

Violet's Story – Blueberries That Taste Like Candy

At my first Suppers meeting, we participated in a workshop that explained how addictive the standard American diet is. In the US, we have easy access to affordable, highly processed foods. The facilitator explained how eating processed foods provides a diet high in sugar, salt and fat that destabilizes blood sugar and causes cravings for unhealthy foods and excessive weight gain. We also learned that dietary changes and eating more whole foods not only improves health but can improve how you feel physically and emotionally. My family has so many of the problems that Suppers says it can help. There are problems with alcohol on both sides; depression, anxiety and struggles with weight. I had no idea that these things are connected and that the common thread is what we eat.

As curious and as hopeful as I was going into this meeting, I was equally overwhelmed and lost when it was over. We had talked about nutritional harm reduction, which is a conscious and steady effort to reduce and ultimately eliminate unhealthy foods from the diet. For example, processed foods wreak havoc with blood sugar and unstable blood sugar can produce, among other things, irritability and mood swings. One way to begin a program of nutritional harm reduction is to begin eliminating processed foods from your diet. I thought back to a scene earlier that day. I had picked up my son as camp. We always stop for ice cream on our way home. He had had a total melt down when I told him we did not have time to stop for our habitual sweet "treat". I shuddered to think about what he might do if I tried to take away his favorite meal items and snacks. There'd be war on Main Street!

As we were wrapping up the Suppers meeting, the facilitator was talking about eliminating sugar from the diet. She mentioned that we might be surprised how we felt after a period of time without lots of added sugar in our daily diet. A Dad in our group shared that he could identify with what was being said. He told the story of how he had had a long illness and had not eaten much during a couple of weeks. When he felt better he ate some blueberries. He said they actually tasted like candy! His story gave me hope that if I started taking gentle steps with my son, I could improve his eating habits incrementally and eventually help him enjoy eating what is good for him.

But, where to start! Some of the mothers in the group became eager to swap stories about the clever ways they slowly got their kids to change some of their eating habits. We laughed at the stories of family members who hid sweets under pillows and in sock drawers! We cried when one Mom described her joy when a healthier diet finally gave her child relief from chronic constipation, tantrums and hyperactivity.

Implementing nutritional harm reduction took over a year in my household. There were many bumps along the way. My family often resisted my efforts. The kids were complaining, my husband was losing his temper and everyone was needling me to bring back the treats. Even though I felt like giving up, I continued to make changes; tossing a box of cookies and making fruit and raw veggies available for snacking, substituting baked sweet potato "fries" for white potatoes fried in oil, refusing to give in to the kids when they whined for candy bars in the grocery store check out line. However, I knew I had come to a turning point one day while riding in the car with my son. I simply turned to him and handed him a box of blueberries for his snack. He tossed a big handful in his mouth and said, "These are *delishush*". Normally, I would have said, "Don't talk with your mouthful, please." Instead, I cried, as did everyone in the Suppers group when I told the story at our next meeting.

When I was frantic about my family's health, Suppers offered me a difficult but attainable task. Group support was critical. I also needed to experience that "hatching chick" moment; the moment before which nothing can change and after which nothing can stay the same. That happened for me the day I could imagine blueberries that taste like candy.