



Making *Healthier* Choices the *Easier* Choices

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What makes us healthy? There are many factors which influence whether or not we will be healthy. These determinants of health vary from biological and environmental conditions to our own lifestyle choices. The genetic composition we receive from our parents provides the developmental blueprint for our body structure and functioning. Prenatal and early childhood conditions determine the potential for well-being. The environment in which we live provides us with the support for, or interference with, achieving our maximum health potential. Environmental components include: education, income, social status, support networks, physical, social and working conditions, and cultural milieu. Where we fit on the spectrum, for each of these determinants, limits the degree of health we experience. We seek systemic change for those things within the realm of societal influence and accept individual responsibility for generating change in those factors under personal control.

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Common Unhealthy Choices

Typically we refer to our eating and activity habits as the factors which make us healthy or not. We tend to negate other choices which also have a profound impact on our experience of health. Significant influences also include: how we use our time, assuming unnecessary responsibilities, accepting excessive expectations, sacrificing sleep to complete report cards, or other routine behaviours we adopt or choices we make as part of our daily survival strategy. Unfortunately the daily crises management strategies don't usually lead to the attainment of our long term health goals.

How can we make healthier choices?

Planning, scheduling and putting things in place are essential to creating a healthier lifestyle. We plan for things which we think would best fit our needs, wants and resources. Next we develop an action strategy with detailed timelines and ensure that we have the required resources. Finally we put the action plan to work. That sounds like a lot of work before even getting started but without it, success is at risk. Have you ever tried to go to class without a lesson plan, schedule or resources and tried to “wing it”? You may make it through that class, maybe even that day but the odds aren't great that you will achieve your course objectives. Making progress in life isn't much different.

Enhancing the Probability of Success by:

1. Eliminating obstacles

Contrary to what we may think, the greatest obstacle to becoming healthier is not a lack of time! Time to exercise, to prepare nutritious meals, time for ourselves and our relationships, time to get through our required duties and time to sleep... these are all important parts of our overall health plan and they represent a significant portion of our complaints. However, time isn't the culprit. Awareness and knowledge are other key factors in the healthy decision-making process. They certainly influence health, but again, they are not the greatest obstacles. So, what does prevent us from making healthier choices? Although we acquire the necessary awareness, knowledge, skills and resources, without being committed to following through, we maintain the status quo. This is no place for apathy. If we want change, we must create it.

2. Increasing Resistance

A pre-requisite to sticking with healthy intentions, is to always have a plan. The temptation to quit can be a real struggle until new habits are well established. To increase our resistance to abandoning this new direction, we need to anticipate obstacles and develop a realistic and practical approach to overcoming them. Sure we expect to have a few relapses along the way, we

even build in a few “holidays”. But each slip back to the old pattern is an opportunity to discover an obstacle we had not previously identified. That slip is not a failure but merely a chance to explore additional strategies for success. Remember that learning new skills does take a lot of practice and changing entrenched habits will take consistent work and determination over time.

3. *Staying Motivated*

Being motivated is a psychological response to a multitude of factors. These include beliefs that: change is important and will benefit *me*; I have, or can acquire, the ability, skills and resources to make the change; and, what I will receive outweighs what I am giving up. Keep the plan and the ultimate goal in mind. Keep the plan manageable. This may mean revisions to the anticipated pace or level of outcomes. Be sure the plan includes a few things which are relatively easy to accomplish and can show fairly quick results. This gives the sense of getting somewhere in the change journey. This can include replacing one cookie or chocolate with a fruit or juice; or taking a weekly 45 minute walk with a friend. Even drinking two extra glasses of water daily can become an easy routine.

Little Things Add Up

Making minor adjustments to daily routines or habits can yield immense health benefits. We can embrace new, or replace current, thoughts and behaviours. The thoughts we engage and the mental images we replay set the tone for how we act and certainly how we react to external things. Talking to ourselves differently is a good start. Rather than dwelling on the negative, we can echo the positive. Rather than driving to work thinking about how that difficult class will affect the day, think of trying something different, finishing up the day and having a pleasant evening. We can assert healthier behaviours by introducing positive choices or by reducing unhealthy ones. However, don't try to immediately eliminate time, energy or health thieves which also serve a coping purpose. Start small and gradually build to the primary goal. For example: cut out one cigarette a day and do something pleasant in the few minutes that would have been spent smoking. For now, set limits: on the time spent surfing the net or in chat rooms; the number of drinks of alcohol or caffeine; or the money spent on tickets or machines. It will help if that behaviour is replaced with something which leads to an identified goal.

The Ultimate Payoff

Experiencing success encourages continued changes and dramatic advances in health status. The increased sense of well-being, capacity to cope with stressors, overall productivity, and general quality of life show

one side of the improvement. The decrease in illness, disease and absenteeism show another side. Research clearly indicates that the incidence of lifestyle-induced illness and death for our province ranks among the highest in Canada. Heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes are leading health threats for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. For many, these threats exist as the culmination of lifestyle influences such as: smoking, unhealthy weight, poor nutrition habits, alcohol consumption and physical inactivity. These risks can be reduced by making a few simple changes and using a lot of determination and effort!

If we want a different outcome, we must create it by doing things differently. We cannot reasonably expect to get a different result if we continue to do the same things.

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