

# DIET, EXERCISE, AND CONTROL STRESS; A DANGEROUS PRESCRIPTION



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In the last few decades a common medical prescription has emerged among mainstream Western medical practitioners. Whether one is diagnosed with high blood pressure, anxiety disorders, or heart ailments the prescription is about the same. Physicians from one end of the country to the other continue to proclaim, “Diet, exercise and control stress.”

While well intentioned, this prescription for whatever ails you is often worse than the ailment itself. The prescription by itself is not necessarily at fault but its interpretation and implementation have reason for one to be concerned. Let’s examine each one of the parts individually to find out where the problem lies.

## **Diet**

What does it mean when a doctor or medical professional tells you that you need to alter your diet? Does this mean to eat less sugar and more fiber? Should you turn to low fat processed foods instead?

When it comes to diet there are thousands and thousands of scientific studies that all show something completely different. It is often said that we need to be careful of what we eat but even more alarming is to be careful of what we read.

For decades we were taught that margarine was better for us than butter. Now many studies proclaim that margarine and all of the processed food oils are even worse for us. We should be eating more whole foods, including butter, milk, and eggs. The polyunsaturated fats in margarines and other processed food products contain free radicals that have been linked in other scientific studies to cancer. When your doctor says to change your diet do you hear him say that you need to eat more butter? But this is exactly what many of these new scientific studies proclaim.

Alcohol is another product that has a long history of condemnation. But recent scientific studies proclaim that a drink or two every day is actually good for the heart. When going in for

your yearly physical examine you might hear the doctor ask you if you drink alcohol. You may sheepishly say, “a little”. This may be the wrong answer. Your medical professional may scold you for not drinking enough alcohol.

We have been bombarded with propaganda warning us of all the chemicals, additives, preservatives, and pesticides in our food. We are reminded to eat organic foods. We are told that the purest food will make us healthy and live longer.

But, not so fast. Some recent scientific studies claim that eating too much fiber is linked to cancer of the bowels. Organic foods may not be our savior after all. If that were not enough one might consider the case of Jerome Irving Rodale. Rodale was considered the founding father of organic foods. He traveled around the country spouting off the benefits of organic foods. Rodale even said, “I’m going to live to be 100 unless I’m run down by a sugar-crazed taxi driver”. Unfortunately, while appearing on the Dick Cavett Show in January 1971, Jerome Rodale dropped dead of a heart attack, right there in his chair, in front of the television audience. He was only 72. The show never aired.

You would think that the people who eat the purest of foods are the one’s who are the healthiest and live the longest. But this is not necessarily so. Comedian George Burns lived to be 100 years old while consuming a steady diet of drinking alcohol and smoking cigars daily. Pure food does not always equate with health.

Maybe food is not the issue at all. Perhaps it is our attitudes and beliefs about the foods that we eat, and not their chemical structure, that makes the difference in our health and longevity.

The following is a wonderful description of a behavioral condition labeled as “Orthorexia Nervosa”.

### *ORTHOREXIA NERVOSA*

*Many of the most unbalanced people I have ever met are those who have devoted themselves to healthy eating. In fact, I believe some of them have actually contracted a novel eating disorder for which I have coined the name, “orthorexia nervosa”. The term uses “ortho,” meaning straight, correct, and true, to modify “anorexia nervosa.” Orthorexia nervosa refers to a pathological fixation on eating proper food.*

*Orthorexia begins, innocently enough, as a desire to overcome chronic illness or to improve general health. But because it requires considerable willpower to adopt a diet that differs radically from the food habits of childhood and the surrounding culture, few accomplish the change gracefully. Most must resort to an iron self-discipline bolstered by a hefty dose of superiority over those who eat junk food. Over time, what to eat, how much, and the consequences of dietary indiscretion come to occupy a greater and greater proportion of the orthorexic's day.*

*The act of eating pure food begins to carry pseudospiritual connotations. As orthorexia progresses, a day filled with sprouts, umeboshi plums, and amaranth biscuits comes to feel as holy as one spent serving the poor and homeless. When an orthorexic slips up (which may involve anything from devouring a single raisin to consuming a gallon of Haagen Dazs ice cream and a large pizza), he experiences a fall from grace and must perform numerous acts of penitence. These usually involve ever stricter diets and fasts.*

*This "kitchen spirituality" eventually reaches a point where the sufferer spends most of his time planning, purchasing, and eating meals. The orthorexic's inner life becomes dominated by efforts to resist temptation, self-condemnation for lapses, self-praise for success at complying with the chosen regime, and feelings of superiority over others less pure in dietary habits.*

*This transference of all of life's value into the act of eating makes orthorexia a true disorder. In this essential characteristic, orthorexia bears many similarities to the two well-known eating disorders anorexia and bulimia. Where the bulimic and anorexic focus on the quantity of food, the orthorexic fixates on its quality. All three give food an excessive place in the scheme of life.*

*Stephen Bratman, M.D.*

*Yoga Journal, Oct. 1997*

As seen in this last example, it may not be the chemicals of anything that is put in someone's mouth that may be causing ill health; it may be the attitudes about the food itself where the problem lies. We live in a culture that teaches and practices the maintaining of control at all costs. When it comes to our food many of us have just given ourselves a new opportunity to control something else. It is this behavior of control that lies at the heart of the problem. It may

not be what we are putting into ourselves that is creating the problem; it may be what we are not letting go of that causes us more harm.

Another interesting diet myth is the story of cholesterol. Most of us have been bombarded with the horrors of eating anything that contains cholesterol. We have been told that cholesterol is “bad” and if we do not want our arteries to clog up we need to avoid foods that contain cholesterol. Unfortunately, we have been given some very misleading information once again.

Most of the cholesterol in our body does not come from foods that we eat. Most of our cholesterol comes from our own liver. Uffe Ravnskov, M.D., Ph.D. states in *The Cholesterol Myths* “Like other mammals, our bodies produce cholesterol day and night. When we eat lots of cholesterol or animal fat, our own production of cholesterol decreases automatically. If we eat only a little, our production increases.” The only parties who seem to benefit from the cholesterol myth are the medical professionals, pharmaceutical companies, and the manufactures of low-fat foods and vegetable oils.

If this wasn’t proof enough we have been lead to believe that it is cholesterol that is the culprit for atherosclerosis, or hardening of the coronary arteries, that ultimately lead to heart disease. But again, Dr. Ravnskov disputes this theory. “That people with low cholesterol become just as sclerotic as people with high cholesterol is, of course, a devastating blow to the diet-heart idea.” According to Dr. Ravnskov, most heart attacks are seen in people with normal cholesterol levels.

One would think that a vegetarian would be a pretty healthy person but not necessarily so. Dr. Ravnskov states, “That the diet had any importance is unlikely because there is no evidence that vegetarians have lower risk of coronary disease than other people.”

Before you go and throw away your white bread and stash of candy, you may want to question what your health care professional is actually trying to say when he suggests that you change your diet. Maybe what he is really trying to say is that you need to change your attitudes and beliefs about food altogether. Maybe the medical professional is delivering old and outdated information to you and is in need himself to update his beliefs systems.

## **Exercise**

“Go out and exercise”, your doctor bellows at you. But what does this rather sharp statement really mean? Does your doctor actually spend the time to show you how to exercise? Most likely

this is not the case. What are the reasons that you need to be exercising? Is this clear? The debate about exercise can go on and on but what is clear is that we do need to move our bodies in order to maintain adequate health. *How* we move our bodies becomes even more important. Sedentary lifestyles are truly disastrous for our health, but so are some of the exercise methods that we have chosen

What your doctor most likely does not tell you is that most modern exercise is even more stressful than not doing anything at all. Most of us were taught to move our bodies in a stressful fashion. In fact, most exercise programs only mimic the affects of stress. When we train our bodies to perform like machines and warriors we only help to create more stress.

Most exercise is based on a concept called “fitness”. Unfortunately, fitness is not necessarily health. On a rare occasion a fitness practice would translate into a health practice, like if you were obese and regular fitness workout would help to reduce the load on your heart. But fitness is primarily designed around appearance and looks. Your health care provider may be suggesting a fitness program for you but he might not have your health in mind. He might have fallen into the trap of the fitness myths that have pervaded our culture. These two myths are 1) A healthy body is a hard body, and 2) and aerobically fit heart is a health heart.

Dr. Kenneth Cooper, considered the godfather of aerobics, helped lead the charge to developing our exercise beliefs. Dr. Cooper created the belief that one must elevate the level of one’s heart for a certain duration in order to be healthy. This became the famous fitness quotient, “220 minus your age equals your maximum heart rate.” We ran, bounced, hiked, and swam to burn more calories and get our hearts pumping. Gymnasiums and sports training institutes founded their routines on these guidelines. Fitness trainers became the messengers who passed this information on to the public in record numbers.

But more than thirty years later, Dr. Cooper has reversed his opinion. He no longer believes in his own theory. Dr. Cooper is quoted in *Fit Magazine, 2000*, “Dr. Cooper has changed his mind about running: “What made me change my mind was telephone calls from distraught widows whose husbands had followed my guidelines and had died of heart attacks,” says Dr. Cooper. “I now recommend walking at any speed for 30 minutes, three times a week. I used to think that to be exercising aerobically you had to be in your target heart rate or you were wasting your time.”

Is your doctor up to date with his information when he tells you to go out and exercise? You may remember the case of Jim Fixx, an avid runner and author of, *The Complete Book of Running*. Jim Fixx died of a heart attack while running. He belongs to a long list of people who followed Dr. Cooper's advise and began running.

We have been lead to believe by a small army of fitness trainers and sports medicine practitioners that the way to health is also to tighten and harden the body. "Go lift weights and develop hard muscles" we are told. While it is true that strength training may be one aspect of a health practice it is only a limited one. And some specific diseases like osteoporosis may benefit by strength training. But, by and large, lifting weights is still primarily a cosmetic ordeal and not necessarily a health practice. Most people who lift weights are doing so primarily to achieve a certain appearance rather that to enhance one's health.

A hard body is not necessarily a healthy body. Hardened muscles and connective tissue do not represent health. "Six-pack abs" hardly contributes to the overall health of an individual but may in fact be harmful in the long run. The organs and glands that reside beneath these overly toned muscles tend to be compressed and their ability to function fully is hampered. Hardened muscles limit one's range of motion and ability to breathe fully. This is hardly health.

In another instance, a little old man walks into a gym already hunched over and barely able to walk. He proceeds to climb on an abdominal crunch machine to create more tightness and hunching over. His medical staff has informed him that "exercise" will be good for him.

If someone had a tight hamstring most people would generally agree this to be a "bad thing". Then why would tight chest muscles and a tightened abdomen be considered a "good thing?"

Fitness is not necessarily health. Let's take the example of firefighters. One might think that a group of men and women as fit as firefighters would be pretty healthy. But a report on KNX news radio revealed that 40% of firefighters die of heart attacks. Fitness does not necessarily translate into health.

Unfortunately, when we are handed a prescription to go and exercise we are not necessarily taught how to do this in a manner that enhances our health. Much of the time the way we interpret and implement this prescription for exercise may be doing us even more harm.

## **Control Stress**

Stress is a concept that has been around for a half-century or so. While the concept of stress is very real it is one of the most misunderstood expressions of all time. How can we control something that we don't even know what it is?

When we claim that we are "under stress", "stressed out", or "stressed" what is it that we are really saying. In the common laypersons term we have come to believe that an event or series of events have occurred that have somehow struck us down. We are taught to believe that the traffic or the stock market crash has given us stress. We are a victim of events that we cannot control. But that is not what stress is either.

Stress is actually an interpretation of events that send us into a danger response. We perceive a threat, either real or imagined, and our body reacts into the Stress Response. Stress is an emotional reaction of fear to a danger. When we are feeling stress we are really experiencing fear. We have perceived a threat to our survival based on our individual beliefs about ourselves.

A natural response to fear would be to curl up in a fetal position in a safe location and cry. This is what a child would do when she experiences fear. But when you leave the doctor's office and have just heard him say that you need to control your stress do you even think to assume you should go home and climb back into bed and shed a few tears. Not likely.

The way that stress is executed in this culture is to go even deeper into control. We seek pills and herbal formulas to quell the affects of stress. While these may be temporary solutions to the symptoms of stress they are certainly not the final solution. We are taught to control our thoughts and emotions. We are told that it is our errant thoughts that are causing our stress. This is just not so. We are told to meditate but this only tends to minimize the symptoms of stress once again. We are afraid when we are experiencing stress and the only real solution is to grieve. Anything else is merely a call to eliminate the symptoms of stress.

The opposite of stress is relaxation. Relaxation is a state of consciousness that occurs when we do not perceive danger. This phenomenon takes place when we feel safe. We do not have to be on guard to any threat, whether it is real or imagined. We can surrender.

Most of us have forgotten how to relax though. We are filled with busyness and running around. Even our vacations are filled with this non-stop doing ness. Relaxation often feels like the hardest thing to do.

If relaxation and release of emotions are the antidotes to stress then why does my doctor keep prescribing for me medications to numb out my senses? Controlling stress is not necessarily an effective long term healing strategy. While those of us who are already addicted to control might feel like this is normal it does not solve the problem of stress. Love and calmness are not the answers either. Relaxation is completely different than any of these as well.

## **Summary**

This prescription for health is not necessarily bad medicine, but it is incomplete. Without adequate information this prescription is often worthless, and many times, even dangerous. While diet, exercise, and controlling stress may take on a common jingle for medical professionals, this treatment protocol often ends up creating more problems down the road. Without a complete understanding of each part and the underlying myths associated with them this treatment protocol becomes obsolete.

New language and implementation needs to be shed along the lines of healing prescriptions. Exact instructions and direction will be needed as the beliefs attached to these treatment choices start to become explored. There is so much more to the diet, exercise, and control stress prescription that never reaches the public.

What may have begun as a well-intentioned attempt to achieve health these attempts often turn into a band of obsessive behaviors of controlling our food, our thought, and our emotions. We often take the fun out of eating and of moving our body. When this happens we are now stuck with a militaristic treatment that may end up backfiring.

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