

Healthy diets in the Covid19 lockdown: much more than a matter of choice?

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Since the lockdown I find myself on social media platforms more than enjoying a good book, like many others, I want to keep up with every update – the serious and the not so serious. I've realised that some find the forced isolation peaceful – both because of relative (very!) privileges and due to personality. I suppose I'm one of these, and the information I'm paying quite a bit of attention to and sending out myself relates to food and eating.

My cousin and I always send one another posts that we can critically analyse: some are just funny, but others raise more serious concerns. Recently she sent a post condemning a high carb diet and accompanied by a picture of a fuller/"fat" woman who was obviously meant to be overweight. My cousin asked, "is this insensitive or am I overreacting?". Having read up quite a bit on consuming a high carb and probably not paying enough attention to my cousin's critical take, I wrote back, "well it's proven that high-carb diet creates insulin resistance and it keeps on making you want more carbohydrates".

Her response was, "I mean it is always in our face to 'eat healthy' when we cannot afford to eat healthy food. In a family of seven, what is a packet of green apples? They will be done in a day, that pack would have bought two loaves of bread".

I conceded, "yea, we yearn to live that lifestyle but it's just out of reach for us."

My cousin, by now really angry, signed off for the day with, "It is so out of touch with reality and that is what upsets me. Yes it's true but not every-one can afford to do it.... Half of the people of social media are encouraging dieting while the other half is pleading for food".

This conversation made me think deeply about the social context of the current wave of media information about food, healthy eating and immune boosting at present. The encouragement of healthy eating, losing weight and boosting your immune system during the first week of the 21

day lockdown has flooded our social media feeds. Yet in total contrast to this, the meticulous rationing of food has been pivotal for many households where those who are breadwinners are currently unemployed. They have made a living for years on piece jobs, and will not get UIF. So spending money on things that they truly need is far more important than buying expensive or



exotic herbs and vegetables that will boost their immune system. Needless to say, a concern here is unlikely to be losing weight because it is quite certain that many will be under-eating until the lockdown period passes. It is heart-wrenching to see the many tweets right now about individuals asking for donations for groceries including basics such as maize meal, and electricity, while the privileged classes,

experts and, especially health experts in the North hold forth.

In contrast to the abstract talk about what people could and should eat, I have been focusing more and more on how socially marginalised South Africans are struggling to deal with the lockdown and food crisis from their point of view. Street vendors are always our go-to. The majority of households in townships purchase their fruits and vegetables from street vendors- *abo mkhozi*. Although vendors are now allowed to operate during the lockdown as they fall into the category of those providing essential services, many have been shut down as police, the military and the vendors themselves have lacked clarity about the regulations and permitting processes. The confusion is regrettable; they sell essential products, and their products are quite affordable for many black people. When the affordable vegetables and fruits we are used to from the vendors are taken away, the dent is clear. Buying spinach from retailers will make you think twice that you need those nutrients; at least from street vendors you would get plenty of goods for under R100; at retail shops one has to be calculating when they are making purchases. The vendors are also easily accessible to many, but now many who buy food for families have to travel far not just to buy vegetables and fruits, but also to buy bread since the regular spaza

shops are also not allowed to open. Retail shops are often a taxi ride away and the only place that many can find their bread. And of course, taxi rides create risk, compromise the call for social distancing. It's a mess!

But just before the lockdown, one movement that amazed me involved people in communities purchasing vendors' stock. A movement of purchasing vendors' stock just before the lockdown rose and people actively supported it. Through social media, but also word of mouth and informal communication, the word spread quickly on social media. I saw post on twitter and Facebook encouraging people to purchase vegetables, fruits and snacks. It showed beautiful solidarity in the community because it seemed to reflect a collective awareness of the need to co-operate in order to survive. The movement came from a place of knowing that when the lockdown



Tessa Dooms

March 24 at 10:58 AM · Facebook for Android · 



Zamayirha Peter

March 23 at 9:50 PM · 

On a more serious note can we panic buy fruits veggies etc from street vendors as of tomorrow guys. 21 days will be long Long.

commences the vendors won't be able to sell their stock and it only made sense to people to support them because if a vendor sells cabbages, it's implausible that they will eat that entire stock and it will eventually go bad, also losing their profits. Facebook and twitter community urged people to rather "panic" buy street vendor goods. From the twitter post "*o jewa keng*" (what's eating you/bothering you?) was created by Keabetswe so that people from different socioeconomic backgrounds can voice out their struggles and anyone who is willing to help can assist. Social media platforms have made us unite in the face of poverty because people from these platforms, although they have elevated to a different class and some of us are in

universities, we are always aware of our background and I think that's why it was so easy for people to be part of the movement of purchasing vendors stock. We are a youth that is always on their phones, social media makes up a portion of our lives; we read news from our phones, we learn about our differences and others social positions from these platforms.

South Africans need more information from different perspectives about dealing with health and food during the Covid19 outbreak. We need especially to learn from those who do not regularly go to gyms, or buy expensive organic produce from farmers' markets, or spend hours on Facebook or reading websites because they have the leisure time to do so. Personally, for example, I've learned a lot from my grandmother who lives in a rural area. When she has no means to buy food she makes homemade bread or amagwinya-vetkoeks, from the December flour she got from her stokvel. She knows that the



bread or vetkoeks will do the trick in making us less irritable during the day. For dinner it is pap and a vegetable that she grows herself, be it spinach, sweet potatoes, morogo or beetroot.

The majority of households in South Africa also rely on dry shelf products because they last longer, samp, rice, and maize meal. They sustain a lot of families, and these dry products make up half of your portion on the plate although nutritionists would advise that such refined carbohydrates be a third of your plate and vegetable carbohydrates be half of your plate. So my cousin's frustrations are valid. Eating healthy is not simply a matter of personal choice. We would all love to be healthy and lead a green life but reality simply doesn't allow it, our parents' income doesn't allow it and the number of people in our households most certainly don't allow it.