

# *From the Heart...*

## *... Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



## ***Meals that Say Family***

Now that you have given some time over the past month reflecting on your basic wellness inventory of movement/exercise, nutrition, and stress management, it's time to eat! So, who's your cook in the family? I know I was for almost 35 years! Yet, when my husband, John, retired, it was his turn—or no retirement!!! At least, that was the deal I made with him.

Over the years, John has really come through on his promise. So, I let him retire in peace! And he's a great cook—a creative genius with cuisine. He also has mastered the fine art of healthy, whole foods menus. With my adventurous health history, there were no other options all around. He was actually glad for it, since we both feel much better when eating a healthy, whole foods routine.

What is meal time like for you? Does your family eat together at your dinner table at least once per day? Once per week? Do you have favorite dishes and menus you often repeat? Or is your meal time basically spontaneous on what leftovers are in the refrig or TV dinner in the freezer? Are you the only one in the kitchen slaving away? With your kids on their iPods, and your spouse at the computer?

Well, here are some tips we've learned over the years that you can talk with your family—about creating meals and mealtime that say family is most important.

- Commit to eating at least 3 meals per week together at home, preferably the evening meal to encourage sharing of preparations and conversation.
- Put some music on to soothe and enliven the soul for your family's evening gathering.
- Sit down and write a basic healthy/whole foods menu plan for the week; and go grocery shopping for it all. Include as much fresh produce as possible and a balanced array of foods (protein, healthy fats, complex carbs).
- Learn how to clean and preserve the foods you buy to avoid waste and potential spoilage.
- For your main meal together, creatively set the table in a way that welcomes everyone to the feast and festivities of family.
- At meal time, ask how your children's day went? Try to keep the conversation positive and light, if at all possible. Relationships will be nurtured and indigestion will be avoided. If a very serious topic comes up, offer a supportive comment and suggest that further conversation on this topic be continued later in the evening or at a more appropriate time.
- Whether you serve buffet style or at the dining table, use colorful serving items that make each meal together something a little special.
- Begin to offer serving amounts to each family member according to their age, and health condition. When smaller portions are somewhat new to your family, offer whole foods menus that fill without creating a bulge in all the wrong places. Smaller portions of whole, balanced foods do more for thinning the

waist and reducing health risks than anything else (along with exercise/movement, of course!).

Next issue, we will cover a variety of lifestyle habits that may hinder the enjoyment of meals and meal time together. We often are not even aware that these routines we develop make mealtime less inviting at home and when dining out. Think about some possible habits that you or your spouse may have that you wish they didn't have, particularly at meal time.

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## ***Lifestyle Habits & Hindrances at Mealtime***

In our fast-paced world, we seldom give much thought to mealtime. It's just part of the day we have when we get hungry...no more, no less. For many who can't seem to slow down, they grab a bite and continue on their marathon. Many meals are tied to high stress business meetings. Even when they sit down to eat at home, their minds are racing through a dozen thoughts and "to do's."

How we approach mealtime is definitely a mindset challenge. Any number of lifestyle habits hinders the enjoyment of meals and mealtime together. We are often not even aware of those lifestyle routines practiced over years that make mealtime less inviting at home and when dining out. Unfortunately, these hindrances can actually set in motion a lifetime of unhappy memories of mealtime. Think back to your own mealtime experiences. Were they happy ones or filled with tension? Think about one possible habit you or your spouse has today that you wish were not part of mealtime.

As you consider these hindrances, what other habits do you have that are not conducive to an enjoyable mealtime together with those you love and care for? Reflect on one of those habits; then write down three potential actions that will free you of that hindrance and offer greater enjoyment in sharing mealtime together. Talk about those actions

with a family member or close friend, giving them permission to hold you accountable for at least one of those freeing actions.

Ask for feedback about any undesirable mealtime habits they would like to see disappear and possible ways to resolve it. Be kind to one another in the way you communicate your thoughts. Certain habits may be a delicate topic for some. Here are some examples of mealtime hindering habits that are fairly common in families around mealtime. Are any of these familiar to you or someone you know?

- Because of years of business meeting meals, you bring the stress home and act the same business-like way with your family at mealtime.
- You repeatedly drink some form of alcohol (including wine) before, with, and after meals—causing you to either zone out or become obnoxious with those around you.
- You do not share in the preparation and serving of meals.
- You routinely complain about what is being served.
- You are always late for mealtime.
- You down your food in gulps between deep breaths and are done eating within the first five minutes at the table.
- You seldom if ever come home and offer to make the meal.
- You hide in your office at the computer answering emails before you even say hello to your family.
- You give no thought to the physical dining environment around you at home, making it unwelcoming for family, friends, and neighbors.
- You try to dissect or solve your life problems at the dining table.

- You argue and dwell on controversial topics at mealtime instead of waiting for a more appropriate occasion.
- You attack or accuse your children at mealtime about school or some unacceptable personal behavior.
- You don't ask questions that encourage friendly, lively conversation.
- You routinely leave the dining table the minute you finish eating, while others are still dining.
- You don't offer to help clean the kitchen after a meal.
- You would rather eat your meals on a TV tray while watching TV.
- You never call to tell your family you will be eating out or late for dinner. You just show up later, then tell them after dinner was waiting for you.

I know this list goes on and on—more than likely with a number of creative habits garnered over the years and hard to break. As you read this list, who wants to live with all this negativity anyway? If any of these are personally familiar to you, how about rewording that particular habit, such as “I will come home, and begin to offer to make the meal at least once per week while enjoying each other’s company.”

You will gratefully begin to build cherished memories at mealtime for you and your family. Your adult children will then have sweet memories of mealtime they will create with their own families. Now, this is a legacy worth passing on.

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## ***Mealtime Traditions in Your Family***

Would you like to share your mealtime traditions with the readers? Here is your opportunity to do just that. Just email me directly at [seekreachachieve@gvtc.com](mailto:seekreachachieve@gvtc.com) to submit your very own cherished memories and today's mealtime traditions. I would love to hear how you build sweet memories of mealtime for yourself and your family. I will then pass them along to my readers with the next several article issues.

You never know who may begin their own tradition based on your very own mealtime memory or family gathering routine. Here is one mealtime memory my own daughters have cherished from childhood, now that they are adults themselves. Whenever one of them would catch a cold and hit the bed for a couple days, I would first set up their room like they were camping. Pulling a couple sheets from the linen closet, I would create a large tent over their bed.

Then I would go into the kitchen and make their favorite "I hate being sick meal, but I know I will get Mom's special rice pudding!" I cook up some whole grain brown rice, warm it up in some milk. Then sprinkle it with lots of cinnamon, raisins, and a drop of honey. Stir it all up, nice and warm. In the meantime, they get all propped up in their beds, ready to enjoy every bite.

I come serving it on a colorful tray with “I love you notes” or maybe a little surprise gift all wrapped up in colorful paper. They may get a puzzle, a little toy to occupy the hours, or a small stuffed bear to hug and talk to. They would always say, “Mommy, the pudding feels so good going down my sore throat and makes me feel so much better inside.” They then play quietly for a while and fall fast asleep. This is just one memory I greatly cherish, knowing even when sick, mealtime can be something special and bring some relief and comfort during such times.

My friend, Judy, recently shared with me that her family always made sure that they had at least the dinner meal together each evening. Her husband, a very busy pastor, would come home and immediately team together to prepare the meal (which is still rare in today’s world). Their dinner meal was always an opportunity to have the kids share their day with Mom, Dad, and each other. Now that the kids are grown with their own families, those meals were always remembered as happy times together. And never in front of the TV.

The focus was on the meal and enjoying each other’s company. This mealtime tradition got them through some very painful years when one of their sons died; and this mealtime brought tears on many occasions, seeing that empty chair. Although the adjustment was hard, the other three children were also comforted by continuing their daily evening mealtime tradition together. The grief eventually transformed into gratitude for a life filled with the love of their children and this daily time together.

So, now it’s your turn. I look forward to hearing from you about all kinds of mealtime traditions your family enjoys. I will not use your name to preserve your privacy if I decide to include it in my articles. In addition, if you had unhappy childhood mealtime memories, feel free to share how you transformed those memories into happy ones with your own children.



Email me soon so I can read them all before article deadlines fast approach. Hope to hear from you soon!

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## ***Mealtime Traditions in Your Family Part 2***

Last issue I invited you to share your mealtime traditions with the readers. And a couple of you answered the call. Here's one for this week. In addition, here is your opportunity to still submit your very own mealtime traditions for next issue. Just email me directly at [seekreachachieve@gvtc.com](mailto:seekreachachieve@gvtc.com). Here is Kit's own mealtime memory, in her own words, that still brings a laugh to her grown up children.

"This hardly qualifies as a family tradition, but it is about making one mealtime special and still remembered by my middle-aged children. We also had dinner-together-no-TV rules in our house. But one evening, everyone including me seemed to be in a grouchy mood that was sure to make it stressful. I was serving one of the "old family favorite" meals that are rarely exciting, but nourishing still.

On impulse, I grabbed a jar of food coloring and turned the rice a bright lavender, never saying a word. When the lid of its covered dish was lifted, the pall of moodiness fell away. Everyone laughed and laughs to this day over Mom's Purple Rice. Thanks for letting me share a laugh!"

How do mealtime memories make the difference for you and your family?

According to a seven-year survey completed by the National Center on Addiction and

Substance Abuse at Columbia University, teens who sit down for family dinner five or more nights a week are:

- 32 percent less likely to try cigarettes
- 45 percent less likely to try alcohol
- 24 percent less likely to smoke pot

This is compared to teens who eat dinner with their families twice a week or less. This mealtime routine helps create a stable environment for children who experience daily temptations and risky situations away from home.

Miriam Weinstein, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and journalist, was so passionate about mealtime, she wrote a book titled *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*. Weinstein visited families around the country— those who make time for family meals and those who do not. She then compared her observations with published research. She found that eating meals together:

- Improves children’s language skills, which better prepares them to learn to read (even more so than children who are read to).
- Helps with emotional stability.
- Discourages obesity and eating disorders.
- Helps keep asthmatic kids out of hospitals.
- Keeps the family more in touch with their ethnic heritage and/or community of faith.
- Teaches real life skills, as each member takes on a role with responsibilities as part of the “team”.
- Makes children less stressed and more likely to get As in school.

- Cements relationships.

Be sure to send in your mealtime tradition or memories soon for the next issue. In the meantime, check out these book references for thoughts and ideas; and take the survey accessed with the link below.

*The Surprising Power of Family Meals* by Mariam Weinstein

*Mealtime Memories* by Thomas Kinkade

Family Mealtime Survey Link –

[http://www.tandtnews.com/survey/public/survey.php?name=Family Time Challenge](http://www.tandtnews.com/survey/public/survey.php?name=Family_Time_Challenge)

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## ***Mealtime Traditions in Your Family Part 3***

My husband and I were recently reminiscing about our own childhood mealtime memories. During John's growing up years, his Mom and Dad always had weekend barbeques with chicken, corn on the cob, and fresh beans from the garden. These were happy memories for John and his brothers. His father was a traveling salesman for a surgical supply manufacturer throughout six western states. So, having Pop home to barbeque was always a treat for the whole family.

I remember, also during my childhood years, Sunday dinners at my home where many times steaks were being barbequed by Dad, while Mom made her favorite potato salad. Vegetables were present, but Mom always seemed to overcook them. Whether green beans or spinach, they always turned a muddy dark green. So, we didn't exactly get excited about that part of the meal. But oh, were those steaks delicious. Sundays were special days for me in particular—both sad and sweet.

On the sad side, I was raised with both alcoholic parents, with an abusive father. So, life was pretty scary most of the time. Yet, there is always a silver lining in the midst of it all. On Sunday, the sweet side would show up. My Dad was sober enough to actually smile, laugh, and enjoy the backyard barbequing days. I was fairly confident

that when the weekends came, life around home was safer all around. I remember my brother (we called him Lucky because he was born on Friday, Nov 13) always making play fun for my younger sister and I during the weekends. As we grew up as teenagers, Lucky would be there to make sure we were alright at school and at home. He was, in fact, instrumental in much of the abuse ending in my teenage years after Lucky confronted Dad and warned him to never hurt me again, or else. Dad must have taken it seriously, and life became friendlier after that.

I find it amazing what self-discoveries surface when you ask a simple question to people, “What mealtime memories do you have about your childhood?” All kinds of responses surface—from similar ones like mine to some of the most endearing mealtime traditions I wish we all experienced. This coming week, ask your spouse, children, and friends what their mealtime memories were and see what discoveries about each other surface in the conversation. I just bet you will more closely understand each other and want to help one another build lasting and endearing mealtime memories cherished by all.

Next month, the focus will be on Childcare tips for parents and want-to-be parents. See you then.

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