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Getting to the emotional roots of poor eating habits



Nora Mullen (left) was an overwhelmed working mother with a new baby when she consulted personal performance coach Erin Owen. The insight she gained from their sessions led her to quit her job and focus on her family's quality of life and good nutrition. She and her daughter both are thriving. (TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer)



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By [Sally Friedman](#), [For The Inquirer](#)

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Life was becoming a winless race for Nora Mullen, 37: rushing to the office and back to her Oreland home, feeling overwhelmed and dissatisfied with her role as a new

working mother.

Her baby daughter, an extremely picky eater, was in day care, and often sick.

It was during that period two years ago that Mullen consulted personal performance coach Erin Owen. The Northern Liberties founder of Your Performance Breakthrough (www.yourperformancebreakthrough.com) offers counseling in stress reduction, change, and nutrition, all with a leaning toward Eastern wisdom.

The two began meeting, and the results, according to Mullen, "were profound." Mullen gained insight into what her stress was costing her, and how she was shortchanging herself and her family, especially at mealtimes. A year ago, she left her job and is now making quality of life and nutrition high priorities. Her toddler daughter is thriving, and so is Mullen.

For the last eight years, Owen, an MBA who also trained at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition (affiliated with Columbia University), has worked as one of a growing number of professionals who specialize in guiding high-achieving and often exhausted people to live more balanced lives, with nutrition as a cornerstone. Nutrition coaching leaves the prescribed diets to the Weight Watchers of the world, and takes a deeply personal approach, examining emotional triggers, eating history, and family dynamics in a one-on-one setting. It's an expanding field - the institute has 20,000 alumni working in 50 states and more than 80 countries since Joshua Rosenthal founded the program in 1992.

Owen, herself a mother of two, jumped from her corporate treadmill after noticing in her 20s that her body was breaking down from stress and improper eating, those deadly companions of modern Western life.

"I studied more and more about Eastern philosophies, made drastic changes in my own diet, ditching the doughnuts and burritos, and even stopped drinking coffee," says Owen. "I use some ancient Chinese ideas about the digestive system, about keeping food in proper relationship to the seasonal changes. ... Food can be the 'drug of choice,' and knowing how to use it can change your life."

Karen Gomez was a skinny kid until around age 10. Then, says the Philadelphia resident, she started gaining weight. "I come from a family with weight issues and bad habits," says Gomez. She tried every diet. As a teen and later as a young adult, she followed scripted plans that failed her. And then she met her nutritional inspiration: Ali Shapiro.

Gomez attended one of Shapiro's group sessions on emotional eating back in 2008, and as she listened to Shapiro discuss the tangled relationships that women have with food, something clicked. She signed on as a private client. "I left that first session so relieved that I wasn't going on a diet, one that would leave me hungry for weeks."

Fast forward to 2012, and Gomez is a considerably thinner - and infinitely happier - working mother of a 10-year-old son.

She has dropped about 60 pounds, embraced an entirely new way of nourishing herself, left a job that she disliked, and is passionate about walking several miles daily to and from her job in administration at the University of Pennsylvania.

Shapiro's "Truce With Food" approach to nourishment (alishapiro.com) contends that excess weight needs first to be understood if it is to be fixed.

Shapiro, 33, often shares her own story with clients, one that begins with her diagnosis, at age 13, of Hodgkin's disease.

"I thought I was going to die - I hated not being 'normal' - and I tried to bulldoze my way through chemo and radiation, stuffing down the feelings."

She was emotionally ravaged, at war with her body, and grew prone to cycles of losing and gaining weight into her young adulthood.

"And then I chose to work in corporate America, traveling all the time, feeling anxious and pressured. All the while, my body was signaling me that I was abusing it. I struggled with depression, had an undiagnosed gluten intolerance, asthma, allergies. . ."

About six years ago, still in her stress-loaded life, Shapiro began studying nutrition, enrolling in the Institute for Integrative Nutrition.

Today, a regular health contributor to NBC's *The 10! Show*, she works with women struggling with weight. Shapiro reviews health histories, family patterns, and emotional eating, offering simple strategies such as getting off processed foods, digging into one's emotional history, and not waiting for life to get better "once I lose weight."

Says Shapiro, "My life and body are at peace now that I've designed my life in a way that truly feeds me."

Although the majority of clients are women, the problem isn't solely a female one. Just ask Jay M. Leistner, founder of Phase 2 Architecture and Interiors.

The 53-year-old Elkins Park resident summarizes: "I had too much on my plate - both food and work."

Given to late-night snacking, Leistner saw his weight creeping up, but he wasn't looking for a diet. He wanted a new relationship with food.

He found it with Sally Eisenberg, founder of Nourish Ur Life (nourishurlife.com), a nutrition counselor who also entered the field following some personal struggles.

"In 2006, I lost my sister to ovarian cancer. That was a terrible wake-up call to me about how precious life is," says Eisenberg, 47. "I'd worked for 20 years in the world of marketing and advertising, and I realized I wanted something more meaningful and personal in my life."

Then there was her own history: "As a chronic dieter, I was obsessed with my weight. It was completely unhealthy. I would weigh myself daily, and if I didn't like the number, my day would be ruined."

Eisenberg understands that with adjustments in attitudes and in daily diet, food can become a friend and less an enemy. Through her company, she works with clients on replacing unhealthy habits and ingredients with healthy ones. "I'm definitely not a fan of going on a diet," she says, noting that instead, she often takes clients on shopping trips to the grocery store to introduce new foods - and new food ideas. She also cooks with them in her kitchen.

On a recent afternoon, she was doing a refresher course with Leistner, who has learned about foods he never knew existed, like the quinoa fritters they were preparing together.

"I've lost 20 pounds without really trying," says Leistner, "and I've gained mindfulness and balance in my life. And that's better than ice cream."

Marni Grinberg Davis, 42 and pregnant, is another Eisenberg client. The director of philanthropy for a nonprofit, Davis has never had a weight problem, but her goal is to improve her awareness about nutrition.

"I definitely feel healthier, cleaner, and better-informed," says Davis. She and her husband plan to pass these principles on to their baby, due in March.

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