

Finding a new kind of comfort food post-cancer

By Katy Yoder
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Comfort food has been a source of contentment and, yes, comfort my whole life. My mom's creamed tuna on toast was a childhood favorite. I'd watch that buttery sauce bubbling in the pan and my mouth would start watering. It was warm, salty and felt like a hug in my tummy.

Then there was the secret stash of chocolate eclairs my great-grandmother kept in her "china closet." We cousins knew what those pink boxes meant ... sugar, chocolate and a high that had our heads buzzing. It made Oma happy watching us devour them and we knew the sweets were her way of letting us know how much she loved us. How could anyone lose in a deal like that?

I can still see big bowls of ice cream laced with milk chocolate and hardening caramel sauce that my best friend and I would eat after school. That kind of food was off-limits at my house. By then Mom had transformed our kitchen into a health-food factory, and ice cream

was no longer allowed in our house. The only time we ate ice cream was when we drove to Baskin-Robbins. I loved those drives in my dad's Buick Riviera. We'd sit at the ice cream store and eat our sugar cones laughing and rehashing the day's events.

In college, my comfort food became what was cheap, filling, and reminded me of home. Macaroni and cheese did the trick. Often under a buck per box, that quick, easy meal became all too familiar in our communal kitchen. After a hard day trying to keep up with my classmates that golden pan of pasta and fake cheese filled my belly and quelled my anxiety.

My diet improved considerably once I was free from school and on my own. But then Ben & Jerry's took the place of Baskin Robbins and with every new flavor they'd create, I found myself unable to resist the sugary sweetness. I'm not sure I was even aware of the addictive quality sugar had for me. I knew it was powerfully alluring but any weight gain I'd had so far wasn't enough to sound the alarm.

Over time the pounds did creep on and one day I woke up and realized I had a problem. I couldn't move the way I wanted to. I couldn't keep up with my fitter friends and my self-confidence was dashed by the constant messages in women's magazines, billboards and television letting me know I was fat and undesirable.

Unfortunately, my plummeting self-esteem brought on by my weight-gain was often comforted by the same foods that got me into the mess in the first place. Processed sugar, carbohydrates and fats from animal products were taking their toll on my health.

I seem to be a slow learner — and it took my cancer diagnosis, painful treatments and recovery before I truly decided to take control of my diet. It was time to admit that I could either choose food that acted as medicine or poison. Everything I put in my mouth either kept the cancer away or led me toward a reoccurrence.

It was time for a new version of comfort food. I wanted a new feeling after I

ate — one that left me feeling confident, proud, and satisfied. The question was could I do that without processed sugar, meat, or dairy?

I can confidently say the answer is, "Yes!"

I know for many hearing those words evokes an instant rebellion. I've heard all kinds of remarks, "You'll have to kill me before I'll give up meat!" or "I can't live without dairy!" It's a little ironic to hear that kind of response. For me, eating too much sugar, meat, and dairy could very well have killed me. No one knows for sure why I got breast cancer, but in some of my research I've found many references to our body storing fat which contains the toxins it was unable to process. Having that stored in my body over a long period of time certainly didn't help.

Comfort food for me includes many of the foods I loved, just in a different form. I make a delicious vegan mac and cheese. But the pasta is gluten-free and the cheese is made with cashews, Dijon mustard, lemon and delicious spices. It's amazing what you can make without

dairy and meat. There are more vegan blogs and websites than I could ever visit. Many have recipes for cookies, main courses, delicious side dishes and more ways to prepare vegetables and fruits than I could have ever imagined. Once I found those sites the transformation was much easier.

I've always called myself a carnivorous hypocrite, meaning I love to eat meat but don't want to know what happens to the animals during their lives and deaths. I worked on a cattle ranch in my college days so I'm not completely ignorant of the lives cattle live. I never worked in a feedlot but I've seen enough images to know it's not a happy existence and it's not healthy for either the animals or the person eating them. So, not eating meat or dairy has opened my eyes to the reality of the system we have in the U.S. I feel good about my choice and can't imagine going back.

If the cancer comes back again, at least I won't have regrets about how I ate. That's the kind of comfort I can live with.



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