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Exercising the Heart Part IV

A Merry Heart as Medicine

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Your Life Your Health

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Significant attention of medicine is given to the primary and secondary prevention of heart disease. Primary prevention is essentially directed toward the prevention of heart disease before you have it. Secondary prevention is essentially directed toward the prevention of the recurrence of and/or the development of complications of heart disease once you have heart disease. Obviously, primary prevention is the best medicine, but secondary prevention is important, also.

As we examined the benefits and the methods of exercising the heart physically, we have also discussed how to exercise the emotional and spiritual heart through “remembering” and through the “making of memories.” These might be looked upon as primary prevention methods, but what if you already have a broken heart, what if life has dealt you a blow, or events have piled up so that your heart is saddened, depressed or even “broken?” How do you heal a “broken” heart? What is the secondary prevention of the “broken” heart? How do you protect the heart from future damage from disappointment, depression or pain?

This column has often dealt with this subject in the context of faith, hope and gratitude. The following subjects have been dealt with over the last six years:

- “Faith: Medicine for the Mind, Soul and Spirit” -- November 2000
- “Prayer and Healing” – November 2001
- “Hope: Health for the Soul” -- December 2001
- “Thanksgiving, Gratitude and Choices” – July 2002
- “Hope: The Ten Elements of Hope and How They apply to our Health” -- August 2003
- “Hope: The Foundation of Health” -- December 2003
- “Thanksgiving Gratitude and Mental Health” -- November 2003
- “Your Health and Gratitude” -- November 2004
- “Faith and Hope: Value and Virtue” -- July 2004
- “Your Health and Gratitude” -- November 2004
- “Hope: Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men” -- December 2004
- “The Health of Gratitude” -- November 2005
- “Health and Stress” – November 2005

Each of these articles can be read on-line at www.jameslhollymd.com under “Your Life Your Health.” Their content serves as the foundation of the primary and secondary prevention of a “broken heart.”

Typically, the secondary prevention of disease regardless of the system involved, i.e., cardiovascular, respiratory, endocrine, etc., focuses on the consequences and/or manifestations of the illness. In the case of a “broken heart,” the symptoms, or consequences are most often sadness, depression, isolation, fatigue or compulsive behavior.

A Merry Heart

Proverbs 17:22 declares, “A Merry heart doeth good like a medicine...” Most physical medical conditions are helped by happiness. Almost any illness which involves the immune system improves with a positive mental attitude and deteriorates with depression, or sadness. The sadness which either causes a “broken heart,” or which is the result of a “broken heart,” can be dealt with by “gladness.” Sometimes, the difference between the two extremes is a matter of choice. Sometimes it is beyond the individual’s choice and other interventions are needed.

Laughter can begin the healing process particularly when the laughter is motivated by those you love. Allowing yourself to in situations where light-heartedness and wholesome fun is possible is the first step. Participation in life is the next. Getting involved and staying involved with others is the final step of allowing the healing possibility of a merry heart to work its medicinal miracle upon your broken heart.

In his book, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*, philosopher and business consultant, Tom Morris, discussed Aristotle's concept of happiness. He quoted a modern interpretation of that concept when he said, "Happiness is not a station that you arrive at, but a manner of traveling." (Margaret Lee Runbeck) Another Greek philosopher understood that happiness did not derive from money, fame or idleness. He said, ""Many who seem to be struggling with adversity are happy; many, amid great affluence, are utterly miserable." (Publius Cornelius Tacitus) The choice to be happy is one of the healthiest choices you can make in your life.

Intimacy versus Isolation

Without question, the greatest contributor to the sadness of a broken heart is isolation from others. Either because of the depth of one’s hurt or because of the fear of being hurt again, withdrawal from and/or the avoidance of the chance of another hurt is a common defense mechanism but it is also the thing which makes a “broken heart” hurt worse. The solution to your own pain is often being involved in the reducing the pain of others.

Intimacy rather than isolation is the prescription for a “broken heart.’ In fact, just as exercising the heart is the cure for heart disease, allowing your heart to be stretched by the inclusion of others is the solution for a “broken heart.” It is in the focusing upon the needs of others that we find that gladness will replace sadness. When you have lost a loved one, they cannot be replaced. However, the pain of the loss does not give more value to your love of the one lost. The giving of your heart to those in need as an

expression of your love for the one you lost will not only heal you, but it will heal others and it will build a living memorial to the one lost.

The Healing Power of Gratitude

The consequences of a “broken heart” often follow the development of bitterness and resentment. These are the results of questions such as, “Why did this happen to me? Or “Why did I deserve this?” This introspective lament is destructive and focuses upon what you don’t have rather than what you do.

One of the greatest motivator of mental health is "gratitude." Rather than focusing upon what you don’t have, count your blessings. A few years ago, my brother sent me a picture of my father's hands. These hands protected us, provided for us, punished us, and petted us. They saddled horses, loaded shotguns, paddled boats, fixed windows, cooked fish and held us when we were hurt. When my brother had appendicitis -- I was glad they didn't treat me the way they did when he had tonsillitis because when he got sick and they took my tonsils out -- those hands carried my brother from the hallway where he collapsed to the bed, and then to the car to the doctor. Those hands bought little Golden Books for us and labored to support us.

I love those hands, yet, as I reflect on the Psalmist's confession, "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek," (Psalm 27:8) I realized that these hands are only an extension of the face of the powerful man who was our father. And, that sun-burnt face is only a reflection of the character of the man who is known as Billy Holly. The Psalmist also said, "Behold, as the eyes of the servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that He have mercy upon us." (Psalm 123:2) To please the master, the servant watched attentively so as to anticipate the desire of the one who he/she served. In some ways, but not in as many as I would have liked, we were like that with our father, wanting to please him.

The sadness of my father’s death is overcome by the depth of my gratitude for who he was and for all of the gifts he bequeathed to me.

As you endeavor to improve your heart’s health physically by losing weight, exercising and not smoking, don’t forget to exercise your heart emotionally. Use the principles of primary prevention of the heart diseases of sadness and loneliness by “remembering” and by “making memories.” And, when your heart has been broken, chose to have a merry heart, get involved with others, give your heart away and be grateful

It is your life and it is your health.