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Nutrition Perspectives Research Paper

For the purposes of this research paper I chose to view the documentary titled “Supersize Me” by Morgan Spurlock. I chose this documentary specifically for a couple of reasons; One, I remember watching it in one of my TLC classes in Junior High School and knowing that it revealed important information but could not fully grasp the concept at the time; and two, because although I used to eat really healthy and I exercise every day I always end up consuming McDonald’s because of the convenience and ease. I wanted to know exactly what kind of effect and damage I was doing to my own body.

Supersize Me, produced in 2004, is a documentary in which Morgan Spurlock takes on the challenge of eating nothing but McDonald’s for 30 days straight as well as maintaining the level of exercise an average America does- less than 5000 steps a day. Although Spurlock does not have a background in nutrition himself (unless you count his vegan chef girlfriend), he employs the help of three different doctors, each practicing separate specialties- cardiology, gastroenterology, and general practice, and has them each conduct a battery of tests to establish his starting health. Additionally, he utilizes the skills of a dietitian and personal trainer in this experiment. His initial statistics and observations are as follows: 6’2” and 185.5 lbs (BMI within

normal range), 11% body fat, normal blood pressure, “perfect” reflexes, cholesterol at 168, triglycerides at 87, no evidence of diabetes; electrolytes, kidney and liver functions were perfect, he was above average fitness for his age group, and had outstanding health in general.

Over the course of the next month, Spurlock’s health changes drastically. He perceptibly gains weight, shows signs of addiction to McDonald’s, has depression, his body organs began to illustrate serious medical issues, his sexual life declines, and he gravely endangers himself. By the end of the experiment, Morgan concluded:

In only 30 days of eating nothing but McDonald’s I gained 24.5 lbs., my liver turned to fat, and my cholesterol shot up 65 points [to 230]. My body fat percentage went from 11 to 18%, still below the average of 22% for men and 30% for women. I nearly doubled my risk of coronary heart disease, making myself twice as likely to have heart failure. I felt depressed and exhausted most of the time, my mood swung on a dime, and my sex life was non-existent. I craved this food more and more when I ate it, and got massive cravings when I didn’t. In my final blood test, many of my body functions showed signs of improvement, but the doctors were less than optimistic.

While this documentary was created nearly a decade ago, I firmly believe that it is still applicable today. Despite the fact that McDonald’s removed their Super Size menu shortly after this film made it to the public, not only Americans, but people worldwide continue to cause harm to themselves in the form of fast food. This trial undeniably demonstrates what fast food does to one’s body, physically and physiologically, even if performed again in present day.

Quite obviously, the main theme in this biography is obesity, particularly in young children. Morgan’s entire idea for the movie stemmed from watching a news clip regarding two young girls attempting to sue McDonald’s for making them fat. According to Wardlaw & Smith (2007), “Most obese North Americans have at least one parent who is also obese...Still, although

some individuals may be genetically predisposed to store body fat, whether they actually do so depends on how many calories they consume relative to their needs” (p. 79). *Supersize Me* voices how, with nearly 100 million Americans being overweight or obese, sometimes these kids don’t stand a chance. In the battle of nature vs. nurture, none of the odds are stacked in their favor.

In correlation with the epidemic of obesity in the United States, Spurlock reinforced the idea of how addiction can start without the person even realizing that it is happening. Wardlaw & Smith (2007) caution that:

We often eat because food comforts us. It smells good, tastes good, and looks good. We might eat because it is the right time of day, we are celebrating, or we are seeking emotional comfort to overcome the blues. After a meal, memories of pleasant tastes and feelings reinforce appetite. If stress or depression sends you to the refrigerator, you are mostly seeking comfort, not food calories. Appetite may not be a biological process, but it does influence food intake. (p. 20)

As a final point, one of the focal themes is the fact that Mr. Spurlock eats well over the recommended dietary allowance while attaining close to no exercise. It seems he goes above and beyond the Tolerable Upper Intake Level which Wardlaw & Smith (2007) describe as “the highest amount of a nutrient that is unlikely to cause adverse health effects in the long run (p. 60). They go on to articulate that “As intake exceeds the UL, the risk of ill effects increases. These amounts generally should not be exceeded day after day, as toxicity could develop” (p. 60), labeling exactly what Morgan was experiencing after keeping the same diet consistently for days.

While watching this documentary I was able to learn about and recognize specific parallels to the fast food habits in my life. McDonald's has managed to engrain itself into our society, and with a location just a few miles away (despite where you are) it always seems like a quick, cheap, and easy meal. Even though it would be faster, and cheaper to make something healthy at home, people still get in their cars and go. They really are exhibiting classic addiction behaviors, unable to distance themselves because they don't realize what they are doing, or how it is affecting their health.

Finally, with the help of this movie, I hope to put a stop to the behaviors in my life that I see mirrored by Spurlock. Sometimes it takes compelling and undisputable evidence to change lives, and I admire Spurlock for trying to make a difference. Even at the cost of his own health.

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