Diet of life

A friend of mine who is a yoga teacher came up with a phrase—“diet of life”—that has changed the way I think about how I spend my time. We say that everything we eat and drink is part of our diet, so we can draw a parallel and say that our diet of life consists of all we take in—our physical environment, our social environment, the work we do, our leisure activities, media, food, drink, medications, exercise, self-care activities, and so on.

Often I find that people have slipped in to a diet of life that contributes to feelings of anxiety or depression. It happens not by choice, but in response to life circumstances. Perhaps we find ourselves stuck with a roommate who is self-centered and inconsiderate. Perhaps we have to study all the time. Perhaps we just don’t have the money to go out and enjoy ourselves.

Still, if you take stock of your diet of life, you will find there are many things you can change, and what is really keeping you from changing is habit. Habits do serve an important purpose. If we had to think afresh about everything we do we would soon be overwhelmed. Often, though, the conditions under which we formed a habit are no longer present. Instead of reacting to present circumstances, we are reacting to things that happened a long time ago—even in our childhood or infancy. This is why it is good to step back from time to time and look at your habits of living, your diet of life.

Sometimes we can’t change our circumstances. You’re going to be stuck with that roommate until your lease is up. You can change the way you think and feel about the situation, though, and your own behavior as well.

If we think of dieting as denying ourselves things, we can start to feel sorry for ourselves, but I find it is easier if you think of it as replacing things that make you feel bad with things that make you feel better. Another way to think of it is cleaning out the refrigerator. Stuff tends to accumulate and get spoiled, so occasionally we have to throw it out and buy fresh. Either way, you’ll find that improving your diet of life will improve your spirits and your functionality as well.

-John Bailey, LMHC