible to make a difference in the lives of others.

MORALES: It sounds like a very rich experience in your life. So let's say someone is interested in your program. How would they get started?

KEOGH: Well the first step is to do a complimentary health history, which takes about fifty minutes and covers basic lifestyle information: age, occupation, etc. But it also includes questions related to what you ate regularly as a child. When I do a health history

I ask "high mileage questions" - basically questions that are very open-ended. By asking the right questions and being a good listener, I can get a good sense of what's going on in this person's life. The health history tells me two things: a) do I feel qualified to work with them, and b) do they feel comfortable working with me? From there I offer a six month program where we meet two times a month, either in person, or via Skype if they're not a local client. We also exchange emails, perhaps do a workshop or cooking class, and they receive handouts, all to help them meet their goals.

MORALES: Your program is clearly tailored to the individual, but can you give some general advice on making dietary changes?

KEOGH: Keep it simple. Reduce sugar and processed foods; increase whole foods. Reduce your intake of sodas – including diet sodas! Increase your water consumption. Look at the labels of what you’re consuming. Look at the sugar content in everything you’re eating. There are a lot of hidden sugars in processed foods. Increase fresh vegetables and fruits. It’s not so much about the fat content. Low fat foods: what’s put in to replace the fat and improve the flavor? Sugar and salt. Actually good, healthy fats are much better for you than low fat - whole milk is better than skim or low fat - extra virgin olive oil or coconut oil. And of course, balance your primary foods.

For more information, or to contact Frances for a free health history, visit her website:

www.inbalance-fran.net.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leela Vera Morales is an author, clothing designer, mezcal distributor, and wandering yogi. She is currently living in Mexico with her husband, a native Aztec dancer, where they are building their business: alchemyoftravel.com. You can read about her adventures and insights at leelavera.com.

