

# Why We Must Override Our Natural Instincts

Andrew Rader, LAc, MS

For almost our entire history as *Homo sapiens*, we have been hunter-gatherers. Our metabolic pathways have developed under the pressures of usually not enough food. The only food around was good for us, unless it was rotten or spoiled. We avoided poisons due to their bitter and nasty tastes. Under these conditions, our bodies evolved several different ways of raising blood glucose but only one way of lowering it; insulin. There was rarely a surplus of food but rather almost always a deficit. We were wired to eat any food that we could get our hands on.

## Survival of the Fittest

We never had synthetic foods. We never had cheap, abundant simple carbohydrates and sugars. We never had factory-farmed meats loaded with antibiotics and lousy fatty acids due to the animals being fed corn (or worse). We never had the ability to feed at will! These are all unprecedented evolutionary forces. In fact, in many cultures today, being heavy is a sign of wealth and prosperity, and something to admire. It is only in our modern industrial age, and especially post-WWII, that we have encountered an entirely new situation; having to "decide" what to eat. If you believe in the survival of the fittest, the ones who are able to make the right food choices, because now they are choices, will out compete those don't.

So now we have this plethora of dietary advice coming from many directions. If we analyze where the advice comes from, it can be broken down into two main groups: Commercially driven, which includes bad science sponsored by the food industry; and what I would call ancient, collected, wisdom-based advice, also known as the good old ways of eating that humans have done for centuries. Granted, we now have modern methods for storing and keeping food from going bad, which is a good thing and should not be forsaken.

However, we still need to approximate, as much as possible, the way our ancestors ate. I understand that we cannot, as a species, continue to eat as hunter-gatherers because the Earth cannot supply 6 billion people with wild food. We must make some sacrifices from what would be best for the individual for the sake of the wider community of living beings on the planet. We also have spiritual and political values that may trump what is best for individual physical health. Nevertheless, we can make much smarter choices, governed by a few simple principles.

The choices can be broken down into what to eat and how much. Again, because we in the Western industrialized world can have these choices, we can consider them a blessing or a curse. To this end, I will refer to a new book, written by Jason Bussell, an acupuncturist from Chicago. *The Asian Diet* is a book many of us wished we had written. Bussell wrote it after realizing that he was repeating his advice over and over to his patients regarding diet and lifestyle. Now he hands them his book and has them read it. He has assembled the kernels of what he considers the most important principles regarding diet and lifestyle. He readily admits that these are his opinions, culled from his own

understanding of Chinese medicine and more recent sources such as [Michael Pollan](#), [T. Colin Campbell](#) and [Paul Pitchford](#), to name a few.

As a society we have become so focused on the constituents of food that we have lost the older wisdom of simply seeing food as whole foods. Jason Bussell notes that since this focus on nutrients began, we have become more obese and less healthy. Our ancestors would never have turned down yams or an egg because they were watching their intake of carbohydrates or were worried about their cholesterol. They would find a way to balance or offset meat with berries or herbs. They would eat colder foods in the summer and warmer foods in the winter. They didn't need studies to figure this out.

Many cultures use chicken soup as a basis for bringing sick people back to health. We know these things instinctually. So how did we suddenly give up our collective wisdom around diet and lifestyle, and turn it over to the folks in white lab coats? The people who peddle industrialized food know that our reptilian brains crave salt, fat and sugar.

### Engineering Our Food

Food engineers can take anything, put salt, fat or sugar in it, and we will want it. They can create synthetic compounds that fool us into thinking we are eating sugars (think saccharin). They can create salt substitutes (MSG). If the compounds are not wholly synthetic, they can be derived from natural sources, then isolated and concentrated to levels never seen before on the planet (high-fructose corn syrup). They can take a naturally occurring fat and put it under tremendous heat and pressure to create wholly new compounds (trans fats). All of this has been in the last 75 years. As consumers, we do not have the savvy, nor the government protections, to shield us from this very focused onslaught. We are on our own to fend for ourselves. Essentially we must assume that anything new is unhealthy until proven innocent. This is called the cautionary principle.

Fortunately we have other sources to guide us, such as the collective wisdom of our ancestors, which has been handed down generation after generation. In the West we do not have much in terms of a written lineage regarding health and lifestyle. However, Chinese medicine, which has at least 2,000 years of written history, has been preserved and utilized through today. Bussell has quotes from these texts in his book, which helps to give us some perspective when juxtaposed against some front-page news story that says that [organic food is no different from nonorganic](#). When it borders on the absurd, we just have to find a sense of humor and respond. If someone tells me organic has no more nutritive value than nonorganic, I ask them, which they would rather eat: an unadulterated orange or one has been dipped in kerosene.

### How Comforting is Our Food?

Food and lifestyle habits are topics that bring up so many emotions. This is mostly because they are governed by our unconscious minds, and our habits around food and lifestyle have developed without much conscious awareness. Think about comfort foods. What makes a food "comfortable"? It's probably a food that we ate when we were very young and associated with feeling safe and protected. It was what we ate at home with our families. Unfortunately, our mothers bought into the idea that serving these comfort foods was the right thing to do. They were told that, to be a modern good housewife and mother, they had to use these products. Now some of us know better.

However, knowing this is not the same as acting on it. We have to go in, work with the hidden associations that these foods and good feelings were originally introduced with and disconnect those

associations. Not easy.

So, this is our challenge; both for ourselves and the people with whom we work. For the first time in human history, we must make conscious decisions around our food and lifestyle habits. We must override what our emotions and our cravings are telling us. This is new. This is actually "unnatural." If we can take on this challenge, then perhaps we can evolve to an entirely new level. May we succeed - quickly.

JANUARY 2010