The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Nutritional Programs
By John M. Berardi

Take a look around the nutrition world. Confusing, isn't it?

Conflicting advice is everywhere, and you're stuck in the middle. You wonder whether anyone out there even knows what they're talking about, or whether the experts will ever reach a consensus on anything. You start to wonder whether you'll need a degree in nutritional biochemistry before you can lose that stubborn abdominal fat.

So what's the deal? Why so much confusion? Why does one expert suggest that high protein is best for everyone, while another expert suggests high carb and yet another expert suggests high fat? Besides, what exactly do high protein, high carb, and high fat really mean? And why are other experts telling us that food choices should be based on our "metabolic type," our "blood type," or our "ancestry"?

One expert says to eat like a Neanderthal and another says eat like a Visigoth, or perhaps a Viking. But while searching for nutritional Valhalla, most people just get lost and eat like a Modern American—and end up looking more Sumo than Samurai.

These days, we have a cacophony of expertise: lots of confusing noise from the experts drowning out the signal of truth.

On the surface, it appears as if today's nutrition technology is quite advanced. After all, we have at our disposal more nutrition information than ever before. More money is being spent on nutrition research than in any time in history. Every day, impressive strides are being made in the field. Dozens of nutrition experts are rising to prominence. Yet simultaneously we're witnessing a steadily increasing rate of obesity, an increase in nutrition-related illness (Diabetes, CVD, and Syndrome X), and an increase in nutrition-related mortality.

Part of the problem is that much of the information hasn't reached the people who need it. Part of the problem is that even when it does reach those people, they often don't use it. And certainly, the problem is multifactorial—there are probably many more reasons than I can list here.

How much more information do we need?

But the curious thing is that many people try to solve the problem by seeking out more information. They know it all and still want more. If there's one thing of which I am absolutely convinced, it's that a lack of good nutrition information isn't what prevents us from reaching our goals. We already know everything we need to know. Sometimes the real problem isn't too little information but too much.

All the fundamental principles you need to achieve good health and optimal body composition are out there already, and have been for years. Unfortunately, with 500 experts for every fundamental principle, and very little money to be made from repeating other people's ideas, experts must continually emphasize the small (and often relatively unimportant) differences between their diet/eating plans and the diet/eating plans of all the other experts out there.

In the world of advertising and marketing, this is called "differentiation." By highlighting the small distinctions and dimming out the large similarities between their program and all the others, they're jostling for your next nutritional dollar.

Now, and let me be clear on this, I'm not accusing nutrition experts of quackery.

Yes, some programs are utter crap. Those are generally quite easy to pick out and don't merit discussion here. But most experts do know what they are talking about, can get results, and wholeheartedly believe in what they're doing. Many of the differences between them are theoretical and not practical, and on the fundamentals they generally agree completely.

It's all good — sorta

In fact, many of the mainstream programs out there, if not most of them, will work. To what extent they work, and for how long, varies. As long as a program is internally consistent, follows a few basic nutritional tenets, and as long as you adhere to it consistently, without hesitation, and without mixing principles haphazardly taken from other programs, you'll get some results. It's that simple, and that hard (as you can see, results depend as much on psychology as on biochemistry).

But if you're like most people, you'll first survey all the most often discussed programs before deciding which to follow. And in this appraisal, you'll get confused, lost, and then do the inevitable. That's right, you'll revert back to your old, ineffectual nutrition habits.

Instead of parsing out the similarities between all the successful plans out there, the common principles that affect positive, long-term change, you get thrown off the trail by the stench of the steaming piles of detail.
The Atkins program works for all patients under the direct care of the Atkins team—as long as patients follow it. The Zone program works for all patients under the direct care of the Sears team—as long as they follow it. The Pritkin Diet works for all patients under the care of the Pritkin team—as long as they follow it.

Yet, not all three plans are identical. How, then, can they all get impressive improvements in health and body composition? Well, either each team somehow magically draws the specific patient subpopulations most in need of their plan (doubtful) or each system possesses some basic fundamental principles that are more important than the ratios of protein to carbs to fats.

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Here’s my take on it. I call these principles, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Nutritional Programs," a shameless and possibly illegal play on Steven Covey’s book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." (Great book, by the way—you should read it sometime.)

These aren’t the newest techniques from the latest cutting-edge plan. Rather, they are simple, time-tested, no nonsense habits that you need to get into when designing a good eating program.

1. Eat every 2-3 hours, no matter what. You should eat between 5-8 meals per day.
2. Eat complete (containing all the essential amino acids), lean protein with each meal.
3. Eat fruits and/or vegetables with each food meal.
4. Ensure that your carbohydrate intake comes from fruits and vegetables. Exception: workout and post-workout drinks and meals.
5. Ensure that 25-35% of your energy intake comes from fat, with your fat intake split equally between saturates (e.g. animal fat), monounsaturates (e.g., olive oil), and polyunsaturates (e.g. flax oil, salmon oil).
6. Drink only non-calorie containing beverages, the best choices being water and green tea.
7. Eat mostly whole foods (except workout and post-workout drinks).

So what about calories, or macronutrient ratios, or any number of other things that I’ve covered in other articles? The short answer is that if you aren’t already practicing the above-mentioned habits, and by practicing them I mean putting them to use over 90% of the time (i.e., no more than 4 meals out of an average 42 meals per week violate any of those rules), everything else is pretty pointless.

Moreover, many people can achieve the health and the body composition they desire using the 7 habits alone. No kidding! In fact, with some of my clients I spend the first few months just supervising their adherence to these 7 rules—an effective but costly way to learn them.

Of course, if you have specific needs, or if you’ve reached the 90% threshold, you may need a bit more individualization beyond the 7 habits. If so, give me a shout at jb@johnberardi.com, or search around on this site.

Many of these little tricks can be found in my many articles published right here. But before looking for them, before assuming you’re ready for individualization; make sure you’ve truly mastered the 7 habits. Then, while keeping the 7 habits as the consistent foundation, tweak away.

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