



# Go Healthy - By Taking Care of Yourself

by KATHY TAYLOR-ROGERS

Common sense dictates that if you do not take care of yourself then you will not be able to take care of anyone else, but unfortunately common sense is not all that “common”. Isn’t it ironic that for most of us we never neglect to get the regular check-ups, tune-ups, oil changes, etc. for our vehicles because we know that without providing the regular needed care and maintenance our car will not last as long or will give us problems. Many of us, however, do not ensure that we receive the same care for ourselves. Car owners quickly learn that the key to keeping a vehicle in “good” running order is regular vehicle maintenance. The same is true for our bodies. Every one of us should have a medical check-up at least once per year. This check-up should include measurement of your blood cholesterol level and a diabetes screen. If you are over 40 years of age then yearly blood work is recommended to check: insulin levels, blood sugar, total cholesterol, HDL Cholesterol and Triglycerides, TSH, Vitamin D level, PSA (for men), weight and blood pressure. For sexually active women yearly pap smears are recommended. For men, yearly prostate examinations are recommended if you are over 40 years of age. Eye examinations are essential for men and women over age 40.

Having these regular yearly check-ups will assist in ensuring that if there are health concerns (i.e. high blood pressure, high cholesterol) that could potentially lead to more serious health problems then the steps can be taken to deal with the concern area before it becomes more serious or problematic. Keep in mind that heart disease and stroke are the leading causes of death in Canada. Risk factors associated with heart disease and stroke are: smoking, high blood pressure, diets rich in saturated fats, physical inactivity, stress, diabetes, family history of heart disease, and being overweight. If through yearly check-ups the presence of risk factors can be identified and a plan developed to make changes to minimize or eliminate the risk factors then you will be taking a positive step towards improving your health. There are some risk factors, such as heredity, that you have

no control over; hence the need to take control of those factors that you can.

Any research on taking care of your physical health will emphasize three very key components. The first of these is maintaining a “healthy weight”. To do this you need to set getting your weight under control as a goal for you and then determine how you plan to achieve this goal. The second component of positive physical health is having a ‘proper diet’. The key to a proper diet is eating more nutritious foods and eating smaller quantities. Eat leaner source proteins, fruits and vegetables and eliminate deserts, soft drinks, candy and anything else high in sugar from your diet. When you are able to take control of your eating habits and make it a lifestyle change it will become the ‘new normal’. The third key to physical health is exercise. This will require you to exercise 200 minutes per week or 30 minutes per day. Make the exercise that you choose something that you enjoy and make it a part of your daily routine. It may require you to push yourself in the beginning but it will get easier and will be well worth it.

The last aspect of achieving positive health is caring for your emotional/mental health. We often receive messages about caring for our physical health through media or other sources but being proactive about taking care of our emotional or mental health is rarely something that we hear about. This is something viewed as a sign of weakness and even the term ‘mental illness’ bears negative connotations. The reality is that achieving positive mental health and increasing resistance to mental illness is just as important as caring for your physical health. In fact, having positive emotional/mental health will contribute a great deal to positive physical health. According to recent research:

- 7.7 million hospital days in Canada are due to mental illness and suicidal behavior
- people with mental illness, as a group, represent the most frequent category of billings by general practitioners
- mental illness and those with substance use problems represent one of the top categories of “frequent

users” of emergency room services according to Statistics Canada.

Positive mental health or well being is often associated with two qualities. The first is resiliency – the ability to rebound from life’s setbacks and the second is empowerment, which means having a sense of control over your life. To be resilient, you need to learn how to cope with different situations. This is especially important in teaching as teachers are often faced with very challenging and unexpected situations that they must deal with “on the spot”. Learning to cope more effectively will also mean recognizing when you are experiencing extra stress and then taking time for yourself to do something that will help take your mind off your problems and allow you to relax. This will mean different things for different people but some examples might include: taking a hot bath; doing something outdoors; learning yoga; listening to your favorite music; meditation; reading a book; walking; or jogging. Another very important aspect of positive mental health is the concept of *balance*. We are faced with many demands on our time – work, family, children, spouse or partner, friends, community, volunteer activities. We have both a right and a responsibility to be realistic about the number of demands that we place upon ourselves; hence it is important that we consider our priorities and limit how much we “take on” that we have control over. Learning to say “No” can be an essential aspect of finding balance.

Research also shows that well being and positive mental health is more likely if you develop and maintain supportive relationships with family and friends. All too often individuals get so involved with their jobs, volunteer activities and other commitments that they neglect the most important people in their lives. When this is a chronic problem over time it can have a very negative impact on all of your relationships. Sometimes the impact can be devastating and irreparable damage can be done. It is important to take the time to consider your life and where you are spending the bulk of your time. It can be helpful to make a log and record how you spend your time on a daily basis for a two or three week period and then do some honest reflection on whether you are spending adequate time on yourself or with your spouse/partner, family/children and friends. Learning how to develop balance within your life could be the most important step you take towards developing positive emotional, mental and physical health.

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