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The benefits of switching to a plant-based diet

FLASHP participants successfully take on 10-day wellness challenge

Danny Ciamprone Feb 20, 2018



They flocked together by the hundreds, each carrying a varying degree of burden. Some saw it as a way to lose weight, others a way to kick-start a healthy lifestyle, and many more viewed it as a necessity to heal what was ailing them.

But in a sea of more than 1,300 FLASHP consortium faculty members, they all shared one common bond: The camaraderie of experiencing and supporting one another through the 10-day plant-based food challenge.

Planting the seeds

Years ago, Doug Schmidt was in the same boat as many other people who were trying a plant-based diet for the first time. Back then, he changed his own eating habits out of necessity: at age 49, he had a heart attack.

Seeking to change his lifestyle, Schmidt turned to a diet that wasn't at all part of the mainstream fabric, as plant-based eating includes whole foods and no oils, dairy or added sugar. Today, he's off all medication, and his cholesterol is only about 120.

At one point, Schmidt appeared as a loner in his dietary platter. But now, not only is Schmidt overwhelmed with enthusiasm by the turnout for the FLASHP 10-day plant-based challenge, but he's also taken notice of the changing mindset around eating a plant-based diet that is sweeping the country.

"Ten years ago, if you said the word 'plant-based' or 'vegan,' you'd hear, 'Oh, there's that crazy nut,'" Schmidt says with a laugh. "Now you're hearing, 'I wish I could eat as healthy as you.' That's a major shift."

From January 8 to January 17, Schmidt, the health and wellness coordinator and enrichment teacher at Victor Central School District, teamed up with Smola Consulting health and wellness consultant Rick Amundson to help lead the 10-day Jumpstart Your Health Challenge for the Finger Lakes Area School Health Plan. With guidance from Rip Esselstyn's book, "The Engine 2 Seven-Day Rescue Diet," faculty members from across the school district traded the knife for the fork and embraced the challenge head on.

As Amundson explains, there were two components to the challenge. The first part included participants taking part in the 10-day challenge and also receiving a biometric screening pre- and post-challenge. That included about 200 people, but because of the amount of interest in participating, Amundson and Schmidt opened the challenge to the entire consortium.

"We were totally flabbergasted when we got over 1,300 people doing this," says Amundson, who adds they expected 500 to 700 participants.

Along with a website, a Facebook support group and unwavering camaraderie, Amundson and Schmidt explain that once the challenge got in full gear, people were quickly discovering new recipes and eating healthier. Their biometric readings started improving, aches and pains became less severe, and they started sleeping better.

"A lot of people when they joined the Facebook group, I asked the question, 'Why are you doing this?'" Schmidt says. "People would say, 'I'm doing it because I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired,' or 'I'm doing it to lose weight,' or 'I'm doing it because I want to be there for my daughter when she gets older.' They were almost desperate to heal some of the things that are bothering them."

Breathing new life

David Tinnes can instantly recall the date: February 20, 2015. He was 44 at the time, and for the first time in his life, he heard a concerning statement about his health when he was told his blood pressure was high.

Since that day, he has become a vegetarian and an avid cyclist, and has lost 35 pounds. But there was still something keeping him from reaching the next level in his health and wellness goals. At first, he thought it could be that he didn't cut out cheese and still had a sweet tooth, but he soon realized it had more to do with body chemistry. That's when he discovered the plant-based diet.

“For me, I feel like this whole challenge has been life-giving,” says Tinnes, special education teacher at Wayne Central High School. “I’m getting into the kitchen and actually preparing food for the first time in my life. I’m not talking about reheating the Taco Bell burrito or an occasional grilled cheese sandwich. I’m making my own salad dressing. I’m making my own hummus.”

Tinnes can’t imagine going back to his old diet. Not only is he benefitting from his healthy lifestyle, he’s also having fun.

“My taste buds are more alive than they’ve ever been in 46 years of life,” he says.

Growing pains

A few months ago, Bonnie Kuhn, assistant principal at Livonia Elementary, had experienced severe inflammation to the point walking was difficult. Her neck was sore, her knuckles were swollen, and she could barely use her hands. After consulting with her doctor and getting extensive blood work, nothing was revealed. Then, after consulting with her holistic chiropractor, she was in early November 2017 recommended to go on the plant-based diet.

Even before the recommendation, though, Kuhn had made dietary changes. She hasn’t eaten pork in about 15 years, and because she has IBS does not consume gluten. There are even certain vegetables she couldn't and didn't eat. Kuhn's doctors, however, advised her that if she went to a plant-based diet, her body would adjust. She also eliminated dairy, a move that has enabled her body to process lentils and beans. Within three weeks, she says the changes were miraculous.

“Before, if I wrote reports or typed for a while, I would just be in excruciating pain for days,” Kuhn says. “Now, I can sit and handwrite reports. My hand might be a little sore, but the next day there’s nothing there, so it’s a typical response. I haven’t looked back.”

Seeing the 10-day challenge as an opportunity to help advise others and continue her goals, Kuhn says she not only learned more about recipes, but the change in her lifestyle has transformed the eating habits of her entire family.

“The best part is I can get up every day and come to work and I’m not in pain,” she says. “To me, that’s life changing. That alone I would hope could inspire people.”

The power of change

Some people just know they need to eat healthier. They realize they are eating out too much, or choosing convenience over meal prepping. It was a scenario all too familiar for Jacquie Bonadonna, a teacher at Livonia Elementary.

Bonadonna found herself getting home late, grabbing fast food and developing poor eating habits. Due to all the rushing around between work and her daily routine, she was also tired in the morning. She would attempt to remedy this fatigue with a coffee and heavy cream, followed by a soda at lunch almost every day. She saw the challenge as a way to kick-start new, healthy habits, but she soon learned it was referred to as a "challenge" for a reason.

“The first couple days when you cut sugar out, when you’re used to having a soda or candy or processed foods, you have to strip your taste buds,” Bonadonna says. “So, there was some discomfort with a headache.”

But after three days, she instantly had a lot of energy. Having the support from the Facebook group was also critical, and now, she’s taking those same healthy recipes and lifestyle choices and sharing them with her daughter.

“Before the challenge, I was really exhausted all the time,” she says. “Now, I have a lot of energy. I was having some problem with joint pain and I’m not feeling that, and now I’m even thinking about joining an exercise class because I’m not in pain.”

At one time, Wendy Helbig found herself in the same boat as Bonadonna. Helbig was accustomed to eating foods that were high in salt, sugar and fat, but adjusted to a plant-based diet. The first couple of days were challenging, she says, but she soon felt better and realized the benefits that were coming with the change.

She lost weight, and her biometric readings for her cholesterol dramatically decreased, so much so that she even astounded her doctor.

Helbig says her family has a history of heart issues, so the challenge not only inspired her to change her eating habits, but she has also discovered a community of support and plans for sticking with her lifestyle change.

“I’m completely fine 19 days doing it,” she says. “I have tons of energy. I feel good. I don’t miss anything.”

It’s a sentiment that Schmidt regularly hears from people who participate in the 10-day challenge. At one time in history, being vegan or even a vegetarian meant garnering a few awkward glances. Now, once people learn about the diet and experience the results firsthand, the benefits are almost inherent.

“When you start feeding your body the proper nutrition it just takes off,” Schmidt says.

More information



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