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PRT Integrated Core

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**CCUE: Health and Wellness**

During the last two weeks, I decided to challenge myself in this assignment and become a vegetarian. I have been interested in doing this experiment to see how it would affect my eating habits and overall health. Since I am not participating in sports, burning thousands of calories like I did in high school, I am now more concerned with my caloric intake and how much physical activity I am getting during the day. My physical health has been highly important to me my whole life, especially now that I am busier and have to consciously make an effort to work out and eat healthy. Vegetarianism has interested my husband and me since it is something we can easily cut out of our diets and see results in how we feel each day.

Until my sister became a vegetarian four years ago, I went my whole life eating meat, never thinking twice about the amount of meat I consumed. Since she became a vegetarian, she expressed to me how she doesn’t miss meat anymore, even when she cooks it for her non-vegetarian husband at home. My husband and I had been trying to find something to help us become healthier without cutting out a huge chunk of our favorite foods. I also started realizing how many of our meals revolved around meat and how much of it we consumed on a weekly basis. It started to become sickening to me to see how many restaurants had over 80% of their menu contain meat, even salads. When I did a little research on the topic, I learned that in 2012, the USDA estimated that Americans ate an average of 52.3 pounds of beef, 57.4 pounds of chicken, and 43.5 pounds of pork per person each year (vegetarian.procon.org). Out of all the foods we eat, those numbers become a huge percentage of our diets. I became hyperaware of what I was consuming and putting into my body rather than mindlessly eating whatever sounded good to me in the moment. For me, vegetarianism became more appealing because it would be challenging, but in a way that would be healthy and fun to try.

The day we started our challenge, I researched recipes online that didn’t contain meat. I found a lot of pasta dishes, salads and things containing “fake meat,” which I wasn’t 100% willing to try at that time. My first thought when I saw these recipes come up on the search was, “What have I gotten myself into?” I started thinking that we would be eating pasta and bean burritos for the next two weeks, but saved a few of the recipes to try. In the beginning, I had to make a conscious effort to not eat meat, since it is in almost every recipe and restaurant meal. But, once I decided to think about all the things I *could* eat instead of focusing on how I couldn’t eat meat, it made my challenge seem a little less intense. When we would go out to eat, we would ask the waiter what they recommended for a vegetarian and I never missed the meat in the meal we had. There were a few places we went where we asked to have one of their entrees without the added meat and the restaurant was always accommodating to our requests.

Before this assignment, I realize now that I was consuming meat almost everyday, sometimes three times a day at each meal. I would sometimes do “Meatless Mondays” to have a small cleanse from it once a week, but would go back to eating it the next day. When I would go out to eat, there were always plenty of options to choose from because I didn’t have to think about whether or not a dish contained something I ate or not. Once I became vegetarian for these two weeks, I realized the difficulty in finding foods to eat when going out and trying to stay away from a certain food. Not only did I look at meatless dishes for myself, but noticed that there are not many non-dairy or gluten free options at restaurants. With the many different diets and allergies that people have, there should be more options for people in those circumstances. Cooking at home was much easier because I knew exactly what was going into my food and could substitute meat with a vegetable if needed. The longer my husband and I went without meat, the more we noticed how we felt after eating a large meal. Instead of feeling overly full and uncomfortable from consuming an abundance of meat, we felt comfortably full and stayed full for longer periods of time from the diverse types of foods we were eating.

My overall health and wellness during this assignment improved and made me feel better about what I was eating. Not only did my physical body feel good, but also it mentally felt good to know that I was giving back to the environment a little bit by cutting down on livestock grazing and killing the animals. I met many people who were also vegetarian, so it felt like I had become a part of their community. Health and wellness isn’t always about nutrition and exercise, but also about keeping yourself balanced and mentally stable. Having taken nutrition and health classes previously, I have come to understand the importance of keeping our minds and bodies healthy and active. Being socially, physically and mentally well rounded is important to our overall health in order to maintain wellness in our lives. Health and wellness does not just mean we are free from diseases or infirmities, but that we are able to recognize the things we need to keep ourselves healthy in all aspects of our lives.

After these two weeks were up, I decided I wanted to see how long I could go without eating meat and if I would find any other positive effects it had in my life. So far, I still have not eaten meat since the beginning of the challenge and do not plan to until I feel the need to eat it again. I have felt better and have liked challenging myself to continue this in my life. I know that there will be more lifestyle changes I will need to make in order to succeed at staying a vegetarian, but plan to make those changes when I come across them. I have enjoyed the benefits of feeling better and healthier as I have participated in this challenge and plan to continue in this lifestyle change.

**Journal Entries for CCUE Health and Wellness**

September 8th: As I searched for recipes without meat, I found that many of them are pasta dishes or salads. I want to branch out in this challenge and try new recipes I haven’t tried, but also alter recipes I have to not contain meat. I already use vegetable stock in all my soups, so that is something that helps, but it is hard to find new, filling meals that don’t contain meat. My husband is joining me in being vegetarian for the next two weeks to see if he feels any different. It is easier to have him do it with me so we can support each other and try this new lifestyle together.

September 9th: Today I am realizing all the quick meals I normally get that have meat, so I need to find different small meals to eat. Things I think I will miss most are turkey sandwiches and breakfast sandwiches that have bacon on them. Instead of having those for lunch or breakfast sometimes, I could just ask for no meat. I am finding more ways to eliminate meat from meals, by requesting to have it taken out or substituting it with something else.

September 10th: So far, the beginning of this challenge has been fairly easy. I talked to my sister who is a vegetarian about different meals she makes and she gave me some good recipes to try. She said that when she goes out to eat, she normally gets side dishes if the menu has a lot of meat choices. My sister told me about a chili she makes that is a three-bean chili and that she likes to have grilled cheese sandwiches with soup for a smaller meal. It is nice having someone who has been vegetarian for years to ask for advice in the beginning of this because I am still trying to find new recipes to try without making pasta or salad all the time.

September 11th: Going to the football game tonight, I thought I would have a hard time finding something meatless to eat or that I would really crave chicken strips or a corndog. Instead, my husband and I had nachos, one of our favorite football snacks. When I saw the other food they offer in the stadium, I was actually glad to go meatless because everything else was either really greasy or fried. Nachos are definitely not healthy, but it seemed like a better choice than other things on the menu.

September 12th: This morning when I went to Starbucks, I really craved one of their bacon, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwiches with my coffee. Instead, I had a granola bar and felt better about my choice. Sometimes it feels hard to find healthy non-meat options when going out. Tonight, we went to a restaurant and we both realized how many meat options there were. It was a fairly small menu, but most of the choices on the menu were a dish that revolved around a piece of meat. This gave us a limited amount of items to choose from. My husband had a potato lasagna which he said was good, but not great and I tried risotto for the first time which I really liked. The vegetarian options are good, but they are few and far between.

September 13th: This morning, when we would normally go to breakfast and have eggs, bacon, and potatoes, we decided to go get bagels instead. It was a nice change of pace to have something a little lighter for breakfast. My husband and I have talked about how we both feel now that we have gone without meat for a few days and agree that it makes us feel healthier. We don’t feel so overly full after eating and feel like we have had just enough food instead of feeling stuffed. So far, we both like it and don’t miss meat as much as we thought we would.

September 14th: Today I decided to do a little research on how much meat we consume in America. Since becoming vegetarian last week, I have been interested to know whether being vegetarian is better for you or not. Here are some facts I found on vegetarian.procon.org:

* Environmental damage caused by grazing livestock has been a factor in the listing of 171 species under the Endangered Species Act.
* The average American get 67% of his or her dietary protein from animal sources, compared to a world-wide average of 34%.
* In the U.S, about 35 million cows, 115 million pigs, and 9 billion birds are killed for food each year.

The last fact really made me realize how much America relies on meat as their main source of food. We consume so much meat that we are killing over 9.15 billion animals for food each year, which is an insanely high number to me. If I can cut down that number, even by a little bit, I would feel much better. Being an animal lover, I hate to see these drastically high numbers, knowing that most of these animals are not treated humanely.

September 15th: One thing I was concerned about when starting this was how I was going to get enough protein in my diet. Normally, most of my protein would come from lean meats, but now I need to consciously think about what to eat to make sure I am getting enough protein. I know that nuts and cheese have a lot of protein, but they are also very high in calories, so it is hard to eat them while trying to keep my caloric intake in a normal range. My husband loves to snack on cheese and crackers, so I have added that to part of my snacking to get those proteins.

September 16th: Tonight we went out to dinner with a friend and both ordered gnocchi macaroni and cheese and a side salad. Our friend ordered calamari for the table without knowing we went vegetarian, so my husband ate some. I told him since he likes seafood that he could be a pescetarian, which is a vegetarian who eats fish and other seafood. I am not a fan of most seafood, so I would stick with vegetarianism, but he said he would like being a pescetarian because he wouldn’t want to give up lobster, fish, shrimp, and other seafood. It is interesting to think about the different branches of vegetarianism because there are quite a few different types. There are:

* Pollo-vegetarians who only eat poultry
* Pescetarians who only eat fish
* Flexitarians who go in and out of being vegetarian
* Vegans who do not eat anything derived from an animal

There are a few more, but those are the ones I could think of. I think that if you are making a conscious effort not to eat a lot of meat or a certain type of meat, you would be considered one type of vegetarian.

September 17th: One thing I have found while doing this challenge is that I get more headaches. This is partially caused by me not drinking enough water during the day, but I am wondering if my body is also adjusting to not having those animal proteins it is used to. I know that when you eliminate something out of your diet, like sugar or caffeine, your body goes through withdrawals from the substance because it is accustom to having those elements in the body. Maybe I am completely wrong, and the headaches are caused solely from not drinking enough water, but I thought it was interesting that it happened during this challenge.

September 18th: It has become more second nature to not order something that contains meat. I don’t think about it as much as I did in the beginning and I am starting to see how this could be fully integrated into my life. My husband feels the same way and we have agreed that this experiment has not been as bad as we thought. We both have noticed we have lost a couple pounds since starting and would like to see if this continues after the two week period. It is a good to feel like we are leading a healthier lifestyle by eating better and taking care of our bodies in a different way than before.

September 19th: By being vegetarian, not only have I thought about not eating meat, but I have also thought more about what I am eating at each meal. I think about how I can make things healthier and better for us instead of using ingredients that are high fat and calorie. I have been adding vegetables to recipes and meals to make them more filling and make sure we are getting our enough vegetables. It would be easy to eat a lot of processed, cheesy, and greasy foods as a vegetarian because a lot of processed food and snacks are meatless, but it is better to add vegetables to keep things healthy.

September 20th: One reason why I wanted to try vegetarianism is because I am a huge animal lover and believe in animal rights. I have watched documentaries on the inhumane treatment of animals in slaughterhouses and it sickens me that places like that are even in business. When I did eat meat, I always tried to find packages of free-range animals because I knew that they were being treated more humanely. I think it is so wrong that we have to put animals through those horrendous conditions just so we can enjoy what they have to offer; whether it be their milk, meat, or eggs. Vegetarianism has helped me feel less guilty about what I eat in terms of where it is coming from and how it was made.

September 21st: I have reflected on the last several days and have realized how much meat is around us. It is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is also not a good thing. My husband and I had a conversation about how many times we had to really try to find a vegetarian friendly entrée on a menu that didn’t seem like it would only fill us halfway. It seems like in our day in age, where so many diets and allergies surround us, there would be plenty of options on menus for people from all circumstances that need their food altered.

September 22nd: As I think about the end of this assignment, I don’t want to stop being a vegetarian. I have seen the benefits in my life from cutting out meat and want to continue this lifestyle change. I don’t think I will always be a vegetarian, but I want to see how long I can go without giving into a craving or something that looks good. Not only have I cut out meat, but also it has made me more conscious about what I am eating and how I am maintaining a balanced diet each day. Some days, of course, I do not eat as healthy as I would like, but I am at least aware of my carbohydrate, fat, sugar, and caloric intake each day. I plan to continue on with this lifestyle change to hopefully see future benefits.