

Coach Thyself: Healthcare Over-Stress



REDUCE STRESS, WE ARE TOLD. It's quite bad for you—the source of many ills. OK... But books, doctors, researchers, and various healthcare pundits are also telling us all sorts of other things. Drink at least 64 ounces of water every day. Non-caffeinated teas count. No, actually, they don't count. Eat fish for their omega 3's. Stay far far away from the mercury in today's fish. Get rid of your amalgams. No don't—there's no evidence for that. If your blood pressure or cholesterol numbers are higher than such-and-such, you must take this drug. No, don't take the drug because its side effects will soon require that you take other drugs and your natural balance will be out the window. And on and on.

All this would be funny, except for one thing. It's ultimately a matter of life and death. And for all of us, in different ways at different times in our lives—it can become a source of moderate to severe stress. But wait a minute. If stress itself is so bad, then maybe it's one of the causes of the situation we're in. And now all the differing healthcare prescriptions are stressing us more? Isn't this just a nasty little feedback loop! And maybe also a fast lane to the infirmary.

Let's call this condition, mild or severe as it may be, "healthcare over-stress." Unfortunately, it's rare to hear it talked about. Someone who does talk about it, Marc David, writes in the area of food and diet. His two

books, *Nourishing Wisdom*, and *The Slow Down Diet*, are simply the wisest I have read on the subject. Eating fast, he points out, not really tasting or enjoying it, and in particular stressing about what you are eating and how healthy (or not) it is—these really cause more trouble than what or how much you eat. Stress clobbers your digestion, shortens your breath, and gums up your metabolism. It is bad.

So how do you avoid health-care over-stress? As a coach, I work with people to reframe the medical advice muddle completely. To coach yourself in the same direction, here are some basic tips.

General health prescriptions are based on statistical averages. No one fits all of them. Every health related step you take also has both good and not so good effects. Your mind-body system is seriously complex, and, while the good of one particular step might way outweigh the bad for you, that's not necessarily true for your neighbor. Apart from acute conditions, every piece of wellness advice should come with an anxiety warning. Something like: "This rule singles out one of many, many factors that affect you. Your particular health depends not on rigid adherence to it, but instead on finding the best compromises among many such rules. Remember this... experiment... and stay cool!"

Experts, whose studies focus in on one or two areas, cannot tell you what's overall best for you. They have tunnel vision. If they were car designers, they would be fixated, for example, on reducing air resistance. What they created would look like a bullet, but could only be driven by midgets. Take note of general healthcare advice, but hold on to this calming truth: how much it

applies to your particular situation remains to be seen.

What's needed, you see, is an expert in you. And guess what? Built in to your intestinal lining is so much nerve tissue that it is now acknowledged as "the second brain" (see Michael Gershon's book so titled). The job of all of this gut level gray matter is to orchestrate what you eat, how it gets digested, and how these power your metabolism and immune system. Compromising among hundreds of different rules is its "meat and potatoes," so to speak. Under its care, your body is amazingly self-healing. You CAN relax and tune more into what it wants. That's a major difference between people who follow all kinds of health rules and still die young, and those who break most of them and live happily on and on.

Again, apart from acute conditions, practitioners who see you only as a set of numbers, and simply try to force those numbers towards the "normal" values are of limited value. Medicine has a history of doing strange things that the human body still finds a way around. On the other hand, practitioners who engage "with heart," and care enough to tune in to your uniqueness, are worth their weight in gold. These folks can help you experiment with and listen to your particular "second brain." In many cases, I think they connect to it intuitively.

Bottom line here is—in the grand array of ever-shifting compromises that determines your health, stressing overly about how well you follow this or that rule or advisory may more than undo any good there is in following it. Feel what your relaxed body wants. Trusting your "gut instinct," it turns out, has a real scientific basis. ▲