

THE FUTURE OF WELLNESS IN COMMUNITIES

By Mary Joan Oexmann, MS, RD

The marriage of truth and grace can help us battle against our culture of excess and the health challenges that inevitably follow.

But it will take responsibility, accountability, and good old-fashioned hard work to pursue better health and better living.

The Mortar Between The Bricks

In the digital world, it makes sense to compartmentalize as we organize our life into neat little packages of health, work, family, fears, dreams, and what are we eating for dinner tonight. It's one way of dealing with information overload. Speaking to a graduation class of dietetic interns about 20 years ago, I was predicting how our jobs would change from dispensing information to making information meaningful with the onset of the computer age. The calm message of balance (moderation and variety) would have to be our response to our culture, which seems to latch on to individual foods or nutrients as in the low-fat, low-carbohydrate debate as frequently as the change in the tide.

We like "provocative." Consider the response to Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, and Morgan Spurlock's, *Super Size Me*. Gibson was encouraging us to question our faith and beliefs.

In some ways, Spurlock consuming McDonald's for 30 days may be more profound than my 30 years as a nutritionist. On the other hand, perhaps it is "provocative" to combine teachings from the Bible with health information. Why? I believe that our spirituality is truly the mortar between the bricks. It's the stuff that connects all the parts of health, work, family, etc. Spirituality connects everything in the present while also offering a way to connect with the past and future.

It's All About People!

Into the future, I see two women and a man transformed. The first woman is walking on the beach out of pain. The second woman is flying by in a motorboat, the wind blowing through her hair as her smile explodes with joy. The man is painlessly bending over to tie his shoes. The names aren't important because we know them all.



After years of supporting the extra pounds, the first woman's hips, knees, and feet continually hurt with surgery on the horizon. The second woman remembers when she was thin and attractive to men. She became pregnant and then neglected. She struggles to accept her beauty, regardless of her weight. And finally the man is simply slowed down and wonders when time will catch up or when his body will pay the price of the burden of extra pounds. My hope for Lighten Up is to see one person at a time over time begin to make one decision at a time for health. It takes hope, energy, and courage to break old ways.

Small Changes Over Time

Every single day we make a minimum of 150 food decisions. We consume a minimum of thirty foods and beverages, which represents thirty decisions. How does it get to be so many? A hamburger

includes decisions about the bun, the meat, perhaps some cheese, ketchup, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, pickle, and something to drink. Trust me. It doesn't take long at all to reach thirty items per day. The next decision is portion. Thirty decisions become sixty. How do you prepare each food—baked, fried, or whatever? Now you're up to ninety decisions. The timing of your food is important. Do you skip breakfast, drink lots of sugared coffee, skip lunch, and finally have a really big meal at night? Now you're up to 120 decisions. Finally, what about all those foods you have available to you that you choose to not eat? You're up to 150 decisions before you even think about walking up the stairs versus taking the elevator!

As a nutritionist, my goal is to help people identify five decisions, which will have the greatest impact on health. It truly is lifestyle modification versus trying to force people into "diets" which simply don't work. Have you ever noticed that "diet" is a four-letter word with the word "die" in it? It simply isn't very encouraging. Diets force people to fit into a box, which leads to failure. If you take ownership by designing your own box, you become motivated by the way you think and will change the way you live.

I continue to be inspired by one of the first children I encouraged. The young man was 11 years old and weighed 400 pounds. His parents shared that they had to give him whatever food he wanted because they lived in a trailer. "If he didn't get the food he wanted, he would walk back and forth across the trailer which would cause their home to rock." He was living a life of isolation because he could no longer attend school. He just couldn't fit in the chairs. In hindsight, this battle was not about food but who is in charge. If you will, it was a spiritual tug of war. The young man lost 200 pounds in eight months by making one decision at a time. It is time to roll up our sleeves and make one decision at a time for health.

I Want People To "Get It"!

What is "it?" It is applying the understanding that life is a process, which relates to others. Life and health is simply not an arbitrary goal of having blood cholesterols of 140 mg/dl or wearing size 10 or size 20. Focusing on the goal versus the process is like searching for eternity. The quest may lead to potions, which promise to make you into that person you wanted to be 30 years ago. Guess what. The latest "fountain of youth" won't overcome the latest battle between the flesh and the Spirit. Lifestyle change is about individual people accepting responsibility and making lifetime decisions for health.

Life is about embracing the process for the benefit of others. "Others" must fit into the equation because everyone pays! It is the spirit of mutual interdependence, which opens the door to apply the biblical principle of "love thy neighbor." Health is about you, your family, your friends, your co-workers, and your community. No one said it would be easy. Dr. M. Scott Peck wrote his book on spiritual growth called *The Road Less Traveled* in 1978. He began his book with the proclamation, "Life is difficult." He's right. Life is a series of problems, which require discipline to solve. There will be sacrifice along the way. There are no easy fixes. The health crisis in America requires the understanding that life is a process in need of people accepting responsibility in a disciplined fashion for the good of all. Getting "it" means having the maturity to accept and apply the simple

principles of eating less and exercising more. We're just too lazy. We must focus our attention (work) and face our fears (courage) to achieve wholeness!

Think Of Future Generations

The name has changed from type 2, Adult Onset Diabetes to Obesity Induced Diabetes. It used to be rare to see children age 10-14 suffering with diabetes. Today, it is estimated that 300,000 children in America fit into the category. That's equal to one child in each classroom! These young obese children will be on dialysis in 30 to 40 years. We have a responsibility to set an example and lead the way to showing young people that they also have the opportunity to choose health. Lighten Up can be part of the solution, as discipline becomes a value.

Begin With Accountability

Improving health is a series of steps, which includes accountability. To that end, some people are forming covenants. The health covenant is an agreement (see Covenant For Health on this page) between two people to endeavor to adhere to specific guidelines. As you'll discover in the list the issues include everything from nurturing relationships, which will support you during stress, to eating a balanced diet to achieve a suitable weight, to getting your legal house in order. Consider using this health covenant as a starting point and modify as you see fit. Throughout the country some ministers are forming covenants with other ministers and may ultimately encourage congregations to do the same thing. Read and select one of the items. Make it a priority before moving on to a second goal. Decide what is important!

Future Expansion Of Lighten Up

Communities of faith are ideal for lifestyle change because people are building on a framework of relationships within the spiritual realm. These relationships include you, yourself, your God, your family, and your community. Health is always a choice, which allows people to fulfill their higher "calling." The philosophy goes hand and hand with Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. His 40-day program of spiritual growth is rapidly expanding throughout the United States. It is transforming lives as people begin to embrace their God-given purpose. Also, Nicky Gumbel of Holy Trinity, Brompton, in London has designed a very successful spiritual growth course called Alpha. Lighten Up is a logical next step for people who participate in spiritual programs of this kind.

I encourage anyone who reads these words to "Roll up your sleeves and take charge!" The health crisis in America is driven by a lifestyle of excess, which we can choose to change. It is time to stop wringing our hands while our waistlines continue to expand. Everyone needs spiritual health, formed from the marriage of truth and grace.★



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Covenant For Health

In response to the physical and spiritual health crisis in America, I will endeavor to adhere to the following guidelines. My health is my responsibility. I commit to make lifestyle improvements for my own life and the benefit of my family, friends, community of faith, and the world.

1. *I will establish a routine of prayer and study to increase my knowledge and discernment of Scripture.*
2. *I will regularly set aside time to listen to the needs of my friends and/or family. This may include meals together or special activities.*
3. *I will nurture relationships with family, friends, and/or colleagues who will support and encourage me during times of difficulty and/or stress.*
4. *I will consume a variety of foods in moderation to achieve a weight suitable for my height, age, and gender.*
5. *I will establish a routine of physical exercise at least three times each week.*
6. *I will establish a routine of adequate sleep at night and appropriate vacation or days off to renew my physical and spiritual health.*
7. *I will routinely see my healthcare provider to guide me in the prevention and treatment of disease. I will endeavor to address any harmful addictive behavior such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or not wearing my seat belt.*
8. *I will put my legal house in order through the preparation of my personal will, durable power of attorney, living will, and/or guardianship for my surviving minor children. I will inform two people of the location of these documents.*

I covenant all of the above. My first priority to improve my physical and spiritual health is to

_____.

My Signature: _____

Friend's Signature: _____

Date: _____