

Meet Jonah Soolman of Soolman Nutrition and Wellness in Wellesley



Today we'd like to introduce you to Jonah Soolman.

So, before we jump into specific questions about the business, why don't you give us some details about you and your story.

At 20 years old, my definition of exquisite nutrition was including a small bowl of iceberg lettuce with my dinner. As co-captain of my Tufts University tennis team and with three Boston Marathons already behind me, I figured I was active enough to make up for eating whatever I wanted.

Shortly thereafter, a health scare inspired me to consider what I could do to take better care of myself. Ultimately, I departed my research analyst position with the U.S. Department of Transportation in order to reenter academia at the University of Massachusetts Amherst with a focus on nutrition.

While studying nutrition, I earned multiple personal fitness trainer certifications and coached clients at a couple of local gyms. Although I no longer work as a trainer, my experience in that capacity deepened my understanding of physical activity, which enables me to better help my patients today.

After earning my nutrition degree, I completed an accredited dietetic internship at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center here in Boston. Interning at such a great institution afforded me opportunities to work side by side with some of the world's best practitioners in clinical, community, and research settings.

My career as a Registered Dietitian began with a wide range of part-time jobs, including counseling at two outpatient clinics and helping the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy with a pair of research studies, including one that had me flying around the country examining the food environments in elementary school cafeterias.

In 2011, I established my own practice, Soolman Nutrition and Wellness, as I continued with my part-time jobs. The following year, my wife, Joanne, who is also a Registered Dietitian, left her job and joined the practice. We restructured the business in order to become 50/50 partners and moved the practice

to Wellesley, where it still resides today. One by one, I left my part-time jobs behind and I have been focusing solely on Soolman Nutrition and Wellness for the past five years.

Overall, has it been relatively smooth? If not, what were some of the struggles along the way?

Patients who came to see me six or seven years ago would not recognize the work that I do today, as I have radically changed my treatment approach in response to further education.

Before I knew better, my focus was on trying to change patient weight and body composition. Now that I understand the flaws inherent to that kind of approach – including the high probability of weight regain, the dangers of weight cycling, and the elevated risk of developing an eating disorder – I instead focus on overall health rather than anthropometrics.

Changing approaches was hard to do for a variety of reasons. For example, considering that we exist in a weight-focused, diet-minded culture that is ripe with myths about nutrition, eating behavior, and body size, comparatively few people are interested in pursuing a weight-neutral approach to health. Given our society's ubiquitous weight stigma, people understandably want to lose weight, but for comparison, imagine the uphill battle financial advisors would face if the vast majority of our society believed that the best way to build one's wealth is to invest in lottery tickets. That is essentially the challenge I experience in my work.

Changing also meant financial risk. Practitioners build their reputations, referral networks, and patient bases on what they offer, so changing courses risks alienating these resources, essentially surrendering everything that one has built up and beginning from square one again. Practitioners are people, too, and we all have bills to pay, which explains why some of our colleagues cling to in-demand, weight-focused treatment modalities despite the research showing how harmful and ineffective these approaches can be. My colleagues who want to change, but do not feel they are in a position to be able to do so, surely have my empathy, as I was once in that spot, too.

To complicate matters, acknowledging the errors in our ways means admitting that we previously led people astray. Speaking personally, providing high-quality care is the most important mission of my work and therefore it was very difficult to accept that I had let my patients down. While I still feel remorseful regarding how I used to practice, I am at least proud of myself for prioritizing patient care over money, acknowledging my mistakes, and making changes so I can better help people.

Please tell us about Soolman Nutrition and Wellness.

At our practice, I help individuals with a wide range of backgrounds and medical conditions reach their goals. My patients span nearly the entire life cycle, all the way from tweens to the elderly. They come seeking guidance for a variety of nutrition-related issues, including eating disorders, disordered eating, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and blood sugar concerns.

Most commonly though, I work with people who have tried numerous diets and are sick of seeing their weight temporarily drop only to inevitably rebound. Contrary to popular myth, our weight is largely out of our hands. The calories-in-versus-calories-out paradigm is a gross oversimplification of the complexities affecting weight regulation. While we might be able to manipulate our body size through

behavior changes for a short while, biological mechanisms promoting weight regain almost always win out in the end.

The good news is that weight and health are not nearly as synonymous as we have been led to believe. Studies have shown that weight loss does not automatically lead to better health, and other research that controlled for behaviors found that health risks between groups of people of different body weights were nearly identical when engaging in similar behaviors. For all of these reasons, while I empathize with a desire to lose weight, I put weight on the back burner and focus instead on behaviors and health.

Fed up with failing diets and being at war with food and their bodies, patients come to me because I offer the antithesis. By taking the focus off of weight and rules, we can form a new and more peaceful relationship with food based on satisfaction, flexibility, and health.

In the female-dominated field that is dietetics, in which approximately 97.5% of Registered Dietitians are women, males are a rarity. Given that, although I certainly work with people of all genders, I see many boys and men who feel most comfortable working with a fellow guy.

If you had to go back in time and start over, would you have done anything differently?

If I had it to do over again, I would have dropped “Wellness” from our name and just called ourselves Soolman Nutrition. Nobody really knows what to make of “Wellness,” as it is a relatively vague term, and honestly I am not even sure what I meant by its inclusion.

What do you like best about our city? What do you like least about our city?

In 2006, I rode my bicycle from Seattle to Boston for charity with a small group of my friends. Having never lived outside of Massachusetts before, this was my first opportunity to not only experience cultures outside of our own, but to really immerse myself in them.

When I got home, I concluded that while I had visited many great communities, I was very happy and lucky to be from Boston. We have a unique blend of characteristics: We are a big city, but not sprawling, and we can get from downtown to picturesque rural and suburban areas with relative ease. We are fortunate to have four major professional sports teams, all of which have experienced recent success. While our weather may seemingly change by the hour, rarely are the conditions dangerous. We have some of the best centers of education and medicine in the world. Someone once told me that if you make a friend in Boston, you have a friend for life, and indeed we tend to be loyal to those close to us. More than anything though, I appreciate our diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, and points of view, and how we generally coexist in peace and with respect for one another – although we clearly still have work to do in that regard.

At the same time, I was really struck by how people across the country are much more open to those outside of their immediate circles than we are. In Montana, our evening’s housing fell through at the last minute so a local plumber and his wife gave us their house for the night and cooked us a gigantic dinner on almost no notice. On a Native American reservation in North Dakota, people smiled and said hello when passing strangers on the street. In Minnesota, a farmer waved us down as we rode by and invited us in for homemade pastries. In Iowa, residents gave us unsupervised free reign of their homes while

they were on vacation and had faith that we would be respectful of their property. In more states than I can remember, we knocked on the doors of random homes asking if we could come in and shower, and more often than not the answer was yes. The list goes on. Would gestures like these happen in Boston? I can't say that I would let a stranger into my house to shower, but then again, I am a Bostonian, and we are a guarded bunch.

When we were in Cleveland, we began calling ahead to Boston in search of a church that would shelter us on the final evening of our trek. "Nobody is ever going to let you do that," a man at one church told us. We were taken aback by that, as we had stayed in churches throughout the Pacific Northwest and the Midwest and already had housing set up for most of the eastern United States as well. What did it say about Boston that we were told we would never receive the same care here that the rest of the country was happy to provide?

Because of our tendency to keep ourselves distant from outsiders, Marathon Monday is one of my favorite days of the year. In a city where we tend to keep to our own circles, cut each other off and exchange middle fingers in traffic, and walk past each other without batting an eye, the Boston Marathon is the antithesis: Strangers act like best friends in order to build something overwhelmingly positive. For many runners, finishing the marathon would be impossible without the support and encouragement of those along the route, including not just the volunteers, but also the spectators. They make the day what it is. Without them, the marathon would not be an event, but rather just a bunch of people going out for a jog. When I had to drop out of the 2004 race due to a medical problem, a complete stranger ran out her front door after seeing me collapse at the end of her driveway and cared for me until I was loaded into an ambulance. More times than I can count, I saw struggling racers break out of their shuffling walks and back into jogs because somebody on the side of the road told them they could still do it. Marathon Monday exemplifies our potential and demonstrates that we have it in us to be more open, just like other communities across the country.

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