Your Attitude and Your Health

Are you curious about your health and your future? You can put yourself through a battery of medical tests, fill out stacks of questionnaires, and see every specialist in town. But for a simple and surprisingly reliable prediction, just ask yourself a simple question: How healthy do you feel?

When it comes to health, your opinion definitely matters. That's what Duke University found when they asked almost 3,000 heart patients to classify their health as poor, fair, good, or very good. He found those who chose "very good" were about 70 percent less likely to die within three years than those who answered "good." And they had three times the survival rate of those who claimed "poor" health.

At first, such results may not seem surprising. After all, people who chose "poor" probably had good reason. But here's the astounding thing: In this study and many others, researchers did their best to adjust for age, smoking, activity levels, socioeconomic class, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, current diseases, and practically everything else that could affect a person's survival.

Even with all of these factors removed from the equation, a person's opinion of their health still stands out as a key to longevity. Take a roomful of 60-year-olds with the same lifestyles and identical results from their last physicals, and that single question can tell you which ones are most likely to see 70.

Here's another dramatic example of the power of perceptions. In a study of more than 5,000 people over the age of 65, researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that a poor image of one's health -- regardless of other risk factors -- roughly doubled the risk of death within five years. In fact, a pessimistic outlook proved to be deadlier than congestive heart failure or smoking 50 or more packs of cigarettes every year.

• Why is attitude so important?

These studies seem to suggest that attitude alone can tip the balance between life and death. But according to Ellen Idler, Ph.D., a professor at Rutgers University who has thoroughly studied the issue, it may be possible to explain the findings without invoking a mystical connection between thought and mortality.

Perhaps, she says, a fatalistic attitude can encourage a person to slip into an unhealthy lifestyle. It's also possible that people are deeply attuned to their bodies in ways that are beyond the intellect, and can sense impending trouble more accurately than any medical exam.

Still, there's something to be said for a sunny outlook. Depression and anxiety can fuel many illnesses, including heart disease, hypertension, asthma, and possibly even cancer and diabetes. A positive attitude about health can ward off mental distress and may help provide important protection against these diseases, says Gunnar Engstrom, M.D., a professor at Lund University in Sweden who has extensively studied self-ratings of health.

One thing is certain: You don't even have to be particularly healthy to see the bright side. Idler once interviewed a partially paralyzed stroke victim in a wheelchair who claimed to be in excellent health. "His only complaint was that he had recently strained his shoulder in a karate class," she says. "He never even mentioned the wheelchair."

Not everyone can match this person's indestructible optimism. But we can all take some control over the attitudes that may help steer our fate. As Idler puts it, "People should occasionally turn their attention away from risks to their health and focus on the resources they have to stay healthy."
Procrastination

Do you find yourself waiting until the last minute to finish a critical document? Are meetings often scheduled and announced just in the nick of time? Is the production of your work calendar a quarterly nightmare? If you recognize any of these scenarios, procrastination may be sneaking into your life, stealing valuable time, and eroding your productivity.

Procrastination is the habitual delay in starting a task or seeing it through to conclusion. But is this always a bad thing to do? The word "habitual" is the key. Most of us procrastinate to varying degrees. Occasional delay is no problem on less important tasks when the delay has no harmful effects to you or to others. However, once delay becomes a habit and creeps into all areas of your life, it undermines your ability to function effectively.

• **The seductiveness of delay** - Procrastination is seductive because there are short-term rewards that come from putting things off. When you have too much to do, deciding not to do any of them can reduce the immediate tension and stress you were feeling. There is a natural tendency to avoid unpleasant things. Putting them off (even though you will have to do them later) means, at the very least, that you do not have to face them right now. Plus, if you are lucky, they will go away or someone else will do them.

Procrastinating can also be exciting. It causes crises and the adrenaline rushes that goes along with them. Waiting until the last possible minute is similar to pitting yourself against the odds. You are gambling that not only will you win out over stress, fear, hunger, and fatigue, but that the mail will arrive on time, the copier will not break, the other person is not out sick, and that the tire will not go flat as you race to your 8 a.m. meeting. When you make it, you probably feel high and slightly euphoric. These are intense feelings, much more interesting than the quiet, calm satisfaction produced when the project is completed early.

Waiting until the last minute to start a difficult task can also be used as a defense for poor performance. You can always claim that it would have been better had there been more time. It can shield you from the consequences that you expect to occur after the project is completed. For example, not accepting a high visibility special assignment will shield you from the consequences of being in the limelight and possibly failing, or doing well and being offered more challenge than you can handle.

• **Breaking the cycle** - In trying to overcome procrastination, don’t decide all at once that you will never do it again. That is like deciding to climb Mount Everest next week without ever having been climbing. Be reasonable and be fair to yourself. Start slowly. Give yourself time to break a habit that has become ingrained and automatic.

For large, complicated or time-consuming projects such as formulating a budget, writing a new procedural manual, organizing a fund-raiser, or learning Chinese, break it into small, manageable parts. Smaller tasks are attractive because they are short, easy, and produce immediate gratification. Keep in mind that all projects, no matter how massive, are only a series of small items reassembled.

Another effective technique is to make a voluntary commitment to someone else. Allowing others to become involved in your efforts by reviewing your progress, helping you set deadlines, or evaluating your results can be very helpful. Often, we are too close to the situation to be objective. Your concerns, fears, and anxieties become secondary to fulfilling the expectations of the people you respect and trust.

Remember to reward yourself for good behavior. Punishing yourself for goofing off is not nearly as effective. Reward yourself at milestones in the process, not just at the completion. Rewards can be anything you like. They can be simple and inexpensive, but they should be things that are important to you. Reading for pleasure, relaxing, playing a game, visiting friends, traveling, going to dinner, and exercising can all be used as rewards. At work, doing the portion of your job that you find enjoyable can be a reward. If you regularly work overtime, go home on time, or take a lunch break instead of eating in a rush at your desk.

When you find yourself blocked and unable to start a task, and you have tried everything else, "think smart" by asking yourself: "Is there anything, no matter how small, that I am willing to do?" When you find that small thing, you are no longer procrastinating.

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