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Take Charge of Your Health

By Janis Gibson

Many people who have been through a serious illness or medical setback will later say that as difficult as it was at the time, they have been changed for the better; that the experience allowed them to look at their lives, reprioritize, and they are now happier and healthier than ever before. One such person is Renee Simon of South Salem.

In 1992, she was a businesswoman on the rise, putting in long hours, often running 20 to 30 miles a week ... and ignoring the signals her body was sending to slow down. Then one morning she woke up with “the worst sore throat I ever had, large swollen glands and fatigue that barely allowed me to get out of bed.” After weeks of low grade fever, foggy brain and debilitating fatigue, her illness was diagnosed as Epstein-Barr virus.

After doing some research, Renee knew, “I would have to take a holistic approach to get better and I sought out practitioners that would support me.” In addition to changing her diet and taking supplements, she began meditating and journaling. She also cut back on her work hours and, with her husband, adopted a child.

Through the process of regaining her health, she shared what she learned with others and discovered a new career direction. “Once I was healthy again, I knew I wanted to help others in a preventative way. Today I work with individuals and families to get them on a path to better health.”

She returned to school and earned a master’s degree in clinical nutrition. “It felt great to be clear about what I was passionate about already; it formalized my knowledge and enabled me to be licensed and certified to practice.”

Today she is a licensed dietician-nutritionist and a certified nutrition specialist, seeing clients at The Center for Health & Healing (which is affiliated with Northern Westchester Hospital) in Mount Kisco plus seeing clients in South Salem and Ridgefield as well. She regularly conducts seminars on various health issues and speaks at hospitals, universities, health spas, corporations, schools and large not-for-profit organizations. Renee is also part of a districtwide committee for developing healthy food programs for schools in Lewisboro, which is required by the New York State to develop a wellness policy by the end of June.

To reach even more people, last year Renee formalized her philosophies and approach in a book, *Take Back Your Health: A Total Wellness Guide For You and Your Family*.

“This book is like having a nutritionist at your side,” she said. It outlines the four key steps in her practice — diet, exercise, supplements and stress management and self-care — and provides a guide for helping individuals and families to restore the body’s natural balance. It includes a 14-day balanced food program, exercises and information on stress management. The book is easy to read and provides client health makeover stories from the inside out for most common health concerns. It can be purchased through her website, totalwellnessnutrition.com, or amazon.com.

“Everything is interrelated, mind-body-spirit,” she said. “In traditional practices, patients are often looked at as diseases, rather than a whole person. Instead of treating symptoms, I test for imbalances that can be corrected with an integrated approach. Some examples where this approach is particularly helpful are: digestive issues, hormonal imbalances, weight-loss resistance, unexplained fatigue and chronic disease.”

Renee sometimes tests for food sensitivities, which is similar to allergy testing. Sensitivities are a lighter reaction than allergy, so they are harder to pinpoint and some do not show up for up to 72 hours after ingesting a food. After a period of abstinence, many of the foods can be slowly reintroduced.

“There is no quick fix to good health,” she continued. “The goal is optimal health for whatever your conditions may be, to get on the right path, physically and mentally. As part of my practice, I work with an energy balance system called reconnective healing and teach breathing and tai chi techniques for stress reduction.”

She works with individuals, special needs kids — ADHD, autism, sensory problems — as well as whole families, helping with kitchen makeovers, providing samples of snacks kids can try, and also using computer games to help teach children to make better food choices. “You have to make it fun to keep them interested,” she noted. She also has a program for teens.

Her experiences play a large role in her practice. “When people know that I’ve ‘been there, done that’ with many of their issues, it opens the door. Much of this is very personal for me; I can empathize with many problems and the fact that I’ve recovered connects me with people. Better health is a personal mission; mine is a heartfelt approach. My clients know I am there for them; this is definitely my calling.”

One Family’s Health Makeover

Wendy McLean began seeing Renee about a year ago at the suggestion of a neighbor. “She said Renee helped her immensely, taught her all kinds of new things — and she’s a nurse!”

Wendy was sleeping about 10 hours a night, but not well, and was always tired. She figured that was because she has two small kids, five and one-and-a-half at the time. More bothersome, however, “I was constantly bloated, often feeling like I was five months pregnant, and constantly had a stuffy nose.” Renee started her on supplements and suggested testing for food sensitivities.

“The test results were amazing!” said Wendy. “I showed a sensitivity to about 25 foods, including lemon, garlic and broccoli. I was also sensitive to cucumbers and grapes. My reaction was, Oh, wow ... well I guess I can give all of them up for a week ... I was stunned when 48 hours later I felt better than I had felt since before the kids were born — and I could smell again! The gas was gone and I could sleep eight hours and feel energetic. And I could instantly feel it when I ate any of the foods by mistake.”

Thrilled with the results, Wendy had her children tested as well. Sarah, the five-year-old, had severe mood swings and Katie had eczema. While Katie also had a long list of sensitivities, Sarah had only two — blueberries and soy. “And here I was trying to work more soy into their diets,” Wendy laughed. Sarah’s mood swings lessened and Katie’s eczema cleared up but recurs if she eats the “wrong” foods. Sarah’s mood changes were further reduced by the addition of zinc drops to her morning drink, “and we can always tell if we forget them,” said Wendy.

Finally, Wendy’s husband consulted Renee for reflux and related pain. Renee recommended herbs that helped heal the esophagus, provided eating tips and instruction on stress reduction. Within a month he “was eating like he did when he was in high school and delighted that pain was gone.”

The family is much healthier and happier now, but “holidays are tough,” Wendy admits. “But the knowledge remains and we get back on track because the rewards are worth it.”

*Renee Simon, MS, CNS, can be reached at 914-763-9107 or RSimon312@aol.com.
View her website, www.totalwellnessnutrition.com, for more information about programs
and services.*