

LET IT GO

Fall into a healthy rhythm this autumn.

by Laurie Young

In my back yard, a miniature weeping cherry tree has held center stage for years. In October, it is pruned to a tight, organized shape and rests quiet and steady through the snowy winter until white blossoms erupt in spring. As summer unfolds to autumn, it grows heavy with green leaves that magically transform to golden orange and then fall to the ground, reminding us it is time to prune once again.

But not this year. Fewer blossoms appeared in spring, leaves emerged reluctantly, and by mid-summer it was obvious that something was very wrong. Tufts of deep green were punctuated by an equal amount of stark, leafless branches. When I consulted my landscape professional, he noted spots on the tree indicating that it was beginning to shut down. We discussed a variety of ways to treat it, but all of them would cost more than replacing the tree itself and might not work anyway. He looked at me and said simply, “It’s time to let it go.”

When clients come to me for health counseling, I begin by having them add in whole, fresh foods and new movement activities. Like the growth of spring and summer, adding in is a joyous process of exploration, finding new practices and ways of eating that nourish the body and soul. The equally important partner to that process is crowding out—cutting back and in some cases getting rid of less healthy foods, sedentary indulgences, or even activities and relationships that are no longer working.

In autumn, nature reveals the ease and necessity of this mindset, as trees release their leaves and plants turn inward, toward earth, for winter. Though we have a model in nature, the process of letting go can still be challenging, particularly when habits, foods or relationships are familiar and comforting. To support the process, identify a few significant things that are no longer serving you. Focus on pruning those habits or situations

carefully, or even thoughtfully letting them go in the interest of healthy growth.

Crowd Out an Unhealthy Food

You probably already have in mind at least one less-than-stellar eating habit you’ve held onto for years. For some of us, it may be low-nutrient, packaged snacks like cake or chips, for others, fast food or lattes. Most of us know specifically what our weakness is, and a tremendous amount of energy is spent justifying why we keep consuming that thing rather than cutting it out.

Great Reads

The following books offer new perspectives on eating and nourishing our health. By letting go of old ways of thinking, we make space for the new to flourish:

The Slow Down Diet by Marc David

David offers a new way to understand our relationship to food, focusing on quality and the possibilities of pleasure in eating to transform and improve metabolism.

The Yoga of Eating by Charles Eisenstein

A practical and inspiring manual that offers original insights on the physical and spiritual functions of food, dieting and the deeper principles of self-nurture. This book appeals to a higher authority—your own body—and shows how to access and trust the wisdom your body has to offer.

Integrative Nutrition by Joshua Rosenthal

Stop judging your own health, weight, and way of eating and living, and strive to understand who you are as an eater—and WHY. Integrative Nutrition is loaded with valuable insights into your relationship with food, nutritional theories, and holistic approaches to maximizing health.

But just like my cherry tree, you may be reaching a point where the effort of keeping it in your life, no matter how enjoyable it has been in the past, is simply too costly for your health.

To be successful at crowding out, get very specific about your goal. For example, rather than “cutting out sugar” all at once—which can be a daunting task—determine your major vulnerability, something you indulge in regularly or habitually. Is it a doughnut or muffin eaten as a snack, a tendency to order a soft drink with meals? If you can narrow it down to a specific tendency or even a particular time of day, it will be easier to develop strategies to eliminate problematic choices by adding in healthy options that fill you up instead.

Evolve Your Health Routines

I see a number of clients who developed their idea of optimal fitness and weight control when they were in their 20s, yet their bodies have changed over time and they are now encountering problems as they struggle to maintain a rigorous exercise routine or restrictive diet just because it worked in the past. The first thing I ask them to do is slow down and focus on gaining more awareness of their bodies. Activities such as yoga, or even a practice of simplified stretching with awareness, can give you information about the nuances of your body, your weak areas and your strengths. (See below for an idea of how you can begin this at home.)

Even if you aren't a fan of yoga, meditation or gentle exercise, devote some time to honoring what your body was like at a younger age while also respecting the gifts of aging, so that you can thoughtfully let go of the past. This will prepare you to either design a more balanced approach on your own or seek help from a professional

who can assess where you are, help eliminate what's not working, and guide you towards a routine that will best benefit you now.

Let Go of Too Many Social Obligations

Friends, family, and community are wonderful, nourishing elements in your life and health, and the summer months offer an abundance of opportunities for socialization and activity. If momentum continually increases unchecked, however, our schedules may reach a fever pitch, becoming so crowded and busy that there is hardly time to enjoy anything or anyone. Activities that were once pleasurable can then take on a heavy sense of responsibility. Autumn offers a natural opportunity to reflect on the volume and quality of our commitments, and observe what needs to be lessened or released so that we can settle easily into the quiet of winter. Take this opportunity during fall, before you are swept into bustle of the holiday season, so that you can maintain balance. And look forward to enjoying family, friends and the spirit of the season in the way it is meant to be celebrated.

If we lose our sense of rhythm with the natural world, we also lose touch with our own inner nature. And without realizing it we may fall out of sync, hanging onto outworn habits, unhealthy ways of eating and social obligations that simply aren't serving us. But like a tree in autumn, there is a sacred grace to letting go when the time is right. In such moments, we find the stillness of what is essential and the promise of new opportunities and growth, in tune with every season.

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Two Simple Yoga Poses for Letting Go

By practicing a few simple yoga poses you can “embody” the process of “letting go.” Through the poses and relaxed breathing, “letting go” becomes not just an idea, but an integrated experience for your body, mind and spirit.

As you settle into each pose, observe your breath. Pay special attention to your exhalations. Imagine you are releasing negative habits, thoughts or emotions each time you exhale.

Child's Pose

This is a simple kneeling pose that fosters humility and surrender of the ego. It also symbolizes reverence to the Divine within.

- 1) Kneel, knees on the floor, and bow your head down. Let your head rest on the floor, and extend your arms forward and overhead.
- 2) If you have pain in your knees or thighs, place a folded towel behind the backs of the thighs. If your head does not reach the floor, place a folded towel under your forehead so that it is supported.

- 3) Remain in the pose 3-5 minutes. Breathe slowly. Let your exhalations be long and relaxed.

- 4) Imagine negativities flowing out with each breath.

Reclining Chest Opener

In this pose you lie on your back with support under the upper back. It opens the chest, heart, diaphragm and abdomen to release physical and emotional tensions.

- 1) Fold one towel 8” wide and 1 to 2 inches thick. Lie on the floor with the towel under your shoulder blades.
- 2) Extend your arms out in a “T” formation. Take a second folded towel and place it underneath your knees.
- 3) Lie over the towels for 3-5 minutes. Breathe slowly. Let your exhalations be long and relaxed.
- 4) Gradually let go of any tension you may be holding in your body or mind. Relax more deeply each time you exhale.

Courtesy of: Ann Teresa Thomas, MA, E-RYT 500, Iyengar Certified Instructor. www.integrativefamily.com.