

Connect with nature – Dr.Nandita Shah

Even a brief encounter with Dr.Nandita Shah can have an emphatic effect on your lifestyle choices and shake your beliefs on 'eating healthy'. There can be no better ambassador than her when it comes to spreading the message of veganism and adapting a holistic and compassionate way of life. Dressed in a crisp black skirt and a white top, she talks passionately about her journey towards becoming a vegan and her efforts in setting up SHARAN (Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature). In 2015, she would be celebrating the tenth anniversary of her brainchild, SHARAN, which has successfully helped around 4000 individuals reverse severe ailments by correcting their lifestyle and diet.

After spending her initial years in Canada, Dr.Nandita Shah, now 55, moved to Mumbai where she ran an extremely busy and successful practice in homeopathy. "I chose homeopathy since it is about treating patients holistically. The medications are specific to each individual, rather than the diseases," says Dr.Shah.

The idea of staying healthy by eating the right food is deep-rooted in Dr.Shah since childhood. "Nowadays, I am shocked at the kind of food that mothers give their children. Luckily, I grew up with my mother insisting on nutritious, home-cooked meals. However, when my health started taking a toll due to a hectic lifestyle in Mumbai, I decided to cut down my practice and in 1999, moved to Auroville, Pondicherry."

Why did she decide to settle down in Auroville? "I had been visiting Auroville for ten years, on and off. At that time, it was the only place in India which did natural farming. I had just read 'One Straw Revolution' by Masanobu Fukuoka and was heavily inspired by its ideas. I reckoned that it was easier to stay fit if we stayed closer to nature by growing plants the way they were intended to be grown and by eating what nature intended us to eat," explains Dr.Shah.

Her journey to veganism began when she learnt how cows are impregnated artificially so they can provide milk. "Since my objective as a doctor was to reduce other's suffering, I was naturally inclined to stop eating dairy products. Since childhood, we live in the myth that we can be strong only if we drink three glasses of milk every day. The truth cannot be farther from that. Many cultures, like the Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Burmese do not include dairy in their meal preferences," clarifies Dr.Shah.

However, she admits that the change did not occur overnight. It was "a process that happened over years." By 2002, she was a complete vegan, moving to a diet that was plant based.

By then, she had also gained another dimension of thought from her experience in homeopathy. "When I was a homeopathic doctor, I observed that patients often came back complaining about

the same problem, sometime later. This was an eye-opener in that it was clear that we are still not tackling the root cause of the ailment," she says.

Over the next few years, she spent her time giving talks underlining the importance of holistic living. The efforts were only moderately successful. "Although people were enthusiastic about it, they would still go out of the seminar and have the next cup of tea or a bowl of ice-cream. I realized that people needed a lot more specific guidance on how to map the theory to everyday life, such as what to eat and what not to," she admits.

Dr.Shah's passion for health, environment and her compassion for animals converged together when she started SHARAN in 2005. "Instinctively, humans are inclined to eat vegetables and fruits, but we have strayed far away from it. If we manage to reconnect to our environment and eat right, not only is there a higher chance of reversing ailments, bio-diversity is also preserved as we keep the animals safe," Dr.Shah elaborates connecting the three elements that remain at the core of SHARAN.

Through SHARAN, she conducts training programs such as 'Peas vs Pills' and 'Reversing Diabetes'. "In the past 30 years, the number of diabetics has increased from 5% to 35%. Young children have thyroid, obesity and other hormonal ailments. Most of these 'metabolic syndromes' do not even exist in texts. Diseases have multiplied drastically, but the good news is that most of these can be reversed significantly by eating the right food," reveals Dr.Shah.

The 'Reversing Diabetes' program, which runs across 21 days in a sprawling resort in Gokarna has received phenomenal response. "Our participants come in totally unsuspecting and are initially in for a shock due to all the diet changes (not even black tea or coffee!). Some youngsters are used to eating out all the time and consuming processed food, that they are not even familiar with the names of many vegetables! Some, who come in with a cynical view, are completely transformed because they see the before and after lab results. However, in due course, they find it hard to go back to the unhealthy stuff that they used to eat, because instinctively our body needs only the kind of wholesome food that we advise in our program," she says with a smile.

One of the key attractions of her program is the cooking classes that demonstrate how to cook on a strict plant based diet with less oil and no dairy and meat and still prepare a nutritious and delicious meal. There is also enough motivation to exercise through yoga, meditation, dance and nature walks.

Dr.Shah shares some of her success stories, "Most of the (diabetic and thyroid) patients are on much reduced medications by the end of the program. Also, there are many examples of obesity control. The highest weight loss in our September program has been close to nine kgs. A lady, who could not walk even a few steps, managed to climb a flight of stairs on her own. A young girl, who initially claimed that the diet is too difficult to follow, has already lost around five kgs over the past month with the help of a strong support group."

SHARAN is gearing up to celebrate its tenth anniversary next year with a ten day workshop targeted for therapists, lifestyle advisors and doctors, who can lend support to their objectives. Talking about her future plans, Dr.Shah says, “The goal is to eventually reach a critical mass, when the need for our workshops will cease to exist! There is also the dream of coming out with a book on the topic, so we can connect with a wider audience.”

When prompted for tips and suggestions on diet, she sums it up succinctly, “Eat only plants or mostly plants. Eat only whole or mostly whole food. Eat only organic. Eat only when you are hungry.”

The suggestions are powerful, yet, are they easy to implement? “As a vegan, I certainly have challenges while travelling, but it’s not impossible to follow. You learn to adapt and order the right items off a menu. It becomes a habit, just like being a vegetarian.” What does she think about the criticism that organic food is expensive? “Well, how do so many boutiques exist, when there are endless retail chains?” she retorts. “When you pay so much attention to the outside, isn’t it important to take care of the inside? It all depends on where your priorities lie. Also, remember that processed food is more expensive than organic food,” she adds.

If you are still not convinced, Dr.Shah throws her parting shot, “Imagine visiting an orchard, the natural senses of any person are immediately alerted to pluck the fruits and eat. But, you are not overcome by that emotion when you visit a chicken farm. It’s all about remaining honest to your basic instincts. Then, your health is automatically restored.”