



Deep Listening

Make Time To Hear What Your Body Needs

by Laurie Young

A young man named Evan waited patiently to speak with me after the first session of my healthy eating series. A small group had gathered and I was chatting casually, answering the usual variety of questions about nutrition and health. When it was his turn, Evan put his arm around me. “Laurie,” he said, sighing a little as he spoke. “I don’t care about nutrition and healthy food.” He was very sincere. “But I like you. So I’m gonna try to eat this stuff.”

I paused, looking at him for a long moment, surprised by what he’d said and unsure how to respond. And yet he’d shared his feelings with such warmth that I couldn’t help but smile. Why? Because he had captured so succinctly both the problem and the promise of developing a healthy relationship to food. When it comes to eating, what we usually get from experts is information about controlling our desires and ourselves. But that’s not what we really need. Our true need can only be met through allowing—opening up to a nourishing relationship with food, with others and most importantly with ourselves. The answer is not in all the talk; it’s in the listening.

The practice of deep listening—whether sitting quietly with yourself or sharing openly with others in community—is about slowing down and making time to focus on what’s truly important. When exploring your health, it’s about accepting desire as a guide, knowing what you need to feel nourished, and understanding how all that relates to food. Deep listening is often missing in programs designed to address nutrition and exercise. And yet it is so central to evolving our relationship to nourishment and health that no lasting change can occur without it.

Winter is a natural time to begin noticing how your body is affected by all you put into it—how food tastes, how your body responds, and even how the experiences you’ve brought into your life over the past year have become a part of who you are. Notice how quiet the world becomes when blanketed by snow. Winter is the season of stillness and deep listening: a time when we can hear nature and ourselves clearly. Begin with the following principles:

Slow Down and Breathe

In winter, more time is spent inside, indulging in warm comfort foods. It’s also an opportunity to relax and reflect. How comfortable are you with stillness? Do you get restless? Are you constantly looking for something to do, a way to keep your mind active? And if so, why? What happens when turn off your mind, and connect with your body and your feelings?

Try sitting quietly for a few minutes each day, enjoying a peaceful walk, eating mindfully. Notice how your body responds. Begin a regular practice of deep breathing. Even just a few slow breaths before eating or any other

Evan’s Favorite: Asian-Scented Greens

- ½ pound kale, chopped
- ½ pound Swiss chard, chopped
- 1 carrot, julienne
- 2 Tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 Tablespoon honey
- 1 Tablespoon rice vinegar
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon sherry (optional)
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic, chopped
- ½ teaspoon fresh ginger, shredded
- 1/8 teaspoon red pepper flakes

Directions:

1. In a hot pan on the stove top, steam chard and kale with a little water, until al dente or cooked to preferred texture. Add carrots and remove from pan to cool.
2. Prepare dressing. Whisk together soy sauce, honey, rice vinegar, olive oil, sherry, toasted sesame oil, garlic, ginger and red pepper flakes.
3. Combine all ingredients and mix well.

Recipe courtesy of: Bonita Woods Wellness Institute

activity will calm your nervous system and bring your awareness inward. It's a way of connecting daily choices to your bodily response, slowing down to notice how foods, activities, conversations and relationships affect you.

Let Go and Open Up

Healthy eating is not a purely logical exercise of understanding facts, plans and calorie counts. It's not a matter of controlling yourself and shutting down desire. Quite the opposite. It's a reciprocal relationship between your mind and body and it's based on opening up rather than shutting down—opening up to new choices with food and cooking, designing new practices of self-care, and allowing yourself to enjoy novel experiences. So let go of the belief that an expert knows more about your body and your needs than you do.

Notice when your mind reaches for more facts and plans, something outside of yourself, something detached from the natural wisdom of your body. Rather than going on another diet or exercise regimen because you've read about the latest and greatest thing, stop. Reach inward instead of outward. Search for what is meaningful to you. And if that answer comes slowly, so much the better. Seek out experiences, conversations and communities where you can explore what you need for robust health.

Appreciate What You Already Know

Not a single person ever walks through my door needing more information, unaware of the familiar advice that they should eat fresh fruits and vegetables, get plenty of exercise and manage stress. More often than not they are overwhelmed, and might even be doing better with a lot less information. Some have had moments of fleeting success with strict diet and exercise regimens, while knowing in their hearts they can't and won't sustain the forced effort. Often what's missing is the ability to hear what they really hunger for, to trust what their bodies

know. Developing a practice of deep listening gives you confidence in your own inner voice.

I learned quite a lot by listening equally to my heart and mind when guiding Evan and his group. In the days before Evan walked up and told me how little he cared about nutritional information, I had been busy organizing a wealth of evidence that led to healthy eating as the only logical choice. I shared the most up-to-date nutritional advice, along with simple assignments and recipes to incorporate into daily practice. And, no doubt, there is a place for all that in any health program. But if we focus solely on logic, plans and control, then we lose sight of the fact that they can never hold the answer to our most personal questions of health and nourishment. No matter how many diet plans we follow, how many books we buy or professionals we talk to, we can never gather enough information to bypass desire and craving, the hunger that comes from a place deep within and drives how we feed and care for ourselves. This is the voice that wants to be heard.

As I listened to Evan speak about his struggles with food and weight, what I heard was his need for connection rather than information—connection with me, with others, and most importantly, with himself. His willingness to try something new simply because he liked and trusted me was an act of faith. In time, as he opened up to new choices, he found that relationship within himself by experiencing the sensation of healthy foods in his own body. "Laurie," he said to me proudly at the end of our series of health sessions, "I tried one of those kale recipes you gave us the other day. And, you know what? It was really, really good!"

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The Secrets of Slow Tea

Making and enjoying a pot of tea is a great way to slow down. Most obviously, because it takes time. It's simple, but you need to pay attention and be patient. It's also good for you. Various studies have shown that tea is beneficial for heart health and weight control. It has less caffeine than coffee, and has the appealing quality of being both relaxing and uplifting at the same time. Black, oolong, green and white teas are all made from the *camellia sinensis* plant. Herbal teas are made from combinations of herbs and flowers and are free of caffeine. Choose loose-leaf whenever you can.

Here's what you need:

- Kettle to boil water (electric or stove-top)
- Teapot or large cup
- Measuring spoon
- Removable infuser/strainer
- Loose-leaf tea

Here's how you do it:

- 1) Put one to two teaspoons of tea (per cup of water) into the infuser and place it in the teapot. If you purchase the tea at a specialty shop, they will give you guidance on the exact amounts, but with time you will learn how strong you like your tea.
- 2) For black tea, bring water to a boil, then let it sit for a minute before pouring it over top of the leaves. Water for oolong, green, and white teas should not be boiled. They should steep at slightly lower temperatures.
- 3) Start a timer. Tea should steep between three to six minutes, depending on type. Four minutes is a good average time. After six minutes, tea will become bitter. Herbals often steep a bit longer than tea, sometimes up to ten minutes.
- 4) Remove the infuser and set the tea leaves aside.
- 5) Take a deep breath, enjoying the scent of your tea. Sip and savor, slowly.