

Ten Things I Learned Along the Way

Graduating from Michigan State University's Coordinated Program gave me a wonderful knowledge base, but I also knew that being a registered dietitian meant I would have a lifetime of learning ahead of me. What I didn't anticipate were all the lessons I would learn outside of the required continuing education classes. These were lessons I learned from my experiences with family, friends, clients, and colleagues. Some were lessons I learned the hard way. I am willing to bet that many of you learned these lessons too:

1. **Some clients really don't know much about nutrition.** When I first was paid to do what I do, I couldn't believe it. My thoughts were, "Doesn't everyone already know this stuff?" Then, one of the most attentive clients I ever worked with asked, "What is the difference between fat and salt?" I never took a client's base knowledge for granted again.
2. **People only remember about three concepts from an hour-long consultation.** Ouch. In the beginning I had so much I wanted to tell people, I ended up cluttering my consultation time and classes with hundreds of details. Then one of my clients, a middle school teacher, mentioned very gracefully, that I was giving too much information at one time. Her wisdom helped me to focus my lessons accordingly.
3. **Don't counsel family or friends.** Ok, so I did learn this in school, and really, I am glad to help with isolated nutrition questions. But how many times have friends, family, or co-workers begged for help to lose weight or get their cholesterol down? I can now answer these requests from experience. Anytime that I reluctantly agreed to work up a meal plan for someone close to me, always ended up making everyone feel uncomfortable.
4. **Refer patients to other dietitians when I don't feel qualified to help.** I don't know it all, I can't know it all, and I don't HAVE to know it all. It is an important part of our job to know when we can and when we cannot help. We don't fool anyone anyway. The client always knows the practitioner is speaking from weakness and insecurity of their own knowledge.
5. **Don't be afraid to enlist the help of other RDs.** After taking a few years off to stay at home with my children, my confidence was shaky. My colleagues were exceptionally patient, allowing me to ask all the questions I needed in order to provide the best information to my clients. Similarly, I am thankful for the encouragement and wisdom I glean from the ADA-DPG groups.
6. **Nutrition and health information is constantly changing.** Are eggs bad for us? Are carbohydrates more important than fat in a client's diet? Is accumulating 10,000 activity steps on a pedometer sufficient, or do we need to keep our target heart rate up for 30 minutes three times a week? If a client loses 10% of their body weight and keeps it off for a year, is it necessary to push reaching a target BMI? (You tell me!)

7. **Mistakes won't kill me.** One day, when writing a meal plan for a diabetic patient, the numbers just wouldn't add up. I knew the mistake would end up being something simple, but time was running out. As soon as the client left, I found my math error and immediately called to correct it. Everyone survived, and that client was one of the most compliant people I ever worked with.
8. **Trust my intuition when dealing with clients.** Several years ago our department hired a psychologist to speak about client accountability. One key suggestion the expert gave was to maintain personal distance. I thought about that, then told my boss I couldn't do that. At the time I was dealing with the morbidly obese, and I recognized that the time these people spent at our clinic was sometimes the only safe "social" time they experienced. I was not going to behave less than compassionate, less than human. Since that time, numerous people have commented, "You are the first counselor to actually listen to me." Now, I doubt that is entirely true. But maybe I was the first nutrition counselor who touched their hand in understanding or looked them in the eye. All I know is it makes a difference.
9. **Read the current fad diet books; study the fad diet purveyors.** Me, read Hilton Head, Atkins, Dr. Phil? Are you kidding? Well, maybe not word for word, but as nutrition communicators it is imperative that we know who our competition is and what they are saying. In the 80's I was furious at the talk shows for putting Susan Powter onstage with her bags of bagels and potatoes. I wondered why people were so drawn to Richard Simmons. Then I realized what they had that most dietitians didn't. They connected to their audience, they had charisma, and they had simple information packaged beautifully in books and journals and backed up with the glitz of the media. I needed to know how to capture some of that working knowledge as a nutrition communicator and make it work for me! In the current culture where the public is flooded with nutrition misinformation, effective propagation of nutrition truth must become the responsibility of each dietetic professional.
10. **You CAN make money as a registered dietitian.** *Over 50 billion dollars a year is spent in this country on weight loss and fitness. Do the math! Even if we share some of that with the exercise specialists, that leaves roughly \$250,000.00 per RD in the US. The money is out there. There is not a recession in wellness, disease prevention, or weight loss. If WE aren't getting the money, then who is? (Refer to lesson number 9.) Faced with this knowledge, there is little debate that dietitians must become outstanding communicators in order to retain market share of the nutrition information, distribution network.*

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