

Energy Obesity and Cutting Calories

They are as sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing.
 – William Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*)

In an interview he gave in 1973, Ivan Illich compared human energy over-consumption, particularly that of oil, with overeating. Both, he said, could lead to a kind of obesity, which could threaten the health of the organism. "High quanta of energy," he claimed, "degrade social relations just as inevitably as they destroy the physical milieu." What does that mean? It means that we can't keep consuming huge amounts of energy (or overeating meal after meal) and not pay a high price, as individuals and as a society.

When we continually overeat, we can become obese. When we continually overindulge in the earth's energy resources, society can become obese, with all the attendant social-health challenges one might expect: fear of scarcity as demand outstrips supply, hoarding of resources by those who can do so, and a rising cost of living that threatens the stability of society as a whole. Illich said, "A people can be just as dangerously overpowered by the wattage of its tools as by the caloric content of its foods," noting that, whether they realize it or not, both the under-consumer and over-consumer alike suffer. Calories are only healthy, Illich reminds us, "as long as they stay within the range that separates enough from too much."

And I guess, for many of us, this is where it gets tricky. What is enough, and how much is too much? That's not always easy to discern, especially in a society that presents over-consumption as the norm (and even a patriotic ideal). Given that, it's up to each of us to begin to question our own energy consumption patterns within a much broader context: How healthy do we want our society and world to be? What is the real cost to each of us as individuals, beyond our monthly budget, of our energy consumption choices? And how can we begin to make healthier choices?

For most of us, the first step is usually becoming aware: Noticing the tighter belt in the case of undesired weight gain; recognizing the symptoms of, say, global warming, in the case of energy consumption. The second step is doing something about it: reducing consumption. Whether we're talking about food or energy, too many calories are too many calories, and we all know what to do about it. But knowing

and doing are not the same. *Doing* is hard. Or so we think.

The fact is even small changes in our energy "diet" can make a big difference when we all make a concerted effort to reduce consumption. For instance, switching to compact fluorescent bulbs, which use up to 75 percent less energy than conventional incandescent bulbs (and last 10 times longer), is an easy, simple change we all can make. Other energy reduction choices include upgrading home insulation and appliances to be more energy efficient, switching to solar hot water heating, driving less and walking and biking more, and using public transportation when possible. Food, it turns out, plays an important role not only in our regular diet but also our energy diet. Because food can travel between 1500 and 2500 miles, farm to plate, transportation energy can be greatly reduced by growing our own food or buying it from local (preferably organic) sources. (This has the added benefit of helping the local economy.)

There are, of course, many other changes that can be made to reduce energy con-

sumption – some easy, some not so easy. In the end, greater measures may need to be taken to reduce our energy diet and overcome "social obesity." But as anyone who cares for their physical health knows, positive change often has a way of creating more positive change, and what seemed like a daunting task turns out to be not so difficult after all.

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