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Comprehensive Health Plan for Your Future – Part IV

By: James L. Holly, MD

In I Timothy 4:8, the Apostle Paul, writing to his young protégé, Timothy, counsels him, “Physical exercise is of limited benefit having promise only for the life which is, but spiritual exercise is of unlimited benefit having promise both for the life which now is and the life which is to come.” The truth of Paul’s advice to Timothy is underscored by the reality that we are all going to die. Death is a reality which all of us will face one day. How we prepare for death will often dictate how we choose to live. A comprehensive health plan for your life should include your beliefs about the ultimate meaning of life and the significance of death to your life.

Philosophers, theologians, scholars, even scientists have sought “ultimate reality.” It seems to be an innate drive within man to find answers to questions of existence such as “why,” “how,” “when”, and “where.” Some find their answers in the physical, in that which is measurable, observable, “manipulate-able” or “experimental”. Others find their answers in revelation, that is, that which they believe comes from beyond experience or observation.

Personally, as a Christian, I believe that Jesus Christ is God and that hope and faith are found and founded in Him Personally. I believe that the truth of Christ excludes the validity of all other faiths. Yet, as a healthcare professional, I know that acts of faith have value, even if those acts of faith do not have objective reality in my personal judgment.

It is these acts of faith which I wish to address as a part of a comprehensive plan for your health. Here are some important observations:

1. A growing number of epidemiological studies point to connections between regular attendance at religious services and a decrease in some serious illnesses.
2. Other studies have suggested an increase survival among individuals who are seriously ill and who have an active faith.

3. Some studies have shown a more rapid recover rate for those who had others praying for them than those who were not prayed for.

One of the major problems with addressing faith and health is defining what faith is. Is faith simple an association with a religious institution around which activities of a “faith nature” revolve, or, is faith a matter of person spirituality with internalized beliefs and experiences as opposed to the social and institutional aspects of organized religion? Probably, it is not “either/or” but “both/and.”

In this context, while each of us has our own personal faith, we can celebrate and appreciate acts of faith different from our own, while affirming our confidence in the validity and truth of our own faith. In this context, in the context of celebrating faith, let’s examine the ways in which faith contributes to health.

While I would never suggest that there are no significant differences in faiths, I would like to suggest that there are some significant commonalities. These things, which are common to almost all faiths, are the focus of our attention to how faith impacts your health.

First of all, faith which is going to benefit your health and well being must teach you to love others. Love differs from emotion because often when we feel a strong emotional attraction to someone, we are only wanting to use them to fulfill our needs without regard to theirs. Love is the caring for others for their benefit without regard to our own. In the Christian faith, in the Islamic faith and in the Jewish faith, this is the kind of love which God has for men and women – caring for them without expecting or demanding anything in return.

This kind of love is described by Paul in the Christian New Testament. He said: “This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience -- it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it shares the joy of those who live by the truth. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope: it can outlast anything. It never fails." (I Cor. 13:4-8a, Phillips)

A life defined by and dominated by this kind of love will be a mentally and emotionally healthy life which will contribute directly to one’s physical well-being.

The second attribute of faith is built on the first and that is forgiveness. Few things are as physically destructive as bitterness, which is the result of harboring and nurturing anger and offense over someone’s acts or words against you. Forgiveness is the act of releasing others and yourself from the negative consequences of disappointed expectations and/or the negative consequences of injury or hurt. Like love, forgiveness is not a feeling or emotion; it is an act of the will – a decision.

In my judgment, the vitality of a person's faith is not seen in how aggressive they are in their religious demonstrations but how they deal with their enemies. If a person's faith allows them to free others from their anger, bitterness, expectations or hate, then that person's faith is great. If a person is very religious but does not forgive others, then that person's faith is small.

There are few things which you can do which will have as great a positive impact on your physical well-being as forgiving others. And, forgiveness is most genuine when you desire the best for those who hurt you and when you find quiet, unacknowledged ways of "blessing" them with your actions.

The third aspect of faith which contributes to one's health is purpose and passion. As lassitude and inactivity will atrophy the muscle and bone, so passivity and aimlessness will atrophy the soul. Few things are as invigorating and as healthy as a passion for something in your life. And, passion is most beneficial when it is not a means to an end, i.e., not a passion for making money or gaining power, but when it is a passion for accomplishing an objective which involves doing good for others while you are doing well.

The finally aspect of faith which contributes to your physical well-being is hope. Repeatedly, it has been shown that those who have hope, heal faster, live longer and have fewer illnesses than those who feel hopeless. Hope is not just optimism about the future, expecting good things to happen. Hope involves a confidence that life has a meaning and that human experience individually, if not collectively, is directed to some good end.

Love with forgiveness, purpose and passion with hope result in peace and contentment. Here is the ultimate impact of faith upon our health. If you have faith, pursue, if you don't think about it. If you are interested in the Christian faith, e-mail me and I'll be glad to share my experience with you.

As you construct a comprehensive plan for your health, you must pay attention to:

1. Your total caloric intake
2. The glycemc index of the foods you eat
3. The fats and particularly the "trans" fat content of the foods you eat
4. The nutrient value and particularly the vitamin and mineral content of the food you eat
5. Your activity level and your exercise including strengthening, striking and stretching
6. Your Mental and emotional health

7. Your spiritual well being.

Your health is not one's responsibility but your own. You have no one to blame for bad health except yourself. No matter what your condition, you can make a decision to improve your health. Do it today, for you must always remember, it is your life and it is your faith.