

Coping With Stress – Let the Love Flow

Ellen Farrell, M.A., NCC, LPC

Coping with stressors is best approached from a holistic perspective with a focus on prevention. The holistic approach is an excellent complement to allopathic medicine, which holds an important place in the treatment of disease. Research shows that many positive effects result from a holistic approach (i.e., proper nutrition, exercise, spiritual connection, and finding meaning - through volunteerism, work, art, etc.) in dealing with the many stressors one may experience in life.

There is also increasing evidence that love and intimacy are “among the most powerful factors in health and illness.” According to research as compiled in Dr. Dean Ornish's book (1998), *Love and Survival, The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy*, intimacy is at the “root of what makes us sick and what makes us well, what causes sadness and what brings happiness, what makes us suffer and what leads to healing.” In fact, he states, “I am not aware of any other factor in medicine – not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not stress, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery – that has a *greater* impact on our quality of life, incidence of illness, and premature death from all causes.” Dr. Ornish states that the first step needed is “awareness, to be followed by meditation, compassion, altruism, group support, commitment, communication skills, psychotherapy/and forgiveness.” These are all “pathways to learning to open our hearts.” Heart health involves more than monitoring cholesterol – it also reflects OUR EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL HEART HEALTH. We find meaning in life through our heart connection.

Although our facility for intimacy is paramount, diet and exercise are still key components of holistic health. One must be wary of research when it doesn't support the relationship between health and the consumption of a high fiber, low fat diet - even when published in highly regarded journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM). For instance, a study done in April of 2000, found that a high fiber, low fat diet did *not* protect against colon cancer. As Dr. Ornish points out the participants' fat intake was measured *only by self-report*, supposedly dropping from 36 to 24 percent – yet they lost, on average only one pound over four years, and their cholesterol levels “barely budged”. Reliable research tells us that a big drop in fat intake would result in a similar reduction of weight and cholesterol. Dr. Ornish states that since the reports were not verified it is *doubtful*, considering the outcome, that the self-reported information was valid. In general, a healthy diet means low fat, high fiber, complex carbohydrates and a variety of fruits and vegetables – the less processed, the better!

There are some differences in defining specific food choices that ultimately define “healthy” for the individual – ethical/environmental food choices, body type/dosha, yin/yang balance, age, physiological and genetic variables – we are each unique! Of course, as we age and enter our 30's and 40's, and beyond, our metabolism slows. According to Dr. Pamela Peeke, “Women over the age of forty do not require (as much) dense complex carbohydrates (pasta, bread, potatoes, or rice) after 5 p.m. <evening meal>” This does not mean to go to an extreme of cutting all carbs!! We especially need those good whole grain carbohydrates at breakfast - so don't skip it! Did you know that cortisol, the stress hormone is activated when we stress ourselves by starving our bodies, as in skipping breakfast, or going more than 2-5 hours without eating?

Dr. Peeke has many good tips on her website, and the article quoted above (*10 Toxic Weight Prevention Tips Every Woman Needs to Know*) is from http://www.bodytrends.com/articles/weight_loss/peeke.htm.

An intention to be healthy also manifests through exercise, which:

- makes our bodies stronger by increasing blood supply to the brain - as we age, working out improves cognitive abilities
- exercise can reverse the negative characteristics of aging
- psychological benefits of exercise: “improved self-esteem, body concept, family relations, memory, concentration, more energy, better sleep.”
- increases of nor-epinephrine from regular exercise overcome depression – in fact, it was found that a *15-minute walk* provided more relaxation than a standard mild tranquilizer!
- research shows that three factors of a good exercise program usually include: the time (best in AM, prior to eating), Supplementation, Type of exercise (20 minutes cardio/weights–preceded by a 20–30 minute meditative walk).

A balanced life includes a balanced diet, exercise, and individual stress management/group support. Making this a priority allows space for that all-important love and intimacy, known as the foundation of lasting heart health - and *overall* health!