

Why Not Choose Health?

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Imagine for a moment the following scenario: A group of individuals is very concerned about the stress and pressure that people experience throughout their lives—from childhood through one's senior years, in schools, homes, and places of employment. The group convenes a conference to address this problem. Early in their meetings they come to the realization that the very stressful, often unpredictable world in which we live will not be easy to change. However, rather than throwing up their arms in despair and displaying a pessimistic outlook, they ask, "What steps can we take to cope effectively with this troublesome world and reinforce our physical and emotional well-being?"

The group searches for answers to this question, aware that there is not one simple solution. They form subcommittees to examine different components of the problem. One subcommittee is specifically designated to consider actions that each individual can take that will lead to a healthier, more resilient life. This subcommittee initiates comprehensive research that leads to what the members perceive to be practical, realistic recommendations. They believe that the proposal of small, achievable steps will increase the probability of successful outcomes and build confidence for further, more comprehensive actions. The subcommittee is optimistic that their recommendations will be adopted.

But the optimism soon dissolves. The subcommittee discovers that not only are the recommended action plans not being followed, but in some instances policies are implemented that actually counteract the proposed recommendations, especially where children are involved. One subcommittee member is stunned, asking, "Why not choose health over possible illness and stress?" Another wonders, "Why engage in practices that research and experience tell us are counterproductive?" A third member, also exasperated, replies, "It's not easy to change people's behaviors even if these behaviors are harmful and self-defeating."

Based on Actual Events

While the committee and subcommittee I described above do not actually exist, as ads for movies often assert, “The story is based on true events.” What are the seemingly practical recommendations that have met with this kind of resistance? What healthy lifestyle choices are within our control? Why do we fail to practice these choices? As most of my readers are aware, these are questions that I have addressed in previous columns and will continue to do so given their importance.

One particular health-promoting activity I have emphasized, including in my June, 2014 article, is that of exercise. I have decided to re-visit this topic in this piece, given certain things I have heard and read since I wrote the June article.

In the past couple of months, several parents and teachers have informed me that their school districts have reduced the time allotted for physical activities and recess during the school day. The prime reason typically offered for this action is that more time is required for academic subjects. One teacher reported that the push for higher scores on standardized tests and the need for additional advanced placement classes have been deemed of greater importance than the inclusion of physical activity. Sadly, such a view runs counter to convincing research evidence that indicates that the reduction of physical activity compromises rather than enhances learning and academic achievement.

In my September, 2008 article I cited the work of Dr. John Ratey, a friend and renowned psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. I featured his book *Spark: The Revolutionary Science of Exercise and the Brain* in which he states that the hypothesis that exercise enhances school performance “is supported by emerging research showing that physical activity sparks biological changes that encourage brain cells to bind to one another. For the brain to learn, these connections must be made; they reflect the brain’s fundamental ability to adapt to challenges. The more neuroscientists discover about this process, the clearer it becomes that exercise provides an unparalleled stimulus, creating an environment in which the brain is ready, willing, and able to learn.”

Ratey provides ample evidence that when a variety of physical activities were offered to students “from kayaking to dancing to rock climbing to typical team sports like volleyball and basketball,” standardized test scores improved as did gains in social-

emotional behaviors. Exercise was tied to the promotion of cooperation rather than competition so that all of the participants felt encouraged by their performance.

CrossFit

This summer I read Ratey's new book, *Go Wild*, co-authored with Richard Manning, in which additional studies are cited that confirm the value of exercise and a proper diet at all ages. In this impressive book Ratey details the program CrossFit to illustrate the benefits of engagement in "a variety of movements: weight training, jumping, running, throwing, push-ups, pull-ups—all designed to involve the entire body, recruit all muscles, just as it recruits heart, lungs, and mind." He captures another key feature of the CrossFit program, namely, "It is done in groups of people and is competitive, but not in the sense of team against team. Rather, there is a group ethic. You compete against yourself first and the group cheers you along, marks the progress, forms a sort of community." An atmosphere of encouragement rather than fear is present.

I had a personal interest in reading about CrossFit since my son Doug and my daughter-in-law Suzanne have been active and enthusiastic participants of the program for a number of years. This past year their 10-year-old son Teddy joined the CrossFit Kids program, which he attends twice a week, and he truly enjoys the various activities. An article in *The CrossFit Journal* authored by Chris Cooper in 2013 notes that CrossFit Kids is now incorporated in the curriculum of at least 400 schools and growing rapidly. This is a hopeful sign, given the cutback of exercise and recess in other schools.

Exercise and the Child with Special Needs

In another article published in *The CrossFit Journal*, Cooper describes the benefits of the CrossFit program for children on the autism spectrum. In the article Eric Jensen, author of *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, observes, "Many special-needs learners are stuck in counterproductive mental states, and movement is a quick way to change them. Second, movements, such as those involved in playing active games, will activate the brain across a wide variety of areas. It may be the stimulation of those neural networks that helps trigger some learning."

Similarly, in an on-line Wall Street Journal article titled “Exercise Helps Children with ADHD in Study,” Sumathi Reddy reports, “A recent study found regular, half-hour sessions of aerobic activity before school helped young children with symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder become more attentive and less moody. Other research found a single bout of exercise improved students’ attention and academic skills.”

Reddy notes that the benefits of this exercise were not just applicable to students with ADHD but to students with typical development as well. “Some teachers have begun getting students up from their desks for brief bursts of physical activity, finding it helps them pay attention to their studies.” Jill Fritz, a fourth-grade teacher at Rutledge Pearson Elementary School in Jacksonville, Florida, observes, “It benefits all kids, but I definitely see where it helps kids with ADHD a lot. It really helps get them back on track and get focused.”

As I read this last comment I could not help thinking about the number of hyperactive, impulsive students who are kept in at recess time to finish uncompleted classwork. This practice not only goes against common sense but runs counter to research findings related to the brain and exercise. It is little wonder that a teacher once told me that a hyperactive elementary school child I was seeing in therapy seemed to have a more difficult time focusing and remaining seated in the afternoon after being kept in from recess!

Exercise for Adolescents and Senior Citizens

Paralleling these research findings and observations were those advanced by Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg, author of *Age of Opportunity: Lessons From the New Science of Adolescence*. In an interview in *The Boston Globe* conducted by Karen Weintraub, Steinberg was asked what is distinctive about the brain during adolescence.

Steinberg answered, “The part of the brain that’s especially plastic (or malleable) during adolescence is the prefrontal cortex. It’s very important for advanced thinking and planning, but it’s also important for self-regulation or self-control. Self-control is probably the single most important trait a person can have for happiness and success in

life. There are 100 studies showing that. If self-regulation is so important and if the part of the brain that governs self-regulation is particularly plastic (during adolescence), then I think it behooves us as parents and educators to try to do what we can to strengthen that capacity.”

When queried about what schools might do to promote self-regulation, Steinberg replied, “The first thing is restoring physical education to the curriculum. If we had our kids spending an hour a day in aerobic exercise, we could do more to raise student achievement than using that hour for more academic pursuits.” There is not a hint of ambiguity in that suggestion. Steinberg continued with a recommendation for mindfulness training and making classes more demanding. Given Steinberg’s perspective, having more challenging courses will be most effective in conjunction with exercise and adequate sleep.

As I emphasized in my June, 2014 article, the noticeable benefits of exercise are not limited to children and adolescents. In an interview for the *CrossFit Journal*, Ratey commented, “Although *Spark’s* focus was on students, the elderly was the first area of interest in academic circles because that’s where the money was, and preventing Boomers from developing Alzheimer’s is still an important area. Sixteen hundred papers were published last year looking at exercise’s effect on cognition. All were positive in the direction of preventing cognitive decline and Alzheimer’s disease. That’s pretty conclusive proof.”

Exercise: An Antidote to Stress

I read another article during the past couple of weeks extolling the impact of exercise. It was based on an interview aired on one of the PBS stations in Boston, WBUR. The interview, conducted by Patti Neighmond, was given the intriguing title, “Best To Not Sweat The Small Stuff, Because It Could Kill You.”

The information contained in the article justified the title. According to the findings of a study conducted by Dr. Carolyn Aldwin who directs the Center for Healthy Aging Research at Oregon State University, “People who always perceived their daily life to be over-the-top stressful were three times more likely to die over the period of the study than people who rolled with the punches and didn’t find daily life very stressful.”

Aldwin explained, “There are a number of ways chronic stress can kill you. That includes increased levels of cortisol, often referred to as the stress hormone. Elevated cortisol levels interfere with learning and memory, lower immune function and bone density, and increase blood pressure, cholesterol, and heart disease.”

The article quoted Dr. Robert Waldinger, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University. He was asked what he would recommend for chronic worriers. His answer? Exercise. “If you could give one magic pill that would improve physical health, mood, reduce weight that would be it.”

Neighmond writes, “Federal health officials recommend 30 minutes of moderate aerobic activity everyday.” Waldinger concurs, “That’s enough. When they do studies particularly of the mood benefit, they find that more than 30 minutes a day is not necessary—you don’t get any boost. So if you think just in terms of stress relief and antidepressant effect, 30 minutes is enough.”

As I read John Ratey’s new book and the material from CrossFit, as I reflected upon the other research cited in this article, it was obvious to me that even a small amount of regular exercise is incredibly beneficial to one’s physical, cognitive, and emotional health at all ages. It makes no sense to reduce the time for physical exercise and activities in school in order to accommodate the inclusion of another academic class. What good is an extra class if the student’s mind and body are not in an optimum position to learn?

And as adults, I advocate that we begin by setting aside just 10 minutes each day simply to walk. I believe that once we are engaged in that 10-minute activity, it will be easier to increase our exercise time to a half-hour a day. And as we build in this time we can consider the different kinds of exercises available such as those recommended by CrossFit that will be most helpful to us.

To Ask the Question Again

To return to the title of this article let me ask once more, “Why not choose health?” While we do not have control over all aspects of our health, shouldn’t we focus on those variables over which we can have some control? Why not choose activities and a lifestyle for ourselves and I might add for our children that promote health and

longevity? Children and teenagers who grow up in such an environment are more likely to continue with healthy practices as adults.

I appreciate and understand that initially it may take time and much effort to assume a healthier lifestyle, especially if one is not accustomed to exercising, consuming a proper diet, or meditating. However, it is well worth the time and effort if one considers that to avoid this undertaking may heighten the risk of facing a shortened, illness prone, stressful life. Choosing health seems a much wiser path.

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