

# Comprehensive Changes Are Easier Than Moderate Ones

By Dean Ornish, M.D.

In our research, we learned that it is often easier for people to make comprehensive changes in diet and lifestyle than to make only moderate ones. At first, this may seem like a paradox, but it makes sense when you understand why.

If you make only moderate changes in lifestyle--for example, reducing fat intake from the typical American diet of about 40 percent of calories as fat to the conventional dietary guidelines of 30 percent fat--then you have the worst of both worlds. You feel deprived and hungry because you are not eating everything you want and are used to, but you are not making changes big enough to feel that much better or to significantly affect your weight or how you feel (or, for that matter, your cholesterol, blood pressure, or heart disease). In other words, you are clear about what you are giving up, but you are not getting much positive reinforcement to make you feel like you are getting something back that is equal or better.

For example, patients in the comparison group of the Lifestyle Heart Trial made moderate changes in their diet (30 percent fat, 200 milligrams of cholesterol), yet they felt worse. The frequency of their chest pains increased by 165 percent. They did not lose weight. And their heart disease worsened.

In contrast, when you make comprehensive changes in diet and lifestyle--for instance, with the Life Choice program--then you begin to feel so much better, so quickly, that the choices and benefits become much clearer. And you do not feel deprived or hungry.

During the first week, patients in the Lifestyle Heart Trial began to lose weight and reported more energy and a greater sense of well-being than they had experienced in years. They reported a 91 percent reduction in the average frequency of chest pains due to heart disease, and most of that improvement occurred during the first few days to few weeks after changing lifestyle.

These rapid improvements are a powerful motivator. ...These often dramatic improvements in people with heart disease help to illustrate the power of the Life Choice program, but its benefits extend to those without heart disease.

"We are always making choices," said our research participants, "And we do not mind making choices when we understand the benefits." Like them, I do not believe in giving up something that I enjoy unless what I get back is better than what I am giving up...

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Another reason comprehensive changes are easier to make than minor changes is that big changes disrupt your old routines. What you eat [or how you do anything] is patterned by your habits, in the same way that it is familiar for some people to light a cigarette when they get on the telephone or to have a drink when they come home from work. You tend to eat the same foods because you are used to them. You may have fallen into a pattern, a rut, and that

familiarity is comforting.

For this reason, it is easier to comprehensively change the type of foods that you eat rather than just reduce the amount of food you eat. For example, if you are in the habit of eating an eight-ounce steak, then it is hard to eat only four ounces. If you are used to eating eight ounces, then you are likely to feel deprived when you eat only half as much. When you eat some, you may want some more. In a real sense, it is easier not to eat any steak at all and to eat something totally different--because you are changing your patterns, your habits, not just eating less of the same foods. And it is simpler--you do not have to wonder, "Is it four ounces or five?" Most important, you do not feel hungry and deprived. [This is because you are eating foods that have fewer calories per serving, and therefore you can eat a greater quantity of food.]

[Additionally, continuing to eat your old foods (or indulge any of your old habits) in smaller amounts serves to maintain your taste (liking) for those particular foods or habits. On the other hand, if you stop entirely then your likes will change and you will eventually no longer find the old foods or behaviors appealing or tempting.]

Comprehensive changes can be stressful at first, exactly because they disrupt your old patterns and habits. In the long run, though, it is easier to maintain adherence to big changes precisely because they take you out of your old habits and help you develop new ones.

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Excerpted from *Eat More, Weigh Less*, by Dr. Dean Ornish HarperCollins Publishers © 1993, pp. 56-58. Edited by Dale Lugenbehl, 2002.