If you’ve ever had a migraine or seen one through the eyes of a loved one, you know that they truly amount to a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Migraines aren’t simply headaches. They’re characterized by severe pain commonly concentrated on one side of the head or behind the eyes, and may be accompanied by extreme sensitivity to light, sounds, and smells, plus nausea, vomit, aches, fatigue, and even difficulty speaking and numbness on one side of the body. Some people also experience visual aura beforehand, with flashing lights, floating spots, and temporary vision loss.

It’s not exactly a party—but ironically, it was a party where I experienced my first full-blown migraine.

I was 12, and it was after my church confirmation (mom is Christian, dad is Jewish, if you’re wondering about that byline). My parents had taken our family and friends out to a diner to celebrate, because that is what you do in New Jersey. But my head had not felt right since I had placed that papery communion wafer on my tongue and taken a sip of the red sacramental wine at the altar. For most of the party—and the next three days—I was in the bathroom, with pounding pain and overwhelming nausea.

Over the next 15 years, I spent many days in dark bedrooms as the migraines went from a couple times a month in high school, to a few times a month in high school, to several times a month as a journalism student at New York University, and finally a peak of up to 15 days a month post-college. (The latter is classified as chronic daily migraine.) Through it all, I managed to excel at whatever I was handling during the day, but would always be counting down the minutes to when I could drag myself home to a hot bath, bed, and pain pills.

I saw many neurologists. One said I gave the migraines to myself, as many “Type A” women do, and told me to relax more; he didn’t have an answer when I asked why they often worsen during vacations. Others were sincere and tried to help with more prescriptions—but the frequency only continued to get worse with each year. I began to think I was allergic to parties in particular, since no holiday or fête ever ended in anything but a foggy “thank you” to my host, followed by a throbbing collapse into bed. But I soon learned it wasn’t the celebrations that were the problem—it was the food I was eating at them.

Luckily for me, the Internet had arrived just in time. Unsatisfied with doctors’ answers, I would constantly Ask Jeeves (remember?) about migraines and read forums where, for the first time, I found other people going through the same thing. I eventually surfed upon the concept of keeping a “migraine diary,” which catalogs happenings on headache days: what did you eat, what was the weather like, how much sleep had you logged, how much water did you drink? I soon began diligently keeping one. And then slowly—over many, many years—I dis-
covered that a lot of foods kept corresponding with migraines. Sure, doctors had bribery mentioned some of the major well-known offenders—red wine, chocolate, aged cheeses like sharp cheddar—but my list went far beyond these top three items.

Foods including onions and garlic (and all fellow allium family members like scallions, chives, and leeks), preservatives like nitrates/nitrites found in hot dogs, cold cuts, and bacon, tyramine in many cured charcuterie meats, MSG, often found in what’s politely called “Chinese takeout,” all sorts of fresh-dried fruit, oranges, apples, orange juice, and even slices of unripe tomatoes or avocados, most alcohol except for white wine; aspartame; and soda were all highly problematic for me. I discovered most sauces, dressings, and condiments were stealth offenders because they often contained onion or garlic powder. My diary also made it clear that going too long between meals and not drinking at least eight glasses of water a day were major triggers.

Other triggers I learned I’m very sensitive to are not enough, or too much sleep; hormonal changes during my period, bright sunshine, tying my hair up tightly, and sudden barometric changes during intense summer or winter storms.

No wonder I was getting a migraine, like, every day.

But it was identifying and cutting food triggers that gave much of my life back. Experts aren’t sure why some foods cause headaches, though they have some theories. “Foods containing tyramine have been thought to trigger headaches by reducing serotonin levels in the brain and affecting the dilation of blood vessels,” explained Brian M. Grosberg, M.D., my doctor at Montefiore Headache Center in New York—who has spent many hours reading and helping interpret my migraine diary.

Migraines, as those of us with the illness are called, can have lots of triggers. Other or even every other food—thanks-a-lot lettuce and happen to have nearly all of them like yours all at once, or a major stressor like a domestic conflict with vegetables, avocados, or beans, in moderation—which can set off other chronic sufferers. And here’s what I’ve learned: Strong food sensitivities of any magnitude in my my body, and the added: don’t bring any of them into my regular daily routine or kitchen. Cutting down on my intake has given me more control over my body. I can do the kinds of things I watched other people do—like keeping a food diary, traveling, and enjoying long days at the beach under the warm, bright sun.

An anti-inflammatory lifestyle goes beyond just diet, too. Yoga, meditation, stretching, and exercise that incorporates toning and cardio are all potent practices that flood the body with an anti-inflammatory boost. I start my morning with a Vega One nutritional shake, blended with almond milk that contains a flavonoid called velutin that has been shown in studies to inhibit inflammation. This makes an emerging breakfast or delicious afternoon/evening snack! Sliced strawberries, diced banana, hemp seeds, and a drizzle of maple syrup is my go-to bowl of choice to top my smoothie.

I take preventative supplements like vitamin B6, riboflavin, magnesium, along with a couple of low doses of preventive medications, and incorporate all of the lifestyle choices I outlined above. My doctor is open to my holistic explorations and I highly recommend that you find a doctor who is, too.

We’re all given certain blessings in life. And discovering that your greatest challenge exists to guide you to a higher personal path of learning and an even deeper sense of empathy for others can be the greatest blessing of all. Migraines have been a part of what made me who I am, but they no longer define me.

CREAMY CARROT PUMPKIN PAIN PREVENTION SOUP

2 cups water
½ tablespoon turmeric powder
½ tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon raw peeled ginger root
pinch of nutmeg
scoop of non-dairy milk [coconut, almond, and hemp milk work great]
stevia or raw honey to sweeten

Bring the water to a boil on the stovetop, then turn it down to a simmer and add the spices. Allow to simmer for 10 minutes.

Strain into a big cup and add the non-dairy milk and natural sweetener of choice. Stir.

AT YOUR PLACE, ACUACERICS TO TURMERIC, YOU CAN INCREASE THE AMOUNT FOR EVEN MORE BENEFITS. TURMERIC IS A WONDERFUL HEALING SPICE FOR ANY CHRONIC PAIN CONDITION—from migraines to rheumatoid arthritis and even irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

NO CHOCOLATE, NO PROBLEM DATE BITES

1 cup chipped carrots
2 cups soup broth of choice
1 cup 100% pumpkin purée [puréed is fine]
1 cup unsweetened almond milk
½ tablespoon peeled ginger root
½ tablespoon turmeric powder
½ tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon natural maple syrup
salt to taste

Combine all the ingredients in a food processor or blender. Taste and add more spices if necessary, keeping in mind that everything will vary when warmed. Heat in a pot over a medium-low flame for several minutes.

GRACE’S AMAZING ACAI BOWL

1 Sambazon unsweetened pure acai smoothie pack [frozen]
½ cup unsweetened almond milk
1 small ripe banana
hemp granola
fruit of your choice to top

Blend the açaí pack, almond milk, and ripe banana together. I do frost the açaí pack a bit first so that it blends more easily! Pour this into the bottom of a bowl. Top with granola and your choice of fruit.

NO MORE DIZZY DO’S

1 carton of fresh Medjool dates
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
organic shredded coconut
crushed almonds or pistachios (optional)

Remove the pits and hard tops of the dates, and place in a food processor or strong blender with the vanilla extract until a very sticky, “dough” forms. I’m able to do this in my Vitamix a few dates at a time, set on low! Form into balls, and then roll in shredded coconut to coat. Store in an airtight container in the fridge.

For guidance from Montefiore on how to keep a migraine diary, visit: bit.ly/diarymigraine.