

Toward A Healthier and Balanced Lifestyle: Taking Charge of Your Body

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Ultimately it's Your Choice!

There is no denying that you have a choice when it comes to your health. You can choose to undo unhealthy habits or to continue with them. Completing adulthood requires the former. It is important you do that proactively to prevent illness, but as importantly, reactively if you've already experienced medical problems.

While this seems so obvious as to not need discussion, the data suggest otherwise. As you look around notice how many disregard healthy behaviors. What's more, those who experience cardiac events or other serious health problems and revert to old, unhealthy habits are in the majority. People who make permanent healthy choices are a minority of less than 25%. The odds are that only one in ten reading this will commit to their healthfulness. My hope is that the one person will be you. Ultimately, it's your choice.

Luck, Genetics, and Denial!

I know someone who believes that life and death are all about luck and genetics. The accuracy of this is hard to deny. Yet, denial is really the problem and such statements feed into it. We have all kinds of ways to deny the seriousness of a glopful lifestyle. In so doing, we stay stuck and avoid making healthier choices. This is equivalent to running your car with the gas on empty believing it will keep going. Eventually, reality trumps denial.

The problem with the luck and genetics philosophy is that we can't measure or predict either one. I don't deny that there are many ways to die and that you can live healthfully and die anyway, in an accident. But, just as you wouldn't drive your car recklessly, it makes sense not to drive your body that way. If life is about luck, then why push yours?

Genetics is equally tough to assess. My father died at 49 from heart problems and my mother is going strong at 95. What's my GQ (genetic quotient)? What's yours? Who knows? What I do know is that not committing to my health led to my angioplasty at age 59. I remember lying on that surgical table and feeling pretty dumb. I thought about all the cigarettes I smoked well into my 40's. I thought about gaining back the 50 pounds I had lost when I was 49. I thought about all the cheese I consumed, deluding myself that because I liked France, I'd be saved by the French Paradox. No such genes! No such luck!

So, as I lay on that cold table feeling that I had let myself down, I made three commitments. The first was that I would devote my energies toward my health by attacking my bad habits. The second was that I would make these changes a life commitment. The third was that when I was successful with these behavioral modifications, I would help others to achieve these goals.

Yo-Yo No More.

As I pen these words, a zinging thought races from my mind. “What if, just what if, after distributing this you go back again, Bill? What if you revert to your old unhealthy habits and fail?” Any self-respecting psychologist knows that “what if” questions are a heartbeat away from anxiety attacks and to be avoided at all costs. On the other hand they do prompt us to think protectively, albeit with a neurotic twist. And considering the number of people who revert back to old habits, perhaps it’s not such a silly question.

In fact, it prompts the thought that none of us can be or become complacent or casual when it comes to our commitment to healthier ways. We need to stay focused and disciplined. We need to avoid the yo-yo – lost 30lbs. gained 36 back – factor. We need to be as hooked on our modifications as we were to our unhealthy habits. In response to the “what if” question, my answer is simply that I won’t allow it. It has been five years and I’m still in the zone. In fact, going public will help me to stay committed. My hope is that your commitment to your self and your body will be as strong.

Hold The Peas, Please!

The yo-yo syndrome spans all areas. People who haven’t smoked a cigarette in years go back. Same with drugs and alcohol. Gyms prosper on unused memberships. And who hasn’t gained back those pounds they so proudly shed – most of us more than once. Perhaps it’s cocky to think of a long term commitment to being healthy. So what. Let’s be cocky. But, watch out for the peas!

I vividly remember a woman I worked with in therapy in the early 80’s who needed to lose more than one hundred pounds. She didn’t have a serious illness, but she was a work in progress. She went on the then popular rice diet sponsored by a local hospital. She could eat as much as she wanted, but could only eat rice – morning, noon, and night – snacks included, too. She lost 103 pounds that way. She beamed with pride. Her husband and kids were proud, her parents and sibling were proud and I was proud for her too. Her doctors were proud and told her she was their best rice diet patient.

Now it was time for a more balanced maintenance diet. So, the doctors added peas to begin to include other foods. She could now eat rice and peas. She was really excited about that. By this time, any variation was welcomed. Trouble is when she added the peas it unexpectedly, inexplicably triggered a giant leap back into all of her other favorite unhealthy glopfilled goodies. She couldn’t stop it and quickly gained back more than she lost.

Clearly, there are saboteurs within us all that work to thwart our healthy goals. They are built of emotional cess and promote self-defeat and self-destruction. In this woman's case, they used the peas as a springboard to undo her good work by causing her to lose control and revert back to old ways. Perhaps, too, the "all the rice you can eat" diet was too restrictive and too extreme. It promoted this bungee-like yo-yo. I have to assume the woman I knew wasn't their only "failure" as I haven't heard about this diet in many years.

What we learn from this unfortunate example is that in all ways we want to promote changes that are BALANCED. We do not want to go to extremes as that adds to the likelihood of a reversal. We also learn that we have to be alert to those parts of us that are not on our side. These jeer leaders must be addressed, if we are to stay in balance and maintain our commitment.

Inner Terrorists

Ever since 9/11 we have thought more than ever about terrorists and terrorism. Yet, the odds we will be hurt by a terrorist are slim. The odds that one of our inner terrorists will hurt us is far greater.

After 9/11 many people put on weight. They used comfort and junk food to salve their sore and sensitive souls. While that may feel better in the impulse driven moment, the cumulative negative effect is a personal downer. But, inner terrorists feed off "what the heck" moods that seem to mock discipline and control. When hard working people get punished for being on time or early, it's easy to slip into a "what the heck" attitude. Stresses of all kinds push us to glop. It refers to anything that tempts us toward unhealthy behaviors or mental states. There is glop on a plate, in a glass or in our thoughts and feelings.

Because life is precious and can be short, it is important to live it in a healthy and balanced way. This feeds pride, confidence, comfort and security which, in the long run, are more positive than feeding your face glop.

The reasons our inner terrorists work against us are many. They are directly related to our historical happenings and present day life. They are intricate, individual and beyond the scope of this article. That they exist is easy to demonstrate. Just look around you and see self-defeat in motion among the rich and famous as well as among the poor and unknown. That we are all vulnerable to those tidal waves of destruction means we must be vigilant and alert to potential traps that can trip us up.

That those terrorists exist within is really what psychotherapy, counseling, support groups, AA, etc. are designed to address. That these saboteurs exist is why nine out of ten who read a self-help book or this article will not succeed with these seemingly simple and appropriate goals. That they exist is why even good therapy can fail to overcome the "pea" factor. It's why people quit therapy and, sadly, sometimes quit living. Be aware that glopful behaviors promote glopful thoughts and vice versa. A balanced lifestyle of healthy

habits promotes positive and prideful thoughts and feelings. The quickest route to self-esteem and confidence is through balanced living.

The Siamese Twins of Compulsion and Addiction

There is no denying the power and fury of the addictive-compulsive process. It literally brings otherwise strong, healthy people to their knees causing incalculable damage and destruction. Look around you and you will see it for yourself. Surely, you know at least one, probably a half a dozen, but at least one, person whose life is being significantly affected by compulsion. I meet many people whose lives are sandwiched in by compulsion. Father was a gambler. Mother liked prescription medication. Older brother has always been messed up – most recently on coke. Husband is a beer guzzler and the woman herself tends toward cigarettes, bingo parlors and sweets.

The power of compulsion lies in its irrationality and ability to override our otherwise intelligent, self-protective parts. It fosters behaviors we know to be hurtful, regret afterwards and repeat anyway. It spawns death, financial ruin, divorce, abuse and all of the other destructive, energy sapping waste of time and money scenarios that life has to offer. If there is a devil it does its work via compulsion and addiction.

It is this very process that makes our health and wellness goals so difficult to achieve. In one way or another, most self-help books and other programs are designed to address and help untangle compulsive, self-defeating, self-destructive mechanisms that are part of being a human being. This includes hurtful, repetitive thoughts and feelings that can be just as compulsive as our hurtful behaviors. The two are often linked in vicious cycles of self-sabotage.

Beyond those people you know directly, the headlines also tell the tale of compulsive and addictive process taking down the rich and famous. Nearly every day some important somebody somewhere, has lost power, respect and pride by losing control of him or herself. From the hallowed halls of the clergy to the hollowed halls of government to the shallow halls of entertainment, we see the glitterati lose their shine as a result of impulse driven behaviors. Denial overrides reality allowing compulsion to override intelligence until reality finally overrides denial. What comes next are screaming headlines, high legal bills and pounds of shame. “What were they thinking?”, I always wonder.

Wake Up Calls

There are a small number of people who manage their lives proactively, preventively and protectively. They enjoy all of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle including the pride that comes with it. They are truly admirable.

The majority of us aspire to that model, but succumb to temptation, self-indulgence and laziness. We may believe philosophically in prevention, but we can easily live in denial.

Wake up calls burst the denial bubble rather quickly. As a result the window of reality is suddenly clear and we take immediate action. That was the case with my angioplasty. I finally paid attention and sought out a healthier and more balanced lifestyle. Terror is typically a powerful motivator.

As time passes, so does the terror. How quickly we can forget! Our reality window fogs. The denial bubble returns to make it harder for us to sustain our control and commitment. Many who have had serious wake up calls, drift back to old hurtful habits.

It is important to keep the wake up call in full view. It can happen again. We need to remind our self that it really happened to us. It was due to a vulnerability. Whether it be angioplasty, anxiety attacks, or an alcoholic's DUI, the potential for a repeat wake up call is ever present. The only prevention is staying addicted to healthier choices. While we don't have to be terrified, we do need to be protected. We need to conquer our hurtful habits of mind and body, once and for all and forever.

"Eat Your Veggies"

A most annoying thing is to be preached at by a reformed anything. "I did such and such, and so should you," can be a very irritating experience. "Eat your veggies" dictums arouse our sleepy rebellious adolescent who immediately says, "Who are you to tell me what to do?" Those same parts cause us to order a double glopper with a side of glop and a glopful drink.

I've decided to be annoying and irritating and tell you what to do. Mostly because if I don't, I'll have been negligent. Also, sometimes we need to be told what to do – especially our little boy or girl parts – who can be particularly self-defeating. The kids within us want what they want, when they want it. So, who am I to tell you otherwise? I'm someone who has finally listened to the voice of adult reason. You can still choose to tune out my voice, but first please listen to it. Then decide for your SELF. Thanks. As Rudy Giuliani said: "you don't change ingrained human behavior without confrontation, turmoil, and anger." Hate me if you must, but more importantly, don't hate yourself! See me as your coach. Ultimately, you can choose how to play the game of life.

Smoking

Smoking cigarettes is one wonderful, stupid habit. I was a nicotine junkie from the age of fourteen to my early forties. I loved smoking. Marlboro was my brand and my father's. That he died at his desk puffing his heart out while telling my Mom and me he was only smoking five a day post heart attack, taught me many things. But it didn't teach me not to smoke. It taught me to worry about smoking which probably caused me to smoke more. It also taught me to lie about stopping – like father like son – which was not only foolish, but humiliating for a psychologist. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

That my father died of heart problems at a young age and that I still smoked cigarettes and a pipe (inhaling both) shows us just how powerful compulsive, addictive habits can be.

They can enslave us and ultimately rule unless we wrestle back control. But regaining that, especially after years and years of habit, is not easy. I smoked first thing in the AM and last thing in the PM. I smoked after every meal and before, during or after every important activity or event. I often joked I would smoke in the shower if I could. Sometimes I tried.

Bear in mind that I was raised in a “smoke your brains out” era. No research had been done. You could smoke in restaurants, buildings, airplanes, movie theaters, etc. This was before smoking areas were established. You could light up just about anywhere. When my father was in the hospital after his heart attack my best buddy brought him a carton of Marlboros. What would be seen as ridiculous today was reasonable then.

I really loved to smoke. When my wife heard about the dangers of secondhand smoke she announced that she would divorce me if I didn't stop smoking. I considered that option. It seemed less stressful than divorcing cigarettes and my pipe. My accountant convinced me I couldn't afford divorce. So did my heart. It wasn't exactly a hop, skip, and jump to extinguish the habit. First, I cut down. Five quickly went to ten. Ten a day became 22. Math was never my strong suit anyway. I kept trying.

Then I just announced one day that I quit. I lied. I was back sneakily smoking as I had done at thirteen. I'm not proud of this nor of some of the crazy antics I pulled to sustain my habit secretly. But, I kept trying. I tried Nicorette gum (neither the patch nor Zyban had been invented). The gum was terrible. It tasted awful. I smoked to neutralize the taste. It caused hiccups. I smoked to get rid of them. Then one day I looked myself in the mirror and said, “Self, this is ridiculous. Either you keep smoking and admit defeat or you just chew the gum. One or the other!” I chose health and stayed with the gum. I vowed I'd never take another puff unless I was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Even then I'm not sure I wouldn't rather die smoke free.

In any case, I stayed with the goal until I achieved it. That it took several years was unfortunate, but in my case, necessary. I admire people who just throw the Marlboro pack away and never look back. I was forced to grope in the dark for the pack they threw away. I envy those who can smoke two a day or none as they like. I was a hard core nicotine addict, but I'm happy to say I've been smoke free for more than twenty years. I'll be happier when my son gives up his need to smoke. He's the same bright child who at a young age told me I was dumb to smoke. But I already told you addiction/compulsion have no IQ.

If you have had a health event and still smoke you really need to address that. Start today. Restart tomorrow. Keep trying to stop until you succeed. Use any tools you can find. If I could stop, so could you. You know what's funny? I used to say smoking calmed me. In truth, post withdrawal I became much more comfortable and relaxed. Nicotine is agitating and creates stress cycles that demand constant feeding. Denial lets us lie to our self over and over again.

Hopefully, your health goals will push past that to a more honest count. Smoking is an indefensible habit. To avoid serious health risks, you need to choose to give it up. By the

way, long after I stopped smoking, my wife told me she would not really have divorced me. However, she would probably have nagged me until I divorced her. Fortunately, I divorced smoking and that was good move. I sincerely hope you do, too. If you don't, get help till you can.

No More Butts and Get Off Yours, Too

It's time for all the couch potatoes to put down this pamphlet and take a rest. But, wait just a moment before you do. Exercise, consistent with your doctor's recommendations, is an important component of your healthful regimen. For me and for most people who enjoy a regular exercise program it serves the following purposes:

- Takes me from the sedentary nature of my work to a more active and "moving" experience
- Enables me to pump healthy brain chemicals that are naturally stimulated by activity. Free Prozac!
- Provides a wonderful stress relief
- Creates a relaxed feeling similar to a runner's high
- Helps me to maintain my weight loss by burning calories
- Helps me to keep my HDL level high and to positively influence my cholesterol ratio
- Keeps me feeling younger by association with hard bodies
- Feeds a sense of pride and commitment to my health, well being, and vigor

For me a good day starts with a walk in the park and ends with a visit to the gym for a light workout with machines for about 45 minutes followed by a steam and a shower. While I don't always have the time to do that, I do try to do one form of physical activity for at least 45 minutes per day. More if I have the time and energy. Intriguingly, exercise feeds energy. Go to the gym tired and you'll likely come out feeling refreshed.

Prior to my angioplasty, I played indoor racquetball. I enjoyed the game a great deal, especially the competitive component. I really left high when I beat my racquetball partner who was 17 years my junior. Post angioplasty, I was told that racquetball was not heart healthy and I gave it up completely. I got more into the walking and machine workout. I miss racquetball, but now I'm actually doing exercise that is more helpful and that feels good.

Others I know have become involved in swimming or some form of aerobics – bicycling or rowing. New activities include Pilates, Taebo, and Gyrotonics. It doesn't really matter what you do – it matters that you do and that you enjoy what you do enough to keep doing it on a regular and consistent basis. Keep exploring different activities until you find something to which you can commit. Doing it may not be the funnest part of your day, but finishing it and sticking with it promises to pay a variety of dividends. I can honestly say I don't particularly enjoy the activities at the gym. What I enjoy is the feelings I experience upon leaving the gym. It is these feelings that keep me going back.

Mostly at the gym I see the same faces attached to the same bodies, about the same time of day. Those who get hooked are able to make that a part of their daily lifestyle. It's best to "schedule" your exercise so it becomes a natural part of your day-to-day activities. For those who can't afford a gym or get to one, there are all kinds of home workouts, etc. Getting off your butt is a key component to maintain your physical and emotional balance. Talk to your doctor and get moving.

For all said, I know of many for whom exercise is so unappealing as to not be an option. "I hate exercise and sweating" is something I hear a lot in my office. All the more reason to eat healthfully. But wait! There are other ways.

Instead of fighting for the closest parking spot to your destination, go for mid and/or far distance or walk to where you are going sometimes. Take the stairs rather than the escalator or elevator. Go to the mall for window shopping a.k.a. walking around. Vacuum an extra time (or one time) for the heck of it and the workout. If you live in an apartment walk one flight per day before you take the elevator. Take the long route to the mailbox. In whatever way you can, with your doctor's okay, try to move around more than you usually do.

Diets Don't Work, but Changing Habits Does

There's so much available to you about appropriate nutrition that I am only going to summarize what I've experienced and observed. Most people do lose weight after a wake up call during the first year. They then start yo-yoing and most go back where they came from plus or minus five pounds. Prior to angioplasty, I'd been there, done that and the t-shirt never fit for long anyway, so I don't want to ever do that again.

The benefits of losing weight and keeping it off are that you feel good and you look good which in turn feeds confidence and pride. Prior to my angioplasty, I hated to go shopping for clothes, hated getting dressed in the morning and could only stomach myself (pun intended) if I looked sideways into the mirror. I had the angles down perfectly in terms of minimizing the reality of my bulk.

This time I approached it differently. There were just some foods that had to be eliminated from my repertoire. I stopped eating meat in 1984 but, oddly enough, I did enjoy hot dogs, salami, sausages and those kinds of junk meats. Those quickly came off my list along with cheese, a long time favorite. I might eat some no fat cheese from time to time. Of course, there went pizza and cheese on top of spaghetti, although I do have two slices for my birthday.

Have I become extreme in moderating my eating habits? you might ask. Absolutely. Of that there is no doubt! I look at labels carefully and if I see saturated fat I don't go there. I don't know about you, but if someone handed me something that looked good and smelled good and had the potential of tasting good, but told me it was poison, I would not ingest it. I would not have drank Jim Jones's Kool-Aid and would not kill myself with poisonous

edibles. High fat, high cholesterol foods are truly poisonous for any of us and there's just no point to it. I think about all those slices of pizza, hot dogs, and French fries, etc. that I've eaten in my life and realized that I am no happier for them and never was. The fleeting taste sensations disappear too rapidly to make them worth the risk. Time it for yourself. The taste of goodies is a 10-15 second experience. I'd rather "just say no" to anything that is identified as an unhealthy food substance and hope the same will be true of you.

There is "poison" control and there is portion control. As any European will tell you, most restaurant food portions in the U.S. are much too large. While we get a big bounce for our buck, we also get more calories and fat grams than we need. Most of the time when I eat out now I can make three or even four meals from the plate. I have become a passionate leftover taker and sometimes leave a restaurant looking like I had been shopping at the supermarket. In Europe, by the way, the concept of leftovers does not exist, so you must bring your own plastic baggies as they don't have doggy bags. They may look at us strangely, but we have always been those "crazy Americans" to them. Once your stomach shrinks, there is no noticeable hunger eating moderately and there's a tremendous amount of cost efficiency associated by turning one meal into three or four.

The same is true at home. Small portions, with a heavy emphasis on healthy vegetables, can make a big difference. Small amounts of protein and carbohydrates help to minimize the caloric content. Salt is something else to be watched, especially since many canned and prepared foods (even veggies) are filled with salt which causes water retention. I wash sauerkraut to lessen the salt. Intriguingly, I've developed a great addiction to pretzels without salt with sliced jalapeno peppers (washed) on top and other odd, but satisfying delights. It's not about going on a diet, it's about creating one that works for you and stays within the parameters of healthy eating.

I am pleased to say that post angioplasty I lost almost 50 pounds and my wife 30 in the past year. We look like high school again – albeit, wrinkled high school. My cholesterol has dropped from 258 to 193 and my ratio has shifted from 3.8 to 1.8. My HDL is 100 + and my tri's are low as well. This healthy eating exercise regimen is reliable. Check with your doctor as to the desirable ranges for you and aim toward them. While nothing is guaranteed and luck and genetics still rule, all research suggests that changing those numbers changes your risks. Living a more balanced lifestyle, is really all about reducing your risks. Hopefully, you can come up with a system to reduce yours when it comes to your nutrition and eating habits. Keep working it until you reach that goal.

Life-Lite

Each person must assess his/her stress and adjust it accordingly. I reduced my work hours post angioplasty from 70+ to half or less and am about to reduce it again. Take a look at your own situation and modify it accordingly. Although the research here is not clear, what is obvious is that we need more time and energy to manage this new healthy regimen.

Though we do have lite beer, lite cheese, lite snacks, etc. these days, our lives are heavier than ever. We all need to work on that. There's no denying the emotional and physical benefits of having a time each day for relaxing, pleasant activities. This may run the gamut from yoga to listening to your favorite music or watching your favorite soap opera or other shows. It could be class, a motivational tape or lunch with a special friend. Whether it is a formal relaxation program such as meditation or an autogenic tape or an enjoyable activity is not important. What is important is that it be a regular part of your everyday life.

What is also undeniable is that Americans are not prone to such relaxation regimens. We seem to have a task oriented, stress based motivational system that starts the moment our feet hit the floor and doesn't end until we are asleep. What I observe, in and out of my office, is that people are doing more than ever before and enjoying their lives much less than ever before. We need to enjoy some of our time and not just on special days. Relaxation is our reward for our hard work. Commit to yourself and incorporate a reasonable dose of lite time and pleasurable activity into your day-to-day life. If not now, when? If you don't give it to you, who will?

Medication Compliance

As important as it is for you to "eat your veggies," it's important for you to take your medicine. People can sometimes be peculiar about this and get sloppy in their habits or forgetful in terms of incorporating it into their day-to-day routine. Some see taking medicine of any kind as an affront to their control needs or as an imposition of authority's will. Sometimes we need to listen to authority, especially when they know of what they speak.

My encouragement is that if you trust your doctor you follow his or her advice to the letter. If you don't trust your doctor, find one you do. I am taking Provolcol 40mgs. which is a statin. Research over the last several years shows it to be very helpful in lowering cholesterol levels and increasing the so-called good cholesterol – HDL. Diet alone only accounts for about a third of the decreases with the meditation contributing the rest.

I also take a .325mg Aspirin everyday. Research shows that this reduces cardiac event risks and is part of maintaining a healthy regimen. A recent study in England confirmed that, "Aspirin reduces heart attacks and strokes in susceptible patients." Never take any medication because someone else does. My college hygiene text said, "He who hath himself for a doctor hath a fool for a patient." It is probably the only thing I remember from my male chavenistic college days.

If you take no medication on a regular basis consider yourself fortunate and keep maintaining your healthy lifestyle. If you are taking medicine regularly, for mind or body, then be sure to take it exactly as prescribed. See it as part of your daily maintenance and follow the schedule compulsively. We need to become addicted to our health based habits as strongly as we have to our unhealthy ones in the past.

In Sum – Reality

Implementing all of the above becomes an integrated fabric of healthful behavior. It guarantees nothing except that you will increase your overall health, well-being and pride. You will be sacrificing, but frankly, that is good for the soul as well as the body and mind. You will be more disciplined but that, too, is a positive. What you won't be, if you follow this regimen with some degree of consistency, is in denial. You won't be ignoring important components of the factory you call your body and its central processor-your mind.

Clearly, there are no guarantees in life. One can follow all of my recommendations and drop dead anyway. Or we can avoid a serious disease, a serious attack but die in any of a number of other ways. Regrettably we don't have much control. All the more reason, I would say, to take charge of that which we can. All the more reason to try our best to positively influence the outcome. We can't do anything about our genes, but we can work to increase our luck through healthy and balanced living.

I truly hope you're the one in ten who takes these ideas seriously and follows them. If not, call me and let's talk or call someone like me and keep pursuing healthy goals. To take charge of your body healthfully, your mind needs to be healthy, confident and in charge. Ultimately, it is your choice. Hopefully, you will make healthy choices in all areas of your life. If you find that you are not able to do that, then I encourage you to seek out support. I wish you good luck, good genes and good choices..