Chapter 11
Choose Health: Tools for a Healthy Lifestyle

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ABSTRACT

What if instead of thinking of using devices to positively change health, people thought of using their minds as tools? The unfortunate thing with modern technology can be the dependence on a device to find an answer. People need to be more aware of how they can benefit from a health perspective by making a few positive changes in their lives, by using self-awareness as their device. By paying attention to their bodies and physical reactions to circumstances that cause tension, people can learn to deal with stress. Stress is a very common cause of a downward spiral to quality of life and overall health. Exercise, nutrition, and writing journals are proven ways to decrease stress levels. This chapter elaborates on techniques such as journal writing, exercise, nutrition, and spirituality that readers can use to reduce stress and choose to lead a healthy lifestyle.

MAKING HEALTHY CHOICES

Writing enables people to process what they are thinking and feeling, as well as identifying patterns of behavior that may need to be changed. However, writing about being healthy does not make it reality. Exercise should be used as a tool in everyone’s life much more often since the United States is continuously getting more obese each day. Exercise actually decreases obesity, decreases the chance of a heart attack, decreases the chance for diabetes, lowers blood pressure, lowers cholesterol, and decreases depression. Research discussed in this chapter shows that exercise increases blood flow to the brain allowing one to think clearer. Proper nutrition can decrease stress levels, decrease risk of a heart attack, decrease risk of cancer, aid in weight loss, decrease blood pressure, decrease cholesterol levels, and decrease depression. Spirituality can provide a sense of community as well as motivation to slow down and reflect. Choosing a healthy lifestyle is a way to help manage stress.

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Each person’s life represents a series of decisions. How many of those decisions are health related? Will today’s menu consist of healthy meals or fast food? Is there time for any physical activity or is exercise relegated to walking through the workplace parking lot? Should emotions be held inside or released through writing, prayer, and conversation? When it comes to health, each individual has a choice in his or her behaviors. Behaviors, whether they include the amount of exercise, food choices, or writing about feelings, all influence health. If the choices do not lead to health and happiness, it’s never too late to make new choices.

This chapter utilizes a myriad of resources from the fields of writing and medicine to illustrate the benefits of choosing health. Clinicians still concur with certain medical concepts defined in existing literature. Take, for example, the discussion presented by Juhan (1998) on the topic of stress that states, “it is clear then that neither the extreme of altogether avoiding stress nor the extreme of altogether ignoring it are really very helpful to the individual who wants to live a long and productive life. The real point is to learn how to handle stress, how to sustain our efforts without burning out, how to keep the nose to the grindstone without grinding it off” (p. 302). However, in order to incorporate the consistently changing medical field while simultaneously dovetailing academic theory with practical advice for the readers of this chapter, websites respected by numerous medical professionals that reflect current practices intertwine with texts from the fields of writing and medicine to present an eclectic approach of using methods that promote healthy behaviors.

Juhan (1998) elaborates on this theme of behavior choices enhancing health by sharing the example of a ballet dancer preparing for a recital because “the dancer, if she is to be a successful professional, has no choice but to confront each symptom and discover the way to work through it, not by ignoring nor avoiding its causes, but rather by learning to form a working relationship with the stresses of her activity. She trains herself to produce strength at every point where a weakness develops” (p. 302). We as the authors of this chapter encourage our readers to identify sources of stress and consider implementing the strategies discussed. After all, theories about healthy living must become a lifestyle in order to achieve elite and effective results.

**CHOOSE TO SHARE STORIES**

Whatever an individual’s story may be, it influences health. Rankin (2013) discusses this issue from a doctor’s perspective and elaborates, “when you work in a hospital, you often hear inspiring stories of optimism linked to disease remission and pessimism associated with disease progression” (p. 127). She also observes, “the body is the physical manifestation of the sum of your life experiences” (p. 173). Tindle (2013) shares this belief that outlook influences health and explains, “we – meaning people in general, but also the larger medical and scientific community – may understand that there is some relationship between outlook and physical health. What we may not fully realize, however, is just how intimately tied our outlook is to our own health and aging over the course of our lives, from our humblest beginnings as babies to the adults we are today, to the older people we’ll become tomorrow” (p. 14). However, in her career as a doctor, Tindle discovered most patients don’t change their behavior because short term incentives become more enticing than long term health. She adds, “given that humans are hard-wired to overvalue rewards now and undervalue rewards later, this answer seems understandable and satisfying, until one thinks about that elusive 1 percent of people – those who achieve ideal cardiac health, or even the 19 percent who get a little more than halfway there, with predictably fantastic health results. How do they do it? What motivates them?” (p. 24). She continues, “I believe that a big part of the mystery of the 1 percent is in