

# Coach Thyself: When Healthcare Doesn't—Care

**M**any of us go through periods of affliction. An accident, a lingering sickness, environmental toxins, or maybe just the adjustments of natural aging—we all face these. But we live in a wonderful time for such episodes as these. Never has there been more exact and detailed knowledge of the workings of the human body. Right down to the molecular level, there are professionals who know a great deal about each little organ or cell. But there's a paradox. The training and attitudes of so many of these professionals, the pressures they face working in a dysfunctional delivery system—these very often prevent that wonderful knowledge from actually getting us well.

So what do we do when healthcare can't really care? How do we get the benefit of this knowledge when it's needed, yet avoid the risks, dependencies, and even increases in disease that stem from a deeply flawed approach to real health? As a wellness coach, I am partnered with people facing these issues every day. In these articles, I try to share with you what's working for us.

A great many mainstream healthcare providers, and some alternative ones as well, think a certain way. What's ailing you is pretty much a mechanical problem. Some parts are limping or failing. The job is to find them and retune, repair, or replace them. But whether the parts are chakras or kidneys, that's what will fix you. While understandable, this single-minded focus on finding broken parts is out-of-touch. Not always, but at times--it's just plain wrong. It works great for maintaining automobiles

and toasters, but it fails too often in understanding economies, ecosystems, the weather--and oh, by the way, human health.

Unlike car engines, we exhibit what are called "emergent properties." That is, simply adding together behaviors observed in our isolated parts does not tell doctors what the whole is going to do. Our parts change their tunes unexpectedly in response to what other parts are doing. Imagine pushing five piano keys at once, expecting to hear a simple chord. And suppose what came out sounded like a little fugue. Hey! How did that happen? Turns out some of the notes didn't like playing at the same time as other ones—so they took turns. That's an emergent property.

The solution here is easy, actually. To exacting knowledge of our parts must be added some serious attention to the whole. Remember the parable of the blind men and the elephant? In terms of your health, beyond your body, that whole includes most importantly your everyday feelings as they react to what's meaningful in your life. One guideline is very simple. Whether it's love, family, work, or even much needed rest--your body responds best to what really fulfills you.

Now who's in the right position to know about, not just your body, but this whole, feeling self that's so crucial here? Who's the likeliest expert on that? It has to be you, right? In the old days, a family doctor, like a wellness coach now, would partner with you--the expert on your wholeness. And the time-tested tools employed would be not just physiology, but also intuition, heart-centered concern, and mutual

awareness of the mixed joys and challenges unique to you.

Nowadays, if you're not "fixed" on the first pass, our system sends you off to a "specialist." Instead of putting the elephant together, and looking for those emerging interactions, now they'll start taking the tail apart. Sometimes that's right. But sometimes it's a wild goose chase, or a "cure" that just pushes disorder from the tail to the lower back. To get the most in real healing from your healthcare, stay aware of this principle of "integrative" science. Without some sense of the whole, delving deeper into the parts can be misleading. Look also in the other direction.

Seek out providers that do cultivate at least some form of heart-centered connection with you. Think carefully about how much energy you put into "risk factors," early diagnosis of "preconditions," and specialized exploratory testing. These are challenged increasingly for leading to unnecessary treatments, and not saving lives. They focus your time and attention on negative outcomes, which can function like the placebo effect in reverse. And they may lead directly away from the more holistic issues that most influence your condition.

Though it's a bit of a challenge at times, we can have the best of both worlds these days—both the whole-person focus, and the vast store of knowledge. But you do have to be proactive, and take some responsibility for your own wellness. ▲

<sup>1</sup>Welch, Schwartz, and Woloshin, *Overdiagnosis—Making People Sick in the Pursuit of Health*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.

