

## LIFESTYLE AND MENTAL HEALTH

### Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLCs) Can Be Powerful Medicines

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This year and every year hundreds of millions of people worldwide will suffer a mental illness. However, one of the most important causes and treatments of mental health problems—lifestyle—is almost entirely overlooked. Yet lifestyle can have a large and wide-ranging influence on mental health—precipitating or alleviating psychopathology, or enhancing wellbeing—as literally thousands of research studies and an extensive review have demonstrated (Walsh, 2011).

Therapeutic lifestyle changes (TLCs) can be beneficial for many psychological disorders. In fact, they can be as effective as either medication or psychotherapy for some common disorders such as depression. In addition, TLCs offer several advantages for both patients and society. They are usually inexpensive, free of side effects, offer both physical and mental benefits, and are often enjoyable.

So what lifestyle changes are helpful? Considerable evidence shows that eight are particularly beneficial: exercise, diet, time in nature, relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, religious or spiritual involvement, and service to others.

- *Exercise* is as good for the brain as it is for the heart. For example, it can reduce anxiety, depression and insomnia, and reduce the risk of neurodegenerative disorders such as

Alzheimers' and Parkinsonism. Exercise can also improve school performance in children, enhance cognitive functions in older adults, and increase hippocampus size and new neuron formation.

- *Diets* rich in multicolored vegetables and fruits (a *rainbow diet*) plus fish (a *pescovegetarian diet*) have many benefits. They can enhance school performance in children, preserve cognitive functions in adults, and also reduce symptoms in affective and schizophrenic disorders. Fish oil supplements may even significantly reduce progression to first episode psychosis in high risk youth.
- *Nature*: The popular idea that spending time in nature clears the head is true. It can improve emotional and spiritual wellbeing, enhance cognitive functions, and reduce symptoms of depression and ADHD. Yet we are conducting an uncontrolled experiment in which we increasingly live in urban settings, indoors, with artificial lighting and diurnal rhythms, ever more divorced from nature, thus producing an epidemic of “nature-deficient disorder.” Preserving nature is both an ecological and mental health imperative.
- *Relationships*: The idea that good relationships are central to both physical and mental wellbeing is an ancient theme, now supported by considerable research. Yet there is concern that Americans may be becoming more isolated, and spending less time with family and friends. They are also spending ever more time alone in front of televisions and computer screens, and the results include multiple “technopathologies” picturesquely described as, for example, data smog or technobrain burnout. We have forgotten the millennia old advice of

Epicurus “Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends” (Gordon, 1999, p. 35”).

- *Recreation and enjoyable activities*—especially when enjoyed with friends and in nature—can be as therapeutic as they are fun.
- *Relaxation and Stress Management* can reduce anxiety, stress disorders, depression and insomnia. Meditation is now the most extensively researched of all psychotherapies and thousands of studies suggest benefits ranging all the way from genetic expression to biochemical, physiological, neural and behavioral (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Meditation can also enhance wellbeing and cultivate multiple qualities—such as calm, concentration, clarity, and empathy—that are especially valuable for mental health professionals. To date, meditation is the only therapy that has been demonstrated to improve patient outcomes when therapists practice it.
- *Religious and spiritual involvement* is associated with reduced rates of anxiety, depression and substance abuse, greater psychological and marital wellbeing, and even with longer lifespan.
- *Contribution and service to others* produce a “helper’s high” that enhances wellbeing, joy and generosity. Altruism can also benefit both physical and mental health and perhaps even

extend lifespan. Of course a major exception is “caretaker burnout” experienced by overwhelmed family members caring for a demented or otherwise impaired spouse or parent.

Very importantly, the benefits of healthy lifestyles extend far beyond individuals. Healthy behaviors spread through social networks, and one person’s TLCs and consequent increased wellbeing can improve the lifestyle and wellbeing of co-workers, family and friends—even extending through three degrees of separation to friends of friends of friends.

Unfortunately modern society throws up multiple obstacles to healthy lifestyles, and the *American Psychologist* review points out that:

Societally, whole industries are geared toward encouraging unhealthy choices. Patients contend with a daily barrage of psychologically sophisticated advertisements encouraging them, for example, to consume, alcohol, nicotine and fast food in the never ending search in which the food industry calls “*the bliss point*” of “*eatertainment*” through “*hyper-eating*.” Unfortunately you can never get enough of what you don’t really want, but you can certainly ruin your health and life trying.”

The wide scale adoption of TLCs will likely require wide scale interventions that encompass educational, mental health and public health and political systems. Of course these are major requirements. However, given the enormous mental, physical, social and economic costs of contemporary lifestyles, such interventions may be essential. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, therapeutic lifestyles may need to be a central focus of mental, medical, and public health.

## Reference List

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