

Blueprints for Change

THE LINK BETWEEN PERSONALITY AND HEALTH

In recent years Americans have been besieged with information on what the body needs or doesn't need to be healthy. Advice such as avoid saturated fats, don't smoke cigarettes, eat broccoli, get the right kind of exercise and sleep is given in newspapers, magazines, books and on the television. Sometimes these rapidly accumulating rules seem like a recipe for health to which the doctors are continually adding new ingredients. By following these rules, good health is a goal that, when achieved, makes it possible for us to enjoy the important parts of our lives. One of the significant messages of the new mind-body research is that good health is more than following rules.

Good health does not allow us just to live our lives but rather emerges *from* the living of our lives.

Health emerges from hope, optimism, laughter, connectedness, support, commitment, self-worth, a sense of control and perhaps something more: **the perception that our behavior plays some unique role**. At the same time, these forces for health should not be thought of as emotional and interpersonal inoculations against disease. There are people who become sick and die young even though their lives overflowed with love, commitment, humor and self-worth. No one experiences such emotions, however, without being in some way healthy in the sense of "whole."

Physical and mental health do not necessarily incorporate the importance of meaning, purpose and wholesome balance. According to the larger definition, no one who perceives life as meaningless is truly healthy, no matter how lengthy and disease-free the person's life may be, and anyone who finds meaning and purpose in life will remain in some sense healthy through physical decline and death. What most enriches our lives is also good for our health and no society can grow healthy individuals if it does not foster personal hope, optimism, commitment and self-worth.

It is interesting to note that some people seem to be comfortable in almost any situation. They seem calm and collected even when they make the most important decisions. They project a sense of quiet confidence and seem to have overcome the fears most others associate with modern life. Many of these people have felt the same anxiety that others feel, but they have cultivated ways of relaxing even in the most difficult situations.

Instead of focusing on the fears and anxieties of life, they view life as an opportunity for more than just coping. They see it as a challenge but one to be enjoyed.

The people who are most likely to survive and succeed in this and future generations will be those who can find enjoyment in adapting to a rapidly change world. Their success is attributable to the relationship between the way they *think* and the way they *feel*.

Our emotions result entirely from the way we LOOK AT things. It is an obvious neurological fact that before we can experience any event, we must process it with the mind and give it meaning. We must UNDERSTAND what is happening to us before we can FEEL it.

If our understanding of what is happening is accurate, our emotions will be normal. If our perception is twisted and distorted in some way, the emotional response will be abnormal. People who believe they are in control of events, who are committed to their work and other life goals and who are invigorated and challenged by change are less likely to be knocked off course by bumps and curves along life's road. Such people also tend to be optimistic, see more good in life than bad and feel hope more often than helplessness.

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Science is now rediscovering the connections between feelings, thoughts, personality and health. Research refutes the idea that personality is somehow separate from the body. For example, breast cancer patients who receive group social support may live, on average, twice as long as those who do not. Other experiments have revealed that hypnosis can hasten the healing of burns, that laughter can increase immune function, and that diabetics can lower their need for insulin with deep relaxation techniques. Psychologists have sketched out personality types associated with heart disease, and studies linking psychological factors to illness and immune function now number in the thousands. This does not, of course, prove that humans can heal themselves of cancer or other disease. Nor does it prove that illness is "all in the head" or that we cause our own sicknesses. What the studies do suggest, however, is that feelings and emotions influence health, and that the body's healing system may be far more powerful and complex than we have dared imagine. Research is revealing a long association that healing has with faith, belief, spirit, family, personality and the web of everyday life.

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