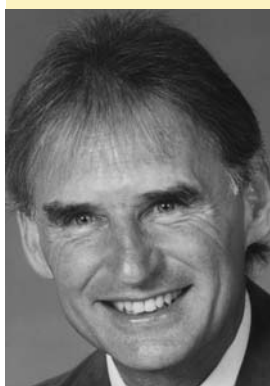


POSITIVE LIFESTYLE INTERVENTIONS: THE KEY TO WHOLE-PERSON WELLNESS

The majority of patients present to the primary care physician with problems relating to unhealthy lifestyle choices.



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Comprehensive lifestyle changes along with the usual medical management can reverse what were previously held to be irreversible processes. There is a large and growing body of scientific evidence that lifestyle interventions are powerful therapeutic tools that have a profound influence on the patient's health status.

TRIUMPH AND LIMITATIONS OF MODERN MEDICINE

The very successes of modern medicine have led to unrealistic expectations of what it can accomplish. Vaccines, antibiotics, and modern surgical techniques have led to the virtual disappearance of once commonplace diseases such as polio, meningitis and smallpox. These successes are limited to 10 - 20% of presenting conditions. Doctors now realise the importance of the more holistic biopsychosocial approach to health and disease for whole-person wellness. This holistic approach was favoured by the early physicians such as Hippocrates. The growing number of chronic and degenerative diseases cannot be cured by allopathic medicine, but are significantly amenable to lifestyle interventions.

THE WELLNESS REVOLUTION

Lifestyle modifications to increase the healing potentials of the body include a healthy diet, avoiding environmental toxins, smoking cessation, exercise, stress reduction, music and, for some, spiritual enlightenment. These interventions are not only essential for the management of chronic and degenerative conditions, but can prevent the phenotypical expression of genetically and environmentally determined diseases. This is partly accomplished by a paradigm shift from the illness (freedom from disease) towards a wellness model (holistic wellbeing) in health care.

The patient must take joint responsibility for his or her own health in collaboration with the health care professional. It means not only exercising all five dimensions of our nature – the physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual – regularly and consistently in wise and balanced ways, but also taking control of all the external influences on our lives.¹

THE HOLISTIC CONCEPT

In order to develop and understand effective management protocols for disease treatment, the holistic, interactive nature of a person needs to be understood. The human being can be described as falling into various definable but inseparable compartments – the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual domains to allow for different interventions in all 5 of these areas.²

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON HEALTH

However, the patient does not live in isolation, but must be seen within the context of the genetic, biological, environmental, occupational, social and spiritual

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influences that may negatively or positively impact on health. The emerging

science, psychoneuroimmunology, the study of interactions between psychological, neuroendocrine and immune processes under basal, disease and therapeutic conditions, expands the understanding of disease and health. Negative mood adversely affects immune markers that may contribute to poorer health. The debate continues on whether psychological interventions can improve clinical outcomes in organic disease.³

THE IMPORTANCE OF LIFESTYLE INTERVENTIONS

These 'external' influences are largely uncontrollable, and have a major impact on the health and wellbeing of the individual. It is in this area where lifestyle interventions may have a major influence on the outcome and doctors need to be aware of the immense therapeutic value of these interventions. Nearly all the top 10 best-selling drugs are for conditions

that are significantly amenable to lifestyle interventions. However, the way a person reacts and responds to physical and psychological influences from outside, will determine the outcome of the treatment interventions. Psychotherapeutic interventions, intellectual and affective stimulation and creative right-brain activities change the way people react to diseases and improve quality of life. Psychosocial interventions offer a means to modify unhealthy lifestyle behaviours (such as smoking, poor nutrition and lack of exercise) which themselves influence illness. The participation of patients in treatment and validation of their subjective experience, particularly in the face of chronic illness, will enhance quality of life and offer comfort in the face of distress, a therapeutically desirable situation whether or not the intervention influences disease outcome.

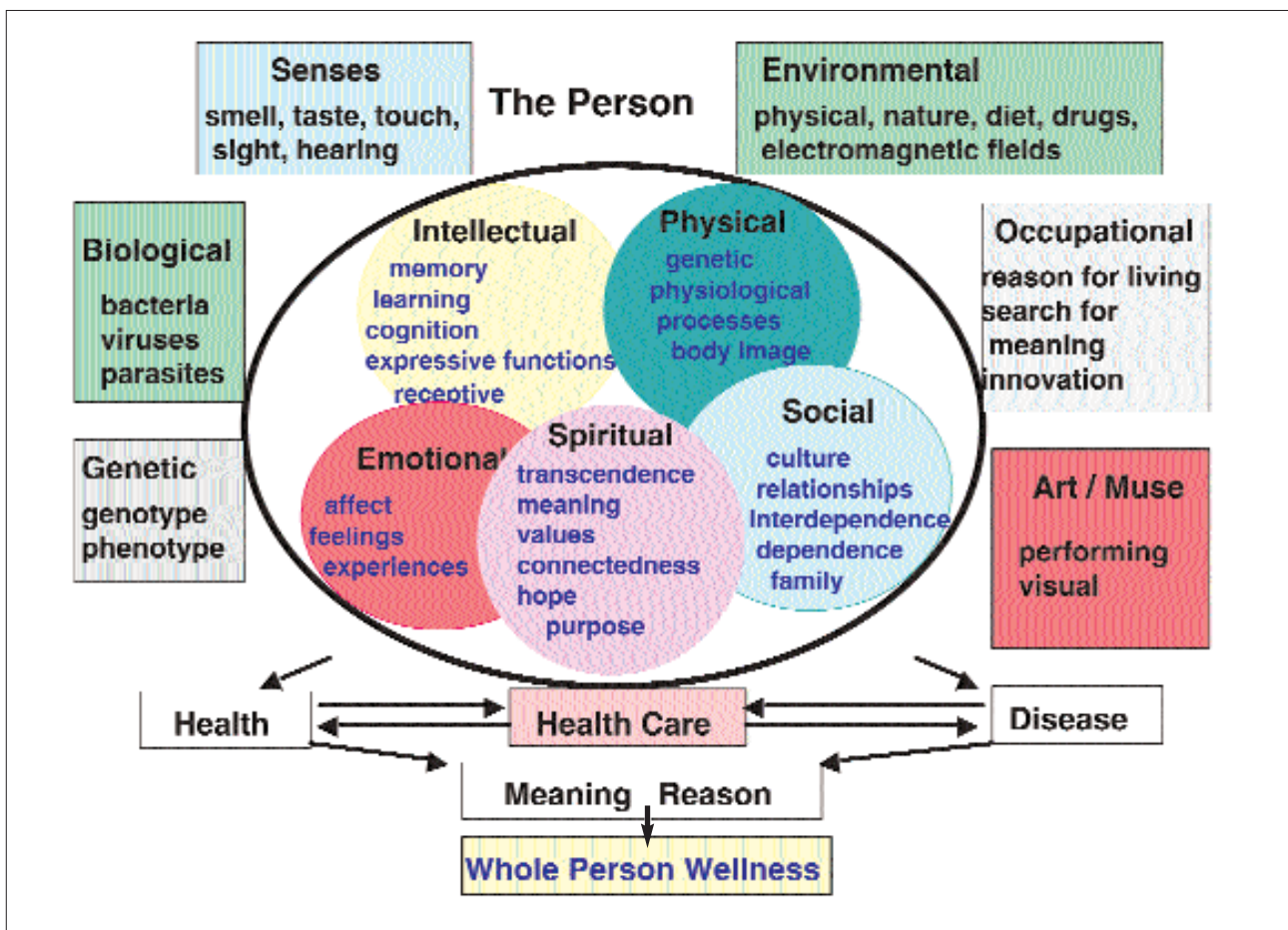


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the encircled 5 components of the personality as well as the various external influences that will ultimately determine the reason for living and whole-person wellness.

STIMULATION OF HEALING VERSUS TREATMENT OF SYMPTOMS

The challenge for medical scientists is how to stimulate the healing mechanisms innate in the body to combat any factor that will disturb the equilibrium. Allopathic treatments often work against the natural defence mechanisms of the body. For example, anti-inflammatory medications may actually delay the natural healing process in many instances!

HEALTH VERSUS WELLNESS

Even more significant is the psychological response of the individual to adverse effects of social, environmental and occupational influences. Many stress-related illnesses are the result of inappropriate responses, ineffective coping mechanisms, or irrational ideas. A sound understanding of the reason or meaning of circumstances is necessary to attain a state of whole-person-wellness.⁴

GENETIC INFLUENCES

We do have control of the phenotypic expression of disease tendencies even if we cannot alter our basic genetic blueprint. Children born to parents with diabetes or ischaemic heart disease may prevent the development of insulin resistance with exercise, diet and the prevention of obesity. The early detection of genetically linked diseases allows early intervention before the disease manifests itself. The emerging possibility of genetic manipulation may even prevent the expression of disease in the future.

BIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

Viral, bacterial and parasite infections remain a serious threat to health. New drugs that stimulate immunity and dietary interventions with antioxidants and selective vitamin supplementation have shown some promising results.

STIMULATION OF THE FIVE SENSES

An important dimension of human happiness is to be able to see and experience beauty in the world. Emotional and intellectual stimulation on an ongoing basis is essential to develop the affective and cognitive capacities necessary for optimal health.

Education – continuing education, continually honing and expanding the mind – is vital for mental renewal. Although most of our mental and intellectual development comes through formal education, it is essential that we do not let our minds atrophy in later life, but that we continue to do serious reading or explore new subjects. Reading a good book, communicating with nature, or listening to inspiring music could be an emotionally rewarding and intellectually stimulating experience. Daily intellectual stimulation remains an important component of health and happiness.

Emotional wellness can be stimulated by moving from analytical left-brain to creative right-brain activities by getting involved in creative pursuits such as stimulating hobbies, gardening and physical recreation. Regular repetitive activities such as showering, swimming, jogging, scrubbing, shaving or steering a car may tip us over from our logical left brain into our more creative artistic right brain.

The fact that antidepressants are among the most commonly prescribed drugs in the developed world is testimony to the fact that people are emotionally deprived and live in social isolation. Good social support systems through family and friends complemented with caring relationships, need to be developed and nurtured on a daily basis to combat this epidemic of depressive diseases and emotional derangement.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

The health and wellbeing of modern man is seriously threatened by environmental influences. These adverse influences are largely controllable, but people are often unable to make the right choices and to control their physical environment. The importance of diet and nutrition is widely recognised, but there is a continuing epidemic of diet-related diseases. The worldwide increase in adult-onset diabetes and ischaemic heart disease is directly related to an unhealthy lifestyle. Add to this the adverse effects of lack of exercise, smoking and substance abuse, and we have a perfect equation for a destructive lifestyle.

Caring effectively for the physical body by eating the right foods, getting

sufficient rest and relaxation, regular exercise, smoking cessation, alcohol in moderation and the prevention of substance abuse remains one of the most important components of optimal health. Yet, despite the loads of information in this regard, people continue to follow a destructive lifestyle. It has now been recognised that the epidemic of lifestyle-related diseases is an educational failure, not a medical failure!

OCCUPATIONAL INFLUENCES

Having a useful occupation creates the opportunity for innovative ideas for self-actualisation and a sense of worth. This sense of purpose is an essential component of psychological and spiritual wellbeing. Unemployment and resulting poverty have now been recognised as an independent cause of disease, and education and training

to fulfill a meaningful role in society have become part of the health and disease paradigm.

THE ROLE OF THE VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

Music is beneficial for both the listener and the maker. The measurable effects of music include reduction of blood pressure and heart rate, changes in respiratory rate, and reduction of muscular activity, consistent with relaxation. The value of art and music in psychiatry and psychology is mainly to conditions where the expression of feelings or the ventilation of emotions is central to restoring balance. The performing and visual arts, through emotion and feeling, increase perception, sensitivity, co-ordination, imagination, confidence, creativity and self-expression – all important aspects of health and wellness.

THE RENEWAL PROCESS

Lifestyle-related diseases can be prevented by consciously renewing ourselves on a daily basis in the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual sphere by listening to the inner voice of intuition and guidance, and by taking responsibility for our own physical, spiritual and personal wellness.

Mainstream medicine is starting to integrate non-medical interventions previously limited to complementary and alternative medical practices into the holistic management of patients. Modern medical or surgical interventions can now be augmented by an array of natural treatments and inter-

ventions to stimulate the healing process.

Carl Gustav Jung believed that five things are necessary for happiness:⁵

- Firstly, we need good physical and mental health.
- Secondly, we need good personal and intimate relationships, such as those of marriage, family and friends.
- The third dimension is to be able to see beauty in the world. The capacity for perceiving beauty in art and nature is necessary for human happiness.
- We need a reasonable standard of living and satisfactory work.
- Last, but not least, we need a philosophical or spiritual point of view that can help us cope with life's difficulties and that can provide us with

an ethical basis on which to found our lives.

Jung stated that ultimately man is a spiritual being, and health care professionals should consider issues of growth, hope, value, transcendence, meaning and purpose as important aspects of the whole patient. This is especially valuable for people with serious or terminal illness.

To create whole-person wellness we need to find meaning and purpose in life. Daily renewal on all levels of the personality will provide the driving force on our journey to health. The family doctor as first contact with the patient has an important role to play by modelling and promoting this point of view.

References available on request.

IN A NUTSHELL

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