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My Diet Strategy? Controlled Indulgence

By JANE E. BRODY

Most people who know me well know that I love ice cream. It has been my favorite comfort food since early childhood, when the Good Humor truck came around daily and a local luncheonette sold double cones for 25 cents. But a new friend was shocked to learn that I routinely keep about six half-gallons of ice cream in my freezer.

They are not *all* for me. A few are flavors favored by my twin grandsons, who spend two afternoons a week at my house. Still, quite a few have my name on them, and I don't hesitate to indulge almost nightly.

Imposing Self-Control

You see, despite my well-known interest in healthful eating, I don't believe in deprivation. I learned long ago, when I struggled unsuccessfully for more than a year to lose 35 pounds, that deprivation feeds desire and can lead to overindulgence at the first opportunity.

And so I adopted a philosophy that I call controlled indulgence. In the two years it took me to return to a reasonable weight for my 5-foot frame, I allowed myself one small treat each day — perhaps two cookies, a thin slice of cake or pie or a few tablespoons of ice cream. The strategy worked, and I continued to use it in the decades of weight maintenance that followed.

For as long as my twin sons lived at home, rather than buy commercial cakes and cookies, I baked quick breads and muffins that were relatively low in sugar and fat and loaded with healthful ingredients like whole wheat flour, bran, wheat germ, fruits and vegetables. They served as the family's desserts and between-meal snacks. I took some to work with me every day to enjoy when the coffee cart appeared in midafternoon.

But back to the ice cream in the freezer. My approach starts with smart selection. I read the nutrition label; the only ice cream I buy provides a maximum of 150 calories a serving, and usually less, 100 to 130. Most are the slow-churned reduced-fat flavors, and some are frozen yogurt. But none are fat free or sugar free, which to me tastes ersatz.

Equally important, of course, is how much to eat at any one time. One serving. Do you know what a serving of ice cream is? It is half a cup. I bought some half-cup containers and measure out my daily indulgence. And I made a rule for myself. If I start eating more than that half cup, all the ice cream has to go. Because I would rather have it around when I want it, I stick to the half cup.

Some people I know say they could never do that. If the ice cream was in the house, they would eat far too much of it. They say they are safer buying a cone when an irresistible urge strikes. But I resent spending \$2.50 for a cone when I can buy a half gallon (all right, 56 ounces) for \$2.99.

Ice cream is not my only passion.

Chocolate, that is, dark chocolate, runs a close second. There was a time when a box of chocolates could sit in my house for months and I would never eat even one piece. Those days, it seems, are gone forever. I blame menopause for my current cravings for chocolate. And I keep quite a lot of it around, especially chocolate-covered almonds and Trader Joe's minipretzels smothered in dark chocolate. Again, the house rule is portion control. Four almonds or two pretzels a day or out they go.

Strategic Rationing

Having heard too many stories about children whose parents forbid them to have any treats who then sneak and hoard the forbidden fruit at every opportunity, I chose a different approach with my sons. Nothing was forbidden, but some foods were just not readily available.

We kept no candy, soda, chips or sugary cereals in the house. But the boys could order soda when we dined out and eat any cereal they wanted when they spent the night at a friend's house. And every Saturday, we gave them money to buy a bar of any candy they wanted.

At first, they nursed that candy bar for hours. But after a few months, the candy was nowhere to be seen. Without a word from any adult, they had decided to use the money to buy knishes instead.

What amazes me more than anything is that at age 38, my sons still have no interest in candy; do not drink soda; rarely have cake, pie or cookies; and have no trouble keeping their hands out of a bowl of chips. As with their mother, their main treat is ice cream, which at least has some redeeming nutritional value.

Overcoming Temptation

The philosophy of controlled indulgence goes beyond treats. I apply it across the board, in all occasions when I might otherwise be tempted to overindulge.

For example, at events where food is served buffet style, I start by surveying the entire selection before I get in line to fill my plate. That way, I don't take everything that is offered. Instead, I end up only with foods I am most likely to enjoy without straying too far from my dietary goals. When salad is among the offerings, I pile it on the plate first, leaving less room for some of the more caloric selections.

Because fruit is usually among the dessert offerings, I eat that first so I have less room and desire for higher-calorie choices.

Sit-down dinners can be more of a challenge. They usually start with salad, and I am not shy about requesting dressing on the side and a second serving if one might be available. I tend to eat all of everything I like, including dessert, but I do not waste calories on food that is not very good. I routinely scrape off sauces, remove the skin from chicken and skip stuffings (unless fellow diners say it's scrumptious).

I do not count calories or make lists of everything I eat each day. In fact, I have no idea how many calories I consume on a typical day. I eat for enjoyment — foods that I like, most of which happen to be good for me, and in quantities that I find satisfying. Rather than counting calories, I monitor my weight. I step on the scale every morning before breakfast. If I start to gain, I cut back a little on portions. But consistent with my philosophy of limitation, not deprivation, I don't cut out my treats.