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WELLNESS: IS YOUR LIFESTYLE GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH?

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Wellness is becoming a major area of concern for large organizations, as well as for individuals. The Wellness concept focuses on preventive health — on the maintenance of healthful behavior in the areas of stress, exercise, nutrition, weight control, sleep, and alcohol, drug, and cigarette use. As the program director of Walter Reed Army Hospital's Wellness Center has said, "We stress prevention...we're trying to stop disease before it starts."

The emphasis in wellness is on the role of *self-responsibility* in gaining and keeping a high level of overall health. As our society has become more and more specialized, we have grown passive in areas outside our individual expertise. Thus, passivity about our personal health developed from an over-reliance on health care specialists, as well as from a lack of knowledge about the disease process.

Our health care system is in reality a disease care system. We have been taught to act on health matters only when we hurt or when organs no longer function properly. All too often, an individual's interest in health begins when his/her health has deteriorated and pain and malfunction have begun to dictate a lifestyle of diminished capacity and enjoyment.

How have we let our responsibility for our own bodies decline to such a degree? The answer lies largely in the fact that as a society we have identified with our minds, rather than with being a complete mind-body organism. Our most important channel to the knowledge of how to lead a balanced, centered, healthful, satisfying life is our bodies. Yet, we have consistently gratified our minds at the expense of our bodies.



For example, we crave mental stimulation to the point that we need our minds to be constantly occupied. If we're alone, we need the stimulation of a radio or television. We become conditioned to a constant mental bombardment of thoughts, plans, worries, re-enactment of old events, and preparation for new ones. We may have difficulty turning off our minds long enough to enable us to fall asleep.

What this means is that our minds and bodies become tolerant of constant emotional arousal, to the degree that hyperarousal seems to be our normal state. We lose the ability to perceive the difference between calmness and arousal. And often there is an *extreme* difference between the relaxed state and what we perceive to be our "normal state."

The price that we pay for needing this constant stimulation is that we cannot hear our body's messages — its signals for rest, peace, or attention. Thus we fail to heed the early signals, and stress-related illness takes its toll. But if we are better attuned to our bodies, and train ourselves to observe our bodily process, we can intervene much earlier in the disease-producing chain of events.

Central to this discussion is the belief that stress contributes to hyperarousal. Scientific studies have documented the illness-producing effects of prolonged stress, including organ malfunction and atrophy. There are many acknowledged psychosomatic disorders, including peptic ulcers, migraine headaches, bronchial asthma, various skin reactions, and colitis. However, as one noted physician has said, "All diseases are psychosomatic."

because stress, anxiety, anger, fear, and frustration increase the body's susceptibility to organic disease.

An individual's lifestyle can powerfully determine his/her state of wellness. It is each person's responsibility to himself and his/her loved ones to identify the stress-promoting activities in one's life and develop a lifestyle which modifies or avoids these stressors.

How stressfully we react to our environment is determined to a large degree by our nutrition, our physical activity and sleep problems, our use of alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes, as well as by our individual attitudes, values, personality, emotional development, and ability to relax. Healthful behavior is an insurance against, or prevention of, ill health. We all possess the capability, should we choose to utilize it, to reduce our stress arousal and thus prevent stress-related illness.

Many highly stressed people are under the misconception that they *must* lead a stressful life. However, the reality of the situation is usually that they: 1) Choose to live a stressful life because it is more externally rewarding e.g., offers more money or prestige than a less stressful lifestyle; 2) Don't know of, or haven't searched for, any alternatives to the present lifestyle; or 3) Fear an unknown alternative more than they fear the effects of the present lifestyle.

However, an individual who determines that longevity and a life of health and happiness are his/her priorities can begin to make lifestyle choices to reduce the stressful activities. The effort must be in the direction of re-establishing a sense of balance, gaining an inner peace and tranquility which can be maintained throughout the day, and re-uniting mind and body.