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Living the Mediterranean Lifestyle

By now we have all heard of the benefits of the Mediterranean diet. This diet, which is really more of a lifestyle, is full of fresh fruits and vegetables, seafood, olive oil, beans, nuts, whole grains, a little dairy and poultry, and very little red meat or processed foods.

It originates from countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, such as Italy and Greece, and there are some non-dietary aspects of these traditional cultures that may be just as important to health as the foods that are consumed. Strong social networks, sharing food over leisurely mealtimes, and spending time outdoors in the sunshine being active are also important components that promote health and longevity.

Benefits

The studies showing the benefits of the Mediterranean diet were based on what people in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea ate in the mid-twentieth

century. These populations had very low levels of chronic diseases and longer than average lifespans, despite being mostly rural and having little access to modern healthcare. Research continues to show that this eating pattern and lifestyle reduce the risk of chronic disease and increase the likelihood of longevity. People who live this way tend to have lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and age-related mental decline.

What if you are trying to follow the Mediterranean diet, but are finding it hard to afford, or hard to follow? Here are some tips to make the Mediterranean lifestyle more accessible, no matter where you live or how much money you have to spend.

Eat Together

In many Mediterranean cultures, multiple generations lived together and ate together.

Mealtime was not just about getting food into the stomach, but time to share and be social with loved ones and friends. This social connectedness may be one of the reasons that people from this region of the world live so long.

The benefits of eating together, especially for children, have been well-researched today. Study after study has shown that children who eat with their families have better diets as adults, do better in school, and even have less risk of substance abuse, eating disorders, and teen pregnancy. The list of benefits goes on

and on. For many of us, sitting down to a family dinner means someone is home in time to cook one, and everyone's schedules--from work to school to sports--have to line up. It may not be possible for every family every night, but the benefits of eating together are clear enough

that it is worth making an effort to do it at least a few times a week. And it doesn't have to be dinner. Breakfast and lunch are also opportunities to gather around the table as a family. Turn off the tv, put the phones away, and focus on each other and the food you are sharing. This is one aspect of the Mediterranean lifestyle that is totally free.

Be Active

Although they may not carve time out of their day for a trip to the gym, many Mediterranean people get lots of physical exercise naturally. They may be involved in farming or raising livestock, which involves lots of manual labor, but they also walk a lot. Traditionally, there were no big box stores where people went to buy everything they needed at once.



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Living the Mediterranean Lifestyle (continued)

They would walk to the bakery, the fishmonger, and the produce stand each day to purchase what they needed. Now they may walk to work, to friends' homes, or just as a pastime. Walking is free and can be done almost any-time, anywhere.



Avoid Waste

Unlike here in America, in many cultures, wasting food has never been an option. It is too precious and costly to produce, so there are many delicious recipes that make use of ingredients that in our culture would end up in the garbage.

Fattoush and panzanella are two recipes from

Mediterranean cultures that make use of day-old, slightly stale bread. Frittatas, soups, and stews are also good ways to use up vegetable and meat odds and ends. Roasting and pureeing vegetables, like in babaganoush, conceals ingredients that might be starting to lose their freshness. Even paella, that famous Spanish rice and seafood dish, is believed to have been created by farm workers to use up leftovers and whatever other ingredients they had on hand.

Not only do these recipes minimize waste, they save money by turning foods that might otherwise be tossed in the garbage into delicious meals.

Eat Seasonally

In the past, eating seasonally and locally was the norm—there was no other option. People ate what was available to them, and that was usually whatever was just harvested, raised, or caught near where they lived. Now, we can go to the grocery store in the middle of winter and buy a pineapple from the tropics that was shipped halfway around the globe using enormous amounts of fossil fuels. This puts enormous strain on the environment, our pocketbooks, and it is not necessary for good health.

Eating seasonally is less expensive because things are generally cheaper when they are in season and in abundance. It is also more nutritious, because the longer food sits on a shelf, the less nutritious it becomes as many nutrients break down over time.

Consider buying extra when something is in season and on sale, and then preserve it yourself by freezing it or canning it. Also, consider that eating like a Mediterranean person does not necessarily mean eating only what is grown in the Mediterranean. Following the Mediterranean lifestyle really means eating what is fresh and local

to you. Instead of artichokes, eggplant, oysters, and expensive wine, that might mean avocados, crab, strawberries, and local wine. The idea is that what you are eating is fresh, and minimally processed, and not necessarily that it was grown in Italy or Greece.

If you're not sure what's in season in your area, check out this website: <https://www.seasonalfoodguide.org/>. It lets you search for seasonal foods by state and season.

Be Frugal

It is true that buying fresh, organic food can be more expensive than purchasing refined, processed foods. But what you save in money now, you will pay for with your health later.

Making most of your meal with inexpensive ingredients, like beans and grains, and adding a few more costly items, like fresh vegetables, nuts, or a little seafood, can go a long way to saving money and your health. Beans are very inexpensive, incredibly filling, and nutritious. Eating a few meatless meals a week is good for you and your wallet. If you buy dried beans, you can cook large batches of them and freeze them in portions for later use. They are much cheaper, more nutritious, and easier to carry and store. Try different whole grains, like barley, farro, quinoa, and millet. They can often be purchased cheaply in bulk and have a long shelf life. And don't forget that eggs are an excellent source of protein, vitamins, and minerals, and fairly inexpensive. Eggs do contain cholesterol, but for most people, dietary cholesterol does not greatly affect blood cholesterol, so an egg or two as your protein in a meal is a healthy and inexpensive option.



Buy seafood when it is on sale and freeze it. It is true that seafood is a staple of the Mediterranean diet, and the health benefits of fatty fish and other seafoods are too many to list. But, seafood can be quite costly. Look for sales and freeze extras for later. Also, salmon, sardines, and anchovies are all high in healthy fats like omega 3s and are available canned, which is usually cheaper than fresh.

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Living the Mediterranean Lifestyle (continued)

Lastly, keep in mind that a serving of protein should really only be about four ounces, so if you stick to that portion size, a little will go a long way. If you are unsure how to choose sustainable seafood that is low in contaminants like mercury, check out these two websites: <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/walletcard.pdf> and <https://www.seafoodwatch.org/globalassets/sfw/pdf/guides/seafood-watch-national-guide.pdf>. They each have printable, wallet-sized guides to choosing fish that is good for you and the environment.

It should also be noted that the traditional Mediterranean diet was eaten by people who, by most standards, were poor. They were not buying expensive seafood or fancy wines. Of course, most of us cannot go down to the ocean to catch our own fish, nor can we grow all of our own food in today's world. But by following some of the guidelines suggested here, you can incorporate important aspects of the Mediterranean lifestyle into your life, for very little cost, and potentially very big benefits. Eating seasonally and locally, being active, and enjoying meals with family and friends is nourishing to your body and your soul.

The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid

In the 1990's, after extensive research supported the benefits of this lifestyle, several groups, including the Harvard School of Public Health, put together the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid. The base of the pyramid is physical activity and enjoying food with others. It is followed by foods including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, nuts, beans, and seeds, and herbs and spices. Fish and seafood are followed by poultry, eggs, cheese, and yogurt. And at the very top, to be eaten sparingly, are meats and sweets. The pyramid also includes water as a daily beverage, and wine in moderation. To this day, research continues to support the health benefits of this lifestyle and dietary pattern.

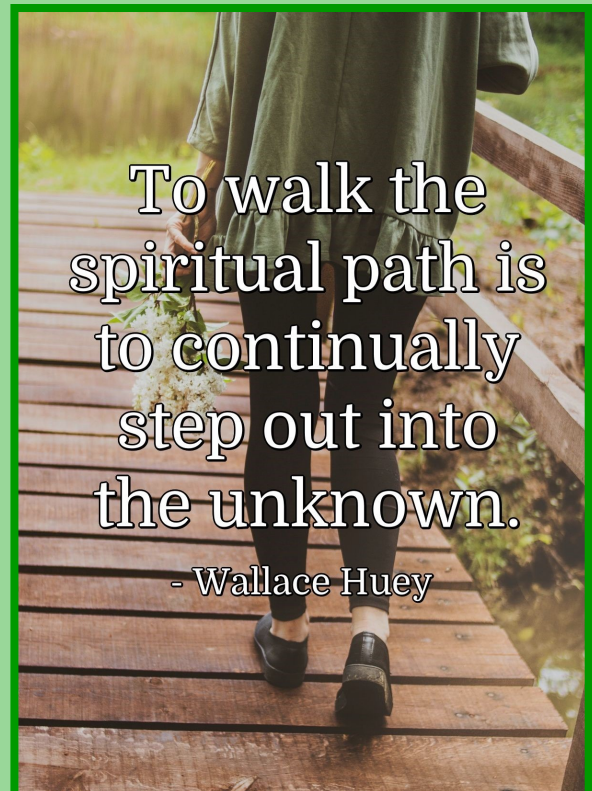


Spirituality Corner: A Spiritual Path

Spiritual practices are sometimes likened to walking a path. The analogy can be taken to mean all of life, from birth to death, or a pilgrimage to a holy site. And labyrinth walking is an ancient practice from several different cultures in which people walked in meandering paths for mindfulness, contemplation, and prayer.

Everyone walks or moves through their environment on a daily basis. We may not have long meandering paths to explore, or quiet beaches to walk on every day, but we all have paths we walk, maybe many times a day. It could be your walk to your car on the way to work, or your walk around your neighborhood at night with your dog. It could even be a short path from your kitchen to your bedroom, or down a long hallway in an office building.

Today, take the time to notice that path. Instead of focusing on your destination, notice the path. Are there pictures on the wall? Rocks or plants on the ground? What does it smell like, and sound like? Do you hear birds, or people talking? Do you smell flowers, or coffee? Every time you walk that path today, be mindful of that particular path. Use it as a tiny moment of mindfulness in your otherwise busy day. Think of that small path as a miniature version of your path in your life, remember to be mindful of it, and feel a moment of gratitude when you reach your destination.



Shakshuka Recipe (or “Eggs in Purgatory”)

Originally thought to hail from Tunisia, there are many variations on this dish, with different vegetables, herbs, and spices. When red pepper flakes are added and it has a more Italian profile, it is sometimes referred to as “eggs in purgatory,” or uova in purgatorio. It is essentially a spiced tomato sauce with eggs cracked into it and cooked until they are set. Eaten with crusty bread, it makes an excellent brunch dish, and with the addition of a salad, a light and satisfying dinner. Sometimes feta or parmesan cheese is added, as I do here.

3 tbsp olive oil
 1 onion, thinly sliced
 4-5 cloves of minced garlic, or more to taste
 1 tsp cumin
 1 tsp paprika
 1 28-oz can tomatoes, or 8-10 fresh tomatoes roughly chopped
 6 eggs
 1 cup feta, crumbled
 Salt & pepper to taste
 Handful of fresh cilantro, basil, or parsley



Heat the oven to about 375 degrees. On the stovetop, heat the oil in a large, oven-safe skillet. Add the spices and cook, stirring, until fragrant. Then add the garlic and tomatoes. If you are using fresh tomatoes, let them simmer for a while until they reach a sauce-like consistency. Stir in the feta, salt, and pepper. When the sauce is the desired consistency, reduce the heat, and make little pockets in the sauce with the back of a spoon. Crack the eggs into the pockets and transfer the pan to the oven. Cook for about 7-10 minutes, depending on how set you like your yolks. Sprinkle with fresh herbs and more cheese, if desired. Serve with crusty bread.



“Cooking is like painting or writing a song. Just as there are only so many notes or colors, there are only so many flavors—it’s how you combine them that sets you apart.”

-Wolfgang Puck

Any Nutrition and Wellness News Questions?

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