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Comprehensive Health Plan for Your Future – Part III

By: James L. Holly, MD

Once you have determined to have good health and once you have determined not to “go on a diet,” but to change your entire approach to nutrition, you need to learn about the things we have previously discussed:

1. You need to know the calorie content of foods and you need to know the energy requirements of your body at various levels of activity.
2. You need to know the glycemic index of foods – how quickly they turn into sugar and consequently how much they stimulate insulin production. It will be your desire to decrease your circulating insulin levels by avoiding high glycemic foods.
3. You need to know how unhealthy processed foods are because of the presences of “trans” fats. You, also, need to know how unhealthy fast foods are and you need to begin eating “whole” foods – foods as they naturally occur and where possible “whole” foods which are organically grown, i.e., without chemicals, pesticides and additives.
4. You also need to know the nutrient content of foods. You need to select foods first because they meet your health goals and not because they taste good, or they are your “favorite.” Last night, I had a delicious meal. I had a modest sized piece of fresh fish, which was grilled and sautéed with red and green bell peppers and olive oil. I had broccoli without any sauce and fresh peas. For desert, I had a small bowel of fresh fruit, paying attention to the glycemic index of each. Now this is really living and particularly because it was prepared by a gourmet cook to whom I have been married for 38 years. It was delicious, nutritious, satisfying and healthy. There were no potatoes, bread or processed foods on this menu. Five years ago, I would have preferred a hamburger and potato chips.

The last three areas of concern for our comprehensive plan for your life and health are:

1. Physical exercise
2. Mental and emotional health
3. Spiritual vitality

Physical Exercise

There are many reasons for “working out,” among the principle ones is that the human body was designed with motion and activity in mind. When we are active, everything from our lungs, to our heart, to our muscles to our bowels works right. When we are inactive, we begin to deteriorate. “Disuse atrophy” is a common condition. The term simply refers to the deterioration of muscles and other parts of the body (atrophy) when those parts of the body are not used (disuse).

Even the health of our bones is dependent upon activity. If you immobilize an extremity, the muscles will begin to shrink in size and strength and the bone will begin to demineralize. There was a time when science argued that the heart benefited from “fewer beats,” therefore people were advised not to “stress” their hearts with a great deal of exercise. Now, of course, we know that the heart’s ability to utilize oxygen and to stay healthy is dependent upon the heart being regularly stretched. Harmful stress to the heart comes because of inactivity, not activity.

In the April 10, 2003 Examiner, Mrs. Norma Duncan summarized the three areas of exercise which are needed for health. In the May 1, 2003 Examiner, she expanded these ideas in regard to “striking,” “strengthening,” and “stretching.”

The first area for exercising or “training your body for health” is “striking,” which refers to walking, jogging, running, swimming, cycling, rowing or other forms of aerobic exercise. This improves your stamina, renews your energy and improves the ability of your heart to stay healthy. You should have at least 30 minutes a day or 3-4 hours a week of vigorous aerobic exercise where you sustain your heart rate above 80% of your maximum. Of course, if you already have heart or lung problems, you should consult with your personal healthcare provider before you start a new exercise program.

The second area of exercise is “strengthening.” Many of us are prejudice against the “body building” image which weight lifting brings to mind, but you can easily and efficiently get the “strengthening” exercise which you need in your own home. With a little instruction and some 5-8 pound weights, you can tone and strengthen your muscles, increasing their efficiency in using the energy created by the food you eat. In addition, if you stimulate your metabolism by ten minutes of vigorous activity before you start your

day, you will discover that your “appetites” – the desires for things which are unhealthy – will be decreased.

Finally, Mrs. Duncan addressed the need for “stretching.” Flexibility is a critical part of the body’s functioning properly. Bending, stooping, proper lifting, reaching and other extended forms of bodily movements are necessary for almost all “activities of daily living.” If you keep your tendons and ligaments elastic and the proper length with a regular stretching- exercise program, you will be less likely to fall, or to injure yourself, if you do. Again, this is something which can be done without expensive equipment, or a gym. The reality is that most successful exercise programs require no money, or very little, and require nothing special except a little time on a regular basis. It seems to be the case that the success of an exercise program is inversely proportional to the cost of getting started, i.e., the more a person spends to start an exercise program, the less success they have sustaining it and the less money spent on starting a program, the more success they have in sustaining the program.

It is an interesting phenomenon that if you are eating properly, you will feel more like exercising and if you are exercising regularly, you will feel more like eating properly. As in all areas of life, success breeds success and failure invites more failure. The most important thing is to get started. The second most important thing is to persevere. If you start and sustain your effort, you will succeed.

Mental and Emotional Health

The last two areas of our comprehensive health plan are perhaps the most important. All of the physical vitality in the world will not substitute for happiness and hope which are the results of mental and emotional health and of spiritual health.

There are several realities with mental and emotional health which are critical:

1. Some people need help with depression. This does not mean that they are weak or bad people. In fact, the presence or absence of depression in our lives is often no more our fault or responsibility than the color of our hair or the height of our stature. However, our response to depression is. Getting help is the only healthy thing to do.
2. Everyone, and that means absolutely everyone, has had negative experiences, or have had emotional trauma of one kind or another in their past. The difference is how you deal with it. Like physical stress, which you invite through exercise, emotional stress, which you do not ask for, can strengthen you if responded to correctly.
3. Like most things in life, having mental and emotional health is a choice.

Mental and emotional health could be two different categories but they are so interrelated, it is easier to deal with them together. Mental health comes from exercising your mind with reading, writing, conversation and thinking. Passively watching television does not provide effective mental stimulations which is why television should not be the dominant source of information, entertainment, or time utilization in your life. It is unhealthy. Recent studies have suggested that readers and writers have a significantly reduced incidence of Alzheimer's disease.

Emotional health is really derived by focusing on others. Normally, we think that achieving a goal comes from concentrating on that goal, but in the case of emotional health, it is very often the opposite. Emotional health comes from caring about others more than yourself. And, that caring about them is not in relationship to what they can do for you, but it is caring about the other person's or persons' welfare without regard to your own. Some of you will have already recognized that we have just described or defined "love." Loving others is not a romantic or emotional feeling; it is heartfelt commitment to their well-being.

Often a depressed person will be made well by focusing upon others, doing for others, and/or serving others. Emotional health involves us with others. It means that we delight in others and enjoy others. Humans are social creatures. Isolate them and their emotional "muscle" begins to atrophy; involve them with others and their emotionalism expands, grows and strengthens. And, just as mental exercise seems to prevent Alzheimer's, there is a direct correlation between emotional involvement with others and a decreased incidence of Alzheimer's disease.

Plan now to start physical exercise. Plan now to read a book. Plan now to visit someone who needs you more than you need them. You will grow and be strengthened each time.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health.