

In Defense of my Cereal



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Valerie Grogan, MS, RDN, LD, joined the Laureate Eating Disorders Program in 2012. She holds a bachelor's degree from Oklahoma State University in nutritional sciences and a master's degree from the University of Memphis in clinical nutrition.

Valerie focuses on integrating family involvement in all stages of nutrition therapy and works to bridge the gap between inpatient treatment and transition to outpatient care. "Food is Medicine" is the driving force behind Valerie's approach to Medical Nutrition Therapy with adolescent eating disorders.

Ms. Grogan has also taken on the role of Laureate Librarian, as she is just as enthusiastic about reading as she is about nutrition - "nourish the body so you can nourish the mind."

Several months ago, I was in the cereal aisle searching for my beloved Cap'n Crunch with Berries which, in my humble dietitian opinion, is the greatest cereal of all time. I was mid- aisle, precious cereal box in hand, when I had an encounter that really struck me. There was a mother shopping with her two little boys in tow. I heard one of the boys ask, "how do we know which cereal is the healthiest one, mommy?" His mom informed him that "if a cereal is colorful and has cartoons on the box, then it is not healthy and you should never eat it." Perhaps my shock was palpable, because she suddenly noticed my attention. She stared pointedly at my box of cereal, which displayed cartoon Cap'n Crunch madly waving from behind a very colorful bowl of cereal, and then she slowly looked up at me.

Now, being someone blessed in the art of witty repartee, I usually have a litany of responses when confronted with this type of comment during a session with a client or family. But this was the real world. I think sometimes we practitioners get so insulated in our sessions that we forget that the distortions our patients relay in session are in fact believed by many people without eating disorders. Perhaps this was the root of my shock - to hear such a common "session belief" stated in real life. This shock really threw me, because instead of my usual scientifically based response, I drew a complete blank. I just stood there, dumbfounded. Eventually a modicum of rational thought returned, and I snapped myself out of this awkward little tableau.



With my usual responses still out of reach, I lifted my chin and said the best thing I could come up with in the moment: "I am a dietitian." I then turned briskly and walked away, so glad I had worn my shoes with the hard bottoms that clicked importantly as I walked. With each strike of my heel, I heard her words in my head - "Not Healthy...Not Healthy..."

I hear comments like this all the time, and I'm sure you do as well, whether you are connected to the world of eating disorders or not. What I have always found interesting is that no one seems to really understand what the language we are using to describe our intake actually means. Even when I am faced with a patient who has a markedly higher IQ than I do, I am amazed at the lack of recognition

of the misuse. Let's look at Cereal Aisle Mom's (CAM) view on the term "healthy" using our old friend - the dictionary.

The etiology of the word "health" can be traced back to an Old English Proto-Germanic word "Hailitho" and was taken to mean "wholeness, a being whole, sound or well." There are several other sources thought to have had influence on the development of the word, including the Old English "Kailo" meaning "whole, uninjured, of good omen." Additionally, we have again Old English "hal" meaning "hale, whole" as well as the Old Norse "heill" meaning "healthy" and "helge" meaning "holy, sacred." Historians also make a point to note that the word "health" is an abstract noun relating to "whole," not to the verb "heal." When you look collectively at the base words behind our more modern word, the theme of "wholeness" presents itself on the forefront. If using the historical context of the word, "healthy" would refer to a cereal that is whole, uninjured and of good omen. I think we would be hard pressed to find any cereal that fits that description, don't you? But let's get back to focusing on our modern use of the word. After consulting Miriam-Webster (online), I find that the word "healthy" has a four-part definition, but for the purposes of this article I'll just focus on the first two, as they are the most pertinent to the disagreement between the Cap'n and CAM.

The first definition states "enjoying good health; free from disease; not displaying clinical signs of disease or infection." Upon opening my beloved box of cereal and subjecting it to a thorough inspection, I find no clinical signs of disease or infection, however I do admit that I cannot confirm whether my cereal was enjoying good health or was free from disease... as it is cereal and not alive to display such signs. Therefore, at least insofar that cereal is not alive to exhibit signs or symptoms of anything, my cereal

is confirmed to be healthy. I think CAM will have to concede that point to the Cap'n.

The second definition states "beneficial to one's physical, mental, or emotional state; conducive to or associated with good health or reduced risk of disease." Ah, there it is. This would appear to be the definition the mother in our story was referring to. In deference to her, let's dig into this one more, breaking it apart piece by piece.

First, we have "beneficial to one's physical, mental, or emotional state." Being a dietitian who has made extensive study of the human body and metabolic implications of nutritional intake, I can speak to physical health quite well.

If you look at the basic breakdown of Cap'n Crunch with Berries, you will find sources of carbohydrate (corn flour, sugar, oat flour and brown sugar), fats (palm and/or coconut oil) and other stabilizers/enhancers (salt, sodium citrate, other flavors, malic acid, coloring agents, riboflavin, folic acid, et cetera). According to the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (for adults) 65% of total daily caloric intake should come from carbohydrates. I'd say my Cap'n Crunch is well on its way to fulfilling that requirement. Additionally, the presence of fat in the cereal also helps meet the 35% recommended intake of fats by calories. As to the list of "other" ingredients, I find a lot of people generally take offense here. I've heard it said that "if you can't pronounce it or don't recognize it, then don't eat it." Well, just to choose two out of the list, how many people do you know use the words "malic acid" or "riboflavin" in every day vernacular? In case you were not aware (since most people aren't), malic acid derives from Malate, which occurs in all living organisms as an intermediate in the citric acid cycle. I will also casually point out that malate is found most abundantly in fruits and vegetables. Riboflavin is one of the B vitamins and is necessary for normal cell growth and function. What is "unhealthy" or "bad for you" about either of these compounds? Yeah, I'm not sure either. Cap'n scores another point!

Now, everyone knows that eating regular meals each day is beneficial, but have you also heard that breakfast is the most important meal of the day? Well, take this dietitian's word for it, for some people it sure is. Regardless, eating at least something for breakfast is going to be far more beneficial than eating nothing at all. I also want to emphasize that one of the most important aspects of nutritional intake is balance. I'm not suggesting that eating a super-sized bowl of Cap'n Crunch with Berries is good for anyone, and certainly not every day, but including this every now and then will do far less harm than eating nothing at all. Therefore, if you look at general content and the fact that eating breakfast



is a good idea, then my cereal is undoubtedly beneficial to one's health. Another point to Cap'n!

The next part of this definition is "beneficial to one's...mental or emotional state." Since we have already determined that Cap'n Crunch with Berries is an excellent source of carbohydrate, I can assure you that it is beneficial to one's mental state. Carbohydrate is the body's number one source of glucose, and glucose is our number one source of energy (not calories, interestingly enough). What a lot of people don't realize is that glucose is the only source of energy our brains can use. Any dietitian can tell you that "hangry" is a real thing. When your brain experiences a loss of glucose, you can experience symptoms such as irritability, shakiness and sweating. We can safely assume that eating a good source of carbohydrate like my cereal would certainly ward off hypoglycemia (or low glucose), at least for a time. Experts would tell you that my cereal, however, would then cause a sharp drop in glucose because of the simple sugars it contains. I do not disagree with this at all, but I would again point out that only eating a large bowl of this cereal is not what I'm talking about. Pairing it with other foods, particularly things like proteins and fats will ward off that glucose drop that experts warn us about regarding sugary cereal intake. There's that idea of balance again. If my cereal is balanced with appropriate intake, then it remains "healthy." Take another point Cap'n!



Dealing with emotional state is another matter entirely. Most people would not associate cereal intake with an emotional state, but when you work with eating disorders it most certainly is. Even those without eating disorders can experience different emotions after eating something. The practice of labeling foods as either "good" or "bad" has a direct effect on one's emotions, even if we don't realize it. Next time you're in a group of people eating together, keep track of how often you hear negative comments about what or how much is being consumed. It is sadly unrecognized how belittling we are to ourselves when we eat foods often arbitrarily labeled as "bad" or "unhealthy." While the mother in my story would undoubtedly experience a negative emotional

consequence if she ate a bowl of my beloved cereal, I on the other hand would feel nothing but pleasure. Sorry Cap'n, this round ends in a draw.

Next up we have "conducive to or associated with good health or reduced risk of disease." I think this is another strong argument that the little boys' mother would use against my cereal. But let's remember my earlier comments about balance. I frequently field questions about documentaries on food and intake such as "What the Health" or "Forks over Knives" or the one that started it all: "Supersize Me." I always caution people who ask me about this against too much black or white thinking. All these documentaries are scientifically based and do have medical efficacy. However, these documentaries also tend to take things to the extreme, which is in no way, shape or form real life. Take "Supersize Me" as a prime example. If you eat nothing but McDonald's for days on end, I can assure you there will be negative effects on your health. But for some reason no one thinks negatively about eating only fruit for days on end. If you only ate fruit for days on end, I can again assure you there would be negative effects on your health, albeit not the same ones as if you only ate McDonald's. Making the assumption that my dear Cap'n Crunch with Berries contributes to disease and poor health only rings true if this is all people are consuming, in large quantities, all the time. I think Cap'n is going to have to take another point from this one.

To recap: my favorite cereal does not display any signs or symptoms of disease. In appropriate and balanced amounts, it is beneficial to my physical state and most assuredly beneficial to my emotional state. Lastly, it should not be judged based off the assumption that this is all I eat, all day, every day. What a shame that in this changing time of improved awareness of diversity and inclusion we aren't applying this to our intake. How about we stop shaming what we eat and get back to recognizing the importance of balance. I think the mom in our story and others like her have missed out on a golden opportunity to teach her children about the importance of not labeling amoral, inanimate objects as "good" or "bad" and including treats as a part of balanced intake. Let's all raise a spoon of our favorite cereal to that!