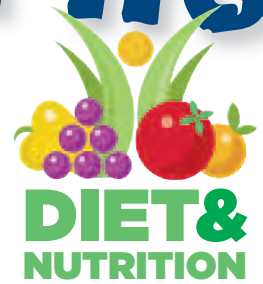


# BUSTING MYTHS & TRANSFORMING THE WELLNESS DISCUSSION



BY ADEOLA SONAIKE

## The Online Nutritionist

"I read on the internet that sweet potatoes are better for me than white potatoes, is this true?" Welcome to our Get FIT nutrition education class hosted at Rowan College for Gloucester County's Adult Center for Transition (ACT). Since 2008, Get FIT has been providing community-based health and wellness services for people with disabilities, chronic illness and their caregivers. The Get FIT Team began working with this particular class by providing hour-long health education classes. Despite weeks of preparation, our first day on site did not go exactly as planned. After putting together what we thought would be a creative and interactive lesson plan, all of this changed when one student raised his hand and said, "I read on the internet that..." It did not take us long to figure out that many students in the class, all of whom have special needs, had similar questions and concerns about their eating habits, especially after reading many blogs and websites authored by self-proclaimed health enthusiasts and online nutritionists.

Conversations around choosing a healthier lifestyle are at an all time high; partially because New Year resolutions tend to incorporate a weight control goal. There is also the growing evidence that what we choose to eat today has a large impact on our quality of life tomorrow, and for years to come. Keeping this in mind, it is no surprise that the minimally regulated sector for wellness and nutrition supplement is a booming multi-billion dollar market. With new fad diets being promoted and increased research pointing to the ability for a healthy diet to decrease the risk of many chronic diseases, the internet is often our primary source for both solicited and unsolicited advice when it comes to our health.

So, we gave the ACT students a homework assignment: "compile a list of nutritional advice that you have adopted from the internet or a magazine." During the next lecture, the students brought their lists and we played the myth-busting game. By the end of the lecture, the students had a clear idea of what were nutritional facts that could be adapted into their lifestyle, and what were myths. However, not everyone has access to a Get FIT team, and it may often be difficult to ascertain what are facts and what are myths.

## The Launch of the Center on Nutrition and Disability

It is no secret that a healthy diet is key for people of all ages, however, how does one personalize the information found on the internet to meet their own specific needs? How does a parent of a child with ASD interpret general nutritional advice found on the internet and apply it to the specific needs, situation and culture of their home? Such questions led New Jersey-based organization the Family Resource Network (FRN) to launch the Center on Nutrition and Disability. Existing as an extension of the now national Get FIT Initiative, FRN has identified a method to increase the access that families have to the Get FIT Team. Through the Center, we are able to share reputable and applicable information, resources and best practices with individuals and families impacted by disabilities.



The Center on Nutrition and Disability (CND) provides individuals with disabilities and their families with a reliable page to find news relevant to their health and wellness. The center's webinars, workshops, and inclusive healthy cooking programs are ensuring that people with disabilities have the opportunity to eat healthier.

The Center is presently in the process of expanding its coalition nationally, to make sure families have access to these experts, no matter where they are.

When FRN launched the Get FIT initiative, the goal was to provide equal opportunities to health and wellness services for people with disabilities, chronic illness and their caregivers. This data driven program highlighted the need for an increased specialization in the delivery of optimal nutrition education and counseling services; after all, fitness is 90 percent nutrition and 10 percent exercise.

Imagine inviting the experts in the field of nutrition, and the experts in the field of wellness for people with disabilities to dinner. There may not be a notebook large enough to store the information that would be shared and discussed at such a feast. That is why the Center is so important to families.

In response, the Center was developed to increase the access that families have to applicable nutrition services and resources. The primary goal of the Center is to facilitate an active and relevant discussion between researchers, providers, and families.

Originally the Center existed only online, as a source for information. As new studies were published pertaining to nutrition and disability, we felt responsible for sharing this information with families. However, when influencing positive change, one has to do more than simply transforming the information environment. With webinars, workshops, and inclusive healthy cooking programs, the Center is now getting on track with ensuring that people with disabilities have the opportunity to eat healthier.

This transformation in the delivery of services can be evident in our recent hiring efforts during which we expanded the Get

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FIT Team to include multi-cultural nutritionists and registered dietitians statewide who have professional experiences working with people with disabilities and specialized diets. With many of our nutrition specialists being parents or caregivers of people with disabilities, the Get FIT team truly gets it. They understand and are empathetic to the daily challenges faced by individuals and families impacted by disabilities.

## A New Voice for Families

Everything done by the Center is based on requests received from families seeking services and resources. Recently, the Center has provided webinars and “Lunch & Learns” for families in an effort to connect them to the experts who can provide applicable advice. A webinar entitled “Mealtime with Get FIT,” featured an occupational therapist and a registered dietitian who provided tips on how to increase variety within the diet and how to overcome food jags by pairing new foods with familiar

and preferred foods. After implementing these practices within our own Get FIT programs, one participant who only ate foods that were white in color was excited to share that she now eats a few green foods too. These are the stories that are exciting and meaningful to us at the Center.

We recognize that it takes more than webinars to accomplish such goals, so we provide additional services to families such as Motivational Interviewing Counseling (MI). This nutrition counseling method is widely used throughout Get FIT, and originated in the Get FIT program at Rowan University. Motivational Interviewing is a

cognitive-behavioral strategy that has been used by a variety of health practitioners to enhance the motivation of participants in order to promote behavioral change. Through this, we empower participants to identify their need for change, and to express their desire to change. We have noticed

that when our participants have ownership of their goals, their wellness journey is much more successful and appreciated.

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The Center is giving families a voice and allowing their requests to dictate the direction of its activities. To date there are no known nutrition efforts in the United States focused solely on the needs of people with disabilities and their caregivers. The goal here is not to re-invent the wheel. We are able to use many of the resources developed for the general population in the programs. Our group nutrition education programs offered in Texas and at The Richard Stockton College of NJ use resources and tools such as [www.myplate.gov](http://www.myplate.gov). However, the Get FIT Team takes it one step further, by tailoring the activities to meet the specific abilities of our participants. This is what makes our efforts unique. The Center's role will be to share these resources and practices with families and practitioners so that they may also apply them.

## New Programs

While setting goals and creating New Year's Resolutions are exciting, families need to have the skills to accomplish these goals in order to truly experience change. Providing the information while assisting with goal-setting is only half the journey. For this reason, FRN is implementing a series of cooking classes. The Family Resource FOOD Network, which launched in 2011 as a Get FIT supported program, provides cooking education classes to adults with disabilities in New Jersey. The success of these classes has led to the development of Young Gourmet, an inclusive healthy cooking class for children with and without disabilities. Young Gourmet is the first nutrition program to be implemented since the launch of the Center. The Get FIT Team will be instructing this class, teaching children not only what foods are healthier, but also how to prepare

those healthy meals. With a thorough intake process, we use a snapshot of the dietary needs of each participant to design a program that promotes success and achievement for each child.

The Center has a lot of exciting programs and activities that will be shared in 2015. Our hope is that families can rely on the Center as a source for information and inspiration so that they may independently achieve a culture of wellness within the home. With New Jersey serving as the headquarters for all Get FIT related activities, the goal is to strengthen nutrition programs in all Get FIT states through the expansion of the Center. With Get FIT teams located in New Jersey, Texas, Mississippi, Connecticut and New York, The Center is now welcoming organizations to join the partnership in additional states by contacting FRN.

As we prepare to launch a new webinar series, we welcome questions and topic ideas from families so that we may invite the experts to the conversation as we bust a few more nutrition myths and stereotypes, and set the record straight. •

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Adeola Sonaike is The Family Resource Network's National Get FIT Director, where she spearheads the expansion of wellness efforts for people with disabilities. As a public health specialist, she began her professional career as the Get FIT Coordinator in New Jersey where her primary focus was on the sustainability of health promotion services for people with disabilities and their caregivers in NJ. She attended Rutgers University and attained her Bachelor's degree in Biology. She also holds a Master's degree in Public Health, and is a Certified Health Education Specialist. Adeola teaches as an adjunct faculty at Rowan University, and is currently attaining her PhD at Walden University. Adeola sits on multiple coalitions and advisory boards, advocating for the inclusion of people with disabilities in conversations surrounding the health of the nation.