

Your health: your responsibility

I look back on my childhood years fondly and think of the positive role modeling I received. I recall a physically active mother who always ensured we were outside: playing in our early years, exercising in our later years. From a farming family, she had us out walking and exploring nature – instilling in us respect for the earth and love for the land. As an early childhood educator there was no shortage of creative projects we could be engaged in. Our food was home-cooked, our snacks homemade. Rarely did our food come out of a package. She continues to be an inspiration to me in this way.

My father – was, and continues to be - a loyal, dedicated and hardworking role model. He insisted our family sit together for meals, he encouraged us to do our chores, our homework. He supported us unconditionally while at the same time giving us responsibility and allowing us to see the value in assuming responsibility for our actions and their outcomes. He has taught me respect for others and to honor our family and family values.

In reflection I see the gifts my family was able to give to me. Even though, at the time their sole intentions may have been to provide me with safety and love, the power of these gifts extended far beyond. This reinforces my belief that a safe, non-judgmental and loving environment is the ideal space in which healing and self actualization can occur.

This article stems from several years of practice as a Naturopathic Physician as well as a result of reflection on my upbringing and value system that I shared with you earlier, and how that plays a role in my life today. It is meant to convey some of my thoughts, as a Naturopathic doctor, on health.

Trained as a Naturopathic Doctor, we study the human body and the healing spirit that resides within. We believe in the Healing Power of Nature – that living in harmony with nature will bring healing and that within our bodies resides an incredible healing potential. It is our role to support and to work in harmony with the body, placing our belief on its self-healing capabilities. Our treatment methods seek to do no harm and to restore health to the individual in the most safe, natural and effective way possible.

Now that I have been in practice several years I have had the opportunity to see many individuals coming to me and honoring and trusting me with their most valued possession – their health. Health is often recognized as that commodity we have of which we don't know the value of until it is taken away. Sometimes it is a flu causing us to become bed-ridden, other times it is chronic pain or depression and more and more often what takes it away is a more life threatening condition – such as cancer.

What I want to attempt to do in this article is:

- 1) Begin to consider that your pain or your health condition – be it physical or psychological – is your teacher and choose to listen to and learn from it
- 2) Begin to see the connection between the physical body, the mental-emotional body and the spirit.
- 3) (Hopefully!) To inspire you to take responsibility for your health with disciplined gentleness

Pain/ symptom as teacher

In practice or lectures, I will often try to use analogies for our bodies. We are often so detached from our bodies – we tend to live in our minds in this society – and more attached to our material possessions - that examples such as cars and houses seem to help people to relate to some of the concepts I attempt to explain.

Using this model to explain “pain as teacher” I want you to consider the carbon monoxide and smoke detectors in your home. These are essentially the “alarm bells” for an unhealthy home. Should one of these go off, I assume that the last thing you do is just to turn it off, pull it off the wall or silence it in some way. Hopefully you look first for the source of the alarm: perhaps it is the battery that needs changing, one of your family members burning their toast or maybe even a small fire somewhere in the home – not yet detectable to you, but giving off enough smoke to activate the smoke detector. Whatever the case – we are conditioned to look for the source of the problem. The alarm has alerted us that something is wrong! We can then proceed to find out what it is, and correct it at its source: change the battery, pull out the toast or pull out the fire extinguisher.

Unfortunately that is not how we have been conditioned when it comes to our physical bodies. We have been conditioned that if: your blood pressure is high...; your cholesterol is high...; your thyroid is low...; you have insomnia... (to name a few potential health issues) we are not to look for the cause, but rather we are to extinguish the symptom through a medication.

Think of how ineffective this would be if we were to do this in our home! If we were to pull that smoke detector off the wall while the fire is still burning we’d have one big house on fire! And so it is with medicating your personal alarm bells: if you start with high cholesterol, take a medication for it – suddenly that alarm bell is turned off... Next one might find out they have high blood pressure and be given another medication... Then diabetes... and so on. One warning signal ignored or improperly addressed is what moves the body into a chronic disease state.

I used the example as a high lab value as a teacher. There are many other signals from our bodies that can act in this way, pain being our most notable teacher. Pain is often our earliest indicator that something is out of balance in the body. It is the most primitive signal that danger is near.

Rather than getting caught in the pain of your physical ailments try seeing it simply as a messenger to listen intently to your body or to your spirit – accepting that this is a means of telling you something needs to be changed in your life. If pain is our teacher, there is no need to feel anxious or resist it. Without resistance and anxiety, there will be no tension. Without tension, disease and pain are unlikely to persist. We may not like what the pain is trying to tell us (to leave a job, or a relationship, etc.) however our spirits – and thus our physical bodies – will be much happier for it.

The goal is to do our best at not judging events in our lives as good or bad, but viewing them as part of life's curriculum.

Body-mind-spirit connection

As I alluded to in the latter part of the above section, we are much more than our physical bodies. We can, however, use our physical bodies as tools to access our interiors. Many people fail to recognize the wounding of their spirit until their physical bodies have become incapacitated to the point that they have no choice but to listen. Often this is what will bring a person into my office in the first place. They might be suffering from some physical ailment that they are looking for assistance in overcoming. This might be weight gain, or low thyroid function, or diabetes, or heart disease – among many other such conditions.

What I attempt to do is to determine what underlying causes might exist to lead to these conditions. Very often the first thing I might notice is poor diet or lifestyle habits or choices. If we eat too much sugar or highly refined or processed foods – then we might end up with problems with our blood sugar, weight gain and ultimately diabetes. If we smoke or drink alcohol on a regular basis, or enjoy fatty foods – we may end up with high blood pressure or high cholesterol. If we consider that our bodies are purely physical in nature, then it would be simple enough to suggest to a person to cease these destructive habits. However I am sure we all agree that the issue is not that we don't know these habits aren't healthy, but rather that our spirits are in distress and we are reaching for our particular coping strategy as a way to help us through a difficult time.

We often feel hurt, depressed, fatigued or generally unwell – and choose to suppress these symptoms – early indicators of a lack of balance in our lives – through over-work, over-exercise, over-caring for others, over-eating, over-indulgence in alcohol/ caffeine/ nicotine/ recreational drugs, over-spending –

the list goes on with numbing strategies provided to us in our pleasure-seeking, immediate gratification filled society.

If we consider the body has a psychological, emotional and spiritual component we can then look to address what is causing us to feel out of balance and therefore reach for our destructive coping strategy. Once that is determined and addressed, we can start to make different choices that are more nurturing rather than destructive. In this model it is important that we entertain the idea that our physical ailment has its roots in an energetic/ emotional or psychological disturbance – and therefore all levels require some attention in order for us to heal.

Wholeness and whole body health means acceptance of being born and dying and the space of living in between. All of these involve pain and discomfort –the key is to be able to willingly go into the mystery of letting go and surrender to whatever comes up for us in life.

Inspiration

Now that I have discussed acceptance and surrender, it is time to discuss action. While it is important to be in a place, psychologically and spiritually, of trust and surrender – it is quite essential to care for our physical bodies as they have been given to us for this lifetime.

To consider that it is our *responsibility* to ourselves in keeping ourselves healthy - we might be inspired to care for our bodies in ways we were never capable of before. Think of your body as a precious gift in which to house your spirit. As you begin to awaken to the power of your potential, see the importance in caring for this physical home in which you reside. As with your actual house – you clean your house, do proper maintenance and repairs to keep it healthy and clean – you must to do so with the home that houses the spirit.

Keep your physical body healthy and clean – giving it those things that it requires to be healthy. Simply put these things include: Water, Fresh Air, Sunshine, Exercise, Rest and Good Nutrition. If you focus on the simplicity of this concept, then it truly is simple. We have a habit in this life of getting caught in the complexity and creating a drama or a difficulty where none truly exists.

Make it your goal to get outside daily – for at least 15 to 30 minutes. Be sure to be out in the light of day. Breathe deeply when you are outside, appreciate the feeling of alertness and energy that breathing in life giving air creates within your body. Stretch and exercise your body at least 30 minutes every day. Walking, swimming, or running are essential to keep your heart and

lungs healthy. Stretching, yoga, or meditation are also important to keep your mind and muscles loose and flexible.

Proper rest involves 8 to 10 hours of sleep every night. I often hear “all I need is 6 hours”. The body runs ideally off 8 to 10 hours every single night. Your energy and mood will improve drastically if you can get to bed by 10pm or earlier. In the summer the body can handle an early morning of 5 or 6 am, but in the winter I strongly encourage you to sleep a little longer – closer to 7 or 8 am. When we wake in the dark, our bodies have not had the full chance to recover and repair over night.

Finally good nutrition is vitally important. Our bodies were not designed to run off of fast foods, “junk” foods, refined (=nutrient depleted) foods. We need whole foods in order to have maximum health. Whole foods are foods that look like they did when they were growing. Rice, oats, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, good quality meats – free range chicken, beef; wild game. Foods that haven’t been refined to contain fewer nutrients or less fiber. Foods that haven’t been artificially made (do you think that pop tarts came from nature?) Think of the difference in how many vitamins and minerals – literally the “gas” to run the engines of our bodies are found in a mixed greens salad with a side of wild rice and a piece of bison steak – when compared to a meal of white pasta, creamy sauce – no protein and no veggies.

In contemplating writing this article, knowing the direction I wanted to take and message I wanted to convey, I “coincidentally” (I put this in quotes, as I really don’t believe there is such thing!) ran across a little book in Awareness and I knew that an excerpt from this magnificent publication needed to be included in this article. I have chosen: *Prayer for Physical Body* from “Prayers: a Communion with our Creator” by Don Miguel Ruiz.

Today, Creator, I promise to make a new agreement with my physical body. I promise to love my body unconditionally as my body loves me.

I promise to protect and take care of my body. I will never again reject my body, abuse my body, or be ashamed of how it looks. From now on,

I will accept my physical body as it is. I will enjoy my body, and be grateful for all the pleasures of life it gives me.

Forgive me, Creator, for believing all the lies about my physical body.

Forgive me for judging my physical body against a false image of perfection. Forgive me for everything I haven’t liked about my physical body.

Today, Creator, help me to see my physical body as a living temple where you live. Help me to respect my body, to love and honor my body. I know that to treat my physical body with respect, love and

honor is to respect, love and honor your creation. Help me, Creator, to
give my physical body whatever it needs to live in perfect health,
harmony and happiness with you. Amen.