

## A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE FOR THE CAREGIVER

**DILRUBA AHMED**

### INTRODUCTION

Doctors as a community are not good at taking care of their own health, an attitude that should change. As caregivers they have a twofold responsibility, taking care of their own health and becoming a role-model of a healthy lifestyle for their patients and also the community.

The WHO (World Health Organization) constitution states that: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Later, being able to enjoy a “socially and economically productive life” also became a part of the definition given for health<sup>1</sup>.

Health, wellness, well-being, whichever term we use to denote this fundamental state, has mutually co-dependent dimensions. Not taking care of any of these aspects would have adverse implications on an individual’s well-being, life quality and health. The following dimensions of health are to be considered (Table 1):

**Table 1: Dimensions of health**

<b>Dimensions of health</b>
Physical
Mental
Social
Spiritual
Intellectual
Occupational
Environmental
Financial

Usually, we think about health in terms of physical health. However, health includes the domains of mental, spiritual, social well-being in addition to the physical wellness. A holistic approach would help attain a fueled body, an engaged mind, balance in relationships and a nurtured spirit. All dimensions need to be addressed even though it is not necessary to place equal weight on all aspects of health<sup>2</sup>. The state of equilibrium for each of us will naturally depend on our own views on what kind of life we mean by the term “to live life fully”. One way of describing it can be, “A lifestyle and a personalized approach to living life in a way that allows you to become the best kind of person that your potentials, circumstances, and fate will allow”<sup>2</sup>.

An individual finds it challenging to take the right decisions when it comes to well-being and health. Even though individuals may be aware of that which is good for health and the choices to make to implement good health habits, many lack the motivation to put the ideas into action and at times after beginning a right health choice one may return back to the habits that put their health at risk. Think of a doctor who smokes, a person who knows smoking is wrong for health but the behavior shows otherwise. The question is: what is it that makes us behave the way we do, or what factors are regulating our behavior.

Our behavior is “what we do, how we do it, and whether we will succeed” and many factors influence this behavior. Habits and Self-regulation are two of the factors that are of particular importance.

Self-regulation is “our ability to direct our behavior and control our impulses so that we meet certain standards, achieve certain goals, or reach certain ideals”<sup>4</sup>. It allows us to act in our short and long-term best interests, consistent with our deepest values <sup>5</sup>. Habits are “any behavior that can be reduced to a routine”<sup>2</sup>. Habits are powerful, they are actually key to wellness. If you change your habits for better, you change your life for the better<sup>6</sup>. Here are some points to consider for a healthy lifestyle (Table 2):

**Table 2 : Factors that negatively influence healthy lifestyle**

<b>Factors that negatively influence healthy lifestyle</b>
Inactivity
Unbalanced diet
Alcohol consumption
Tobacco usage
Remaining in sitting position for prolonged time periods
Inadequate water intake
Poor sleep
Lack of monitoring of body weight
Not maintaining healthy relationship
Stress

Belloc and Breslow had reported that the Alameda County study identified a range of practices pertaining to health lifestyle, and had become to be known as the Alameda 7. This included maintaining average Body Mass Index (BMI), no or moderate consumption of alcohol, seven to eight hours of sleep each night, never smoking, no in between meal snacking, breakfast intake and physical activity<sup>7</sup>. The body of research has grown since then that has studied the influence of various sets of lifestyles benefiting health on outcomes like life-expectancy, stroke, cardiovascular disease, all-cause mortality, diabetes, and carcinoma<sup>8</sup>. It has been noted that those who adhere to healthy lifestyle behavior had lower risk of development of chronic disease related mortality and morbidity in comparison to those with unhealthy way of life<sup>9</sup>. There also exists a few studies in which unhealthy lifestyle was found to be related to the principal outcome of all-cause mortality<sup>10-18</sup>.

Individuals who play the role of caregiver for patients suffering from chronic disease have been found to be under caregiver burden ( a term that refers to the load that is carried by caregiver for fulfilling the role of caregiver) <sup>19-21</sup>. In the United States, 3 out of 10 caregivers find the task of care giving stressful emotionally<sup>22</sup>. An inverse relationship has been noted between healthy lifestyle practices (like good nutrition, medical routine follow-up for themselves and regular exercise) and caregiver burden faced by those giving care to dementia and elderly patients<sup>23-25</sup>. Also an increased risk of cardiovascular disease has been noted among the caregivers<sup>22,26,27</sup>. A key role is played by evidence based positive lifestyle changes (like physical activity and nutritious diet) for prevention of chronic diseases like cardiovascular disease among caregivers<sup>28</sup>.

Association has also been reported in previous study between strain of caregiver and all -cause mortality, stroke risk, and coronary artery disease<sup>22,26,27,29</sup>. The caregivers should be encouraged to adhere to prevention activities recommended nationally that includes regular exercise and

healthy diet which would in turn exert beneficial effects on risk factors like BMI, blood pressure and serum lipid profile<sup>30,31</sup>.

A healthy lifestyle decreases disease risk, helps one to remain energetic and physically fit. As per the World Health Organization, living healthy is a means of living which aids in enjoyment of more life aspects. This manner of living decreases the risk of early death or suffering grave illness<sup>32</sup>. Physicians face the burden of propagation of healthy habits and those physicians who abide by such healthy way of life are more likely to be able to convince their patients to adopt such lifestyle in comparison to doctors not following healthy lifestyle<sup>33</sup>. As has been noted in long term population study that implementing healthy lifestyle can raise life expectancy and reduce premature mortality<sup>34</sup>. In middle-east a study performed on physicians' lifestyle and well-being observed that 11% suffered from diabetes and 20.3% had hypertension<sup>35</sup>. Another study found 23.1% physicians had diabetes while 14% had hypertension<sup>36</sup>. A research done by Ramachandran et al. noted 35.6% of doctors had hypertension, 55.5% suffered obesity and 29% had metabolic syndrome which were significantly higher ( $p < 0.001$ ) than that of general population<sup>37</sup>. Another study found that only 50% of doctors performed daily exercise for half an hour or more while others did not even do that despite having the knowledge about the importance of physical activity<sup>36</sup>.

There also exists a positive correlation between staying happy and being healthy. This therefore points towards encouraging doctors to be happy to remain healthy<sup>36,38</sup>. A survey done in 2019 on physicians happiness by American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) found 38% of them were somewhat happy while 33% were very happy<sup>39</sup>. Proper sleep is necessary for healthy way of life. However, care givers often have very busy schedules which result in them suffering insomnia (almost half of the physicians as noted in a study)<sup>36</sup>.

Physicians and caregivers need to be self-motivated to put into practice a healthy lifestyle that is significant for their life as professional and as promoters of healthy psychological and physical health in society<sup>36</sup>. There needs to be a well-planned strategy in place to identify the health risks and put in place interventions for correction. Also, health care givers should incorporate in their schedule proper diet and exercise. Long hours of work and busy schedule need to be revised to allow care givers time to have the necessary hours of sleep and scope for performing exercise. This would help avoid permanent health damage and possible early demise among the caregivers who put their duty first at the risk of jeopardizing their health.

Sometimes change can take a long time, can require repeated trials and failures but please do not give up. If we can will ourselves (self-regulate) to make the right choices for a healthy life and can form a range of good habits, we can not only live longer but also enjoy a better quality of life during those years. Thus we should remember two things "Self-regulation" and "Good habits". Let us start today.

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**Dr. Dilruba Ahmed**

MBBS, MPH, M.Phil

Associate Professor

Department of Community Medicine

Medical College for Women &amp; Hospital

Uttara, Model Town, Dhaka-1230.