

SURGEON,



HEAL THYSELF

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becoming healthy" has been a buzzword since the 1990s. Thanks to the baby boomers, who have started the trend, we have seen a considerable increase in our awareness of health. There has been a tendency to reverse the paradigm from the treatment of diseases to their prevention. In his book *The Next Trillion*,* Paul Zane Pilzer, a world-renowned economist, predicted that wellness will occupy an additional one-seventh or "next trillion" of our economy. He also states that wellness is the industry in which the fortunes of the new millennium will be created. We as surgeons and physicians, who have been monitoring the health and wellness of our patients, need to start taking a better look at our own health and wellness.

We as a profession are being watched by our family, our friends, our colleagues, and, especially, our patients. Knowledge is caught, not taught—in other words, our actions speak louder than words. Our patients want to make sure that we not only talk the talk but also walk the walk. We need to be the model for our patients to follow and free ourselves of the old philosophies and old thinking, "Do as I say, not as I do."

The process of becoming healthy

We live in a society of immediate gratification: enjoy now, pay later. I call this a "credit card mentality." At the same time, the media are overwhelming consumers with advertisements for losing large amounts of weight in short periods of time and getting that six-pack abdomen in just six to eight weeks. But, of course, under most conditions, these proclamations are physically impossible. The manufacturers of

these products also realize that fact because one might notice their disclaimer in very small print, either in the advertisement or on television: "Results not typical." The shorter period of time in which a person makes those changes, the higher the chance that that person will go back to his or her former state in just as short a period of time. This also sets the participant up for failure with unrealistic expectations. The only thing that the seller is interested in is making some money, not a person's continued success. We as physicians must be aware of this deception both for ourselves and our patients.

The reality is that becoming healthy is a process, just as learning how to walk was a process. It is not an overnight miracle. A person cannot cheat or shorten a process. A surgeon cannot create a surgical wound one day and expect it to be healed with perfect tensile strength in one week. There is a process to wound healing.

As recipients of this magazine continue to read this article, they are either becoming healthy or unhealthy. It is like standing on a set of stairs—one may either go up or down but cannot stand on the same step. Many of us have let our health go because we have been so busy going through medical school, residency, and busy hours in our practice. We, as well as our patients, have a tendency to react to crisis, not the subtle hints we receive every day. We don't address our health until that medical crisis arises. Then we eat differently, exercise more, and lose some extra weight.

Getting started

There are two ideas to keep in mind while considering the content of this article. The first idea is, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing every day, expecting different results." We are guilty of this in all aspects of our lives, not just our health. Many people believe that they can change results with their old habits and actions but, if they continue to do what they have always done, they will continue to get what they have always gotten. The other phrase is: "If you want to make some changes in your life, you have to make some changes in your life." Change is often uncomfortable because we are so secure in our comfort zones, but change is good. It is part of the process. We will not make the changes that we need to make to improve our health and

*VideoPlus, 2001. ASIN: B0006RX28E

lives if the reasons for doing so are not important enough.

So how does one get started? First of all, a person needs to know why he or she wants to become healthy. I had my reasons: I was overweight and had hypertension and lots of coronary calcifications. I wanted to be able to spend more time with my kids in a much healthier body. We all must determine, “What is our reason, our why?” What are the consequences of not attaining a healthy life? If the reasons for getting healthy are not important enough to the person, it will never happen. That person will not be able to get to the next step: making some commitments.

So now that a person knows why he or she wants to become healthy, what kind of commitments is that person willing to make? It is already well known that surgeons are capable of making and keeping commitments, as they have already gone through the grueling process of becoming a physician/surgeon. That took sacrifice and courage to go for it and complete it. Surgeons had to make many changes in their life, schedule, social life, sleep pattern, and study habits. The surgeon had to stretch, and he or she did it because the “why” was important enough. Even though there wasn’t always a lot of time, there was a way for the surgeon to find time to do the things that he or she wanted to do, like a social engagement, time with a spouse, time with kids or family, and so on. There was commitment. Isn’t health worth it? Patients and family will know if a surgeon is not committed to his or her own health.

A person’s ideas about maintaining a healthy life may be the same that I considered. I have seen so many people, myself included, who start off a new, more healthful approach to life with a bang and fizzle out in a very short time. People quit. They quit their jobs, relationships, professions, exercising, reading, studying, and so much more. A surgeon cannot possibly be responsible for them, but that surgeon can be for himself or herself.

A variation of the so-called Pareto principle is the 20/80 rule: 20 percent of people will be responsible for 80 percent of the results. That principle applies to all aspects of life, not just health. If a person’s reason for becoming healthy is important enough, that person will find the way to push forward.

HABITS

The best way to keep to commitments is to develop good habits. Here is a poem from an unknown author that best describes habits:*

*I am your constant companion.
I am your greatest helper or heaviest burden.
I will push you onward or drag you down to failure.
I am completely at your command.
Half the things you do might just as well be turned over to me and I will be able to do them quickly and correctly.
I am easily managed—you must merely be firm with me.
Show me exactly how you want something and after a few lessons I will do it automatically.
I am the servant of all great people and, alas, of all failures, as well.
Those who are great, I have made great.
Those who are failures, I have made failures.
I am not a machine, though I work with all the precision of a machine plus the intelligence of a person.
You may run me for profit or run me for ruin—it makes no difference to me.
Take me, train me, be firm with me, and I will place the world at your feet.
Be easy with me and I will destroy you.
Who am I?
I am habit.*

* Available at <http://www.motivateus.com/stories/ycc.htm>

Four seasons analogy

I like to take this point and put it into what I call a “four seasons analogy.” *Winter* is an “intuitive” season—it is cold and not much physically gets accomplished then, but it is a time of thinking and planning. For example, consider the farmer who is getting ready for his next planting. He may get the seeds and the fertilizer ready and plan where the crops will go. In the winter season, we

also do our planning, get our thoughts in order, maybe set some goals, and make the decision to get started.

Spring is the “get started” season. This is the time when we are out of the gate with great enthusiasm and energy. Whatever we are doing, whether it be for our health or otherwise, there is no stopping us. The farmer is preparing the soil, planting the seeds, making the rows straight, and fertilizing and watering the early crop. In both situations, great amounts of energy are being expended with excitement. Challenges are handled with relative ease; we are headed toward our goals.

Summer is the “meet your wall,” or “life happens,” season. This is the season when the challenges really start to happen and maybe even increase. We don’t see a lot of results yet and begin to wonder if what we are doing is really working. The farmer may see a drought, too much rain, too hot, too cold, too many weeds, a poor crop, or animals and pests destroy the plants. A surgeon may find that work gets busier, and there are family problems, illness, or any other challenge that life brings along. The farmer doesn’t give up on his crop. Should a surgeon give up on what he or she is trying to achieve? This is the season when most people quit. They don’t have the drive and reserve to dig deep down to continue plodding along to get to *fall*, the harvest.

Yes, fall is the harvest season. This is the point at which we begin to reap the results. The continuous efforts that have been invested are now starting to pay off. Some of the toughest challenges have been weathered, and we are beginning to be where we want to be. This stage is not the end, though. As mentioned before, a person cannot stay here—he or she will either go forward or slide backwards.

Here is an important point to keep in mind. Many people quit during the summer of their journey. They are not experiencing the results they are looking for, or they cannot overcome their challenges. They did not know how long summer would be. When they quit, they did not know how close they were to their fall, their harvest, their results.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle

There are two components to completing this “process”: goal setting and finding a mentor. Some goals must be set and written down. A person needs to know where he or she wants to be if

that person wants to be able to recognize when he or she gets there. I am sure that many people remember being on a long trip as a child and asking, “Are we there yet?” That child had no idea where the family was going, how long it would take, and what it would look like when he or she got there. That is why goals must be set—so all these unknowns are addressed.

Lastly, don’t do it alone. A person going through this process should find a mentor, someone who has already done what is set to be accomplished and is very successful at it. In the area of health, it may be a person’s physician, a personal trainer, a nutritionist, or another health care professional. Find someone with comparable experience and follow his or her direction and advice. A person will pay a pro to improve a golf or tennis game, so why not find a pro for improving health? A mentor should guide the goal-setting process initially.

Remember this: becoming healthy is a process, and it is an ongoing journey. Learn to enjoy the journey, for, believe it or not, the success of achieving these goals is not in attaining them, it is the process of becoming who or what a person needs to become while doing it.

The principles presented here apply not only to becoming healthy but to all aspects of life. They are achievable. I know, for I have done everything here that I recommend to you, the reader. I am not anyone special, just a person with renewed passion for personal health and wellness. Q

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