

Building a Foundation for Health

My psychology practice focuses on emotional health. It is hard, if not impossible, however, to separate physical and emotional health. They go together.

The good news is that you can help yourself and improve your emotional health by adopting a few simple habits that are physical in nature. The evidence that these habits help with emotional health is indisputable and they make the hard work of changing your emotional response to life's stresses and strains more manageable.

It is ideal to simultaneously attend to the following lifestyle elements. Each element contributes to physical health in its own way. Each is important. **PLEASE NOTE: This list of lifestyle elements is a starting point or introduction to more comprehensive investigation/education on your part. Please do not make any changes in your current lifestyle until you feel confident about the rationale, benefits, and risks of the change you are undertaking. In particular, please consult with your physician prior to initiating any change (such as initiating an exercise program) that you feel may be too strenuous or demanding.**

1. Exercise – There is no question that regular exercise is an important component of maintaining physical health. In addition, multiple studies indicate that regular exercise has antidepressant and anti-anxiety benefits. The benefit appears to increase as the intensity and duration of the exercise increases but only to a point. Beyond this point, additional intensity and duration can be counterproductive.
2. Relaxation – Making time to relax is a powerful antidote to both physical and emotional stress. Make time to relax each day (a period when all tasks and deadlines are put aside in favor of recreation, listening to music, reading a book...). Relaxation is one goal of meditation and a component of the practice of Yoga--two good ways to make relaxation a priority in your life.
3. Sleep – Adequate sleep is a critical component of both physical and emotional health. Make time to sleep and attend to getting to sleep like you might any other ritual. Avoid caffeine if it interferes with your sleep--as it often does (for two or three days after taking it in).
4. Relationships – Relationships and the emotional support they offer are an important element in reducing stress and in improving both physical and emotional health. Make time to relate positively to others in your family or support network.

5. Nutrition/Diet – The effect of diet on physical health is part of our national dialog. The effect of diet on emotional health is frequently ignored. This is in spite of ample evidence linking the so-called “Western” diet to emotional health problems. To improve physical health and build the best possible foundation for emotional health it is important to: **PLEASE NOTE: The following items are offered as an introduction to the topic of nutrition/diet's role in physical/emotional well being. They are general guidelines geared toward achieving a foundation for emotional health. In the case of dietary supplements, additional supplements or changes in dosage may be appropriate to address your specific symptoms.**
- a. Avoid foods that have added sugar, sweeteners (like fructose, corn syrup and high fructose corn syrup), saturated fat, trans- or partially hydrogenated fats/oils.
 - b. Avoid processed and “fast” foods to the degree possible. Eat a wide variety of foods that are minimally processed such as fresh/organic fruits and vegetables, whole grains, organic meats, wild caught fish, etc.
 - c. Be aware of causes and symptoms of “sugar sensitivity” and “hypoglycemia” due to the “simple” carbohydrates in sweetened foods (ice cream, cakes, cookies, donuts, etc.) and in grain products (especially, cereal, white breads, white rice, cakes, cookies, etc.). Try to choose foods that have a low “glycemic index/load.”
 - d. Be aware of the potential for allergies to wheat and/or dairy, food colorings and any food ingredient eaten in excess (for example, wheat can be in cereal, toast, bread, pasta, etc.). Allergic reactions to foods can influence mood and behavior--including and perhaps, especially, in children.
 - e. Avoid more than limited intake of caffeine and alcohol.
 - f. Consider supplements of:
 - i. Essential Fatty Acids, particularly fish oil (the best source of omega-3 EFAs).
 - ii. a multivitamin formula.
 - iii. a multimineral formula (may be combined with multivitamin).

Despite the intelligence of our science, the human body and mind and their interaction are not fully understood. We do know that modern life has brought ills only seen rarely by our forefathers. Think of childhood diabetes and obesity, etc. One view is that our bodies were designed for simpler times, when regular exercise and fresh, local foods were the norm for everyone. I think that returning to those lifestyle elements can help anyone build a foundation for health, including emotional health.

References

- Babyak M. et. al. Exercise Treatment for Major Depression: Maintenance of Therapeutic Benefit at 10 Months. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 62:633-638 (2000).
- Benson H. and Klipper M. *The Relaxation Response*. New York, NY: Harpertorch, 1975.
- Hoffer A. *Healing Children's Attention & Behavior Disorders: Complementary Nutritional and Psychological Treatments*. Toronto, Ontario: CCNM Press, 2004.
- Hoffer A. and Walker M. *Putting It All Together: The New Orthomolecular Nutrition*. New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, 1996.
- Holford P. *The New Optimum Nutrition Bible*. Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 2004.
- Saul A. *Doctor Yourself: Natural Healing That Works*. Laguna Beach, CA : Basic Health Publications, 2003.