

Are you in a vicious cycle of unwellness?

Dr. Larry Ohlhauser, MD

“You can have it all!” screams one of our culture’s favourite mantras. The question I hear echoing back, however, is this one: “At what cost?”

Indeed, many of us pay dearly to “have it all,” and the sad, deadly truth is that we end up with precious little that makes us happy. Debilitating stress, failing health, unbalanced lifestyles, suffering relationships, anxiety over finances, overall disappointment in our quality of life – far too often, these are the entries on the other side of the fulfillment ledger.

Does this sound like you or someone you know? Perhaps you’re managing to get through each day, but your health, your marriage and your financial focus are all suffering.

Let’s begin with physical health. An increased understanding of human physiology and advances in medical science have introduced new ways to promote health and increase lifespan. However, there are no straight-forward, foolproof ways to treat, let alone eradicate, a vast number of diseases and medical conditions.

It is preventive strategies, instead, that are the key to taking charge of your health and investing in long-term quality of life. Yet many North Americans aren’t getting the message.

Obesity is a health crisis. More than 60 per cent of North Americans are considered overweight. More than 20 per cent are obese. One of every eight deaths is caused by an illness directly related to being overweight or obese.

Increasing numbers of individuals are being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and triglycerides, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. All of these often stem from obesity. Also on this list are certain types of cancer and even sleep apnea.

TV has become our top leisure activity, with people giving it an average of over four hours per day of their attention. What’s the tradeoff? Well, a recent study indicated that only 30 per cent of Americans aged 18 and older regularly engage in physical activity.

Our sedentary lifestyle is killing us.

We’re stressed out, too. In fact 20 per cent of North Americans worry that stress will affect their health – yet 36 per cent admit they deal with it by drinking alcohol or eating.

Is one problem really solved by creating another?

Sick on the Job

Our occupational habits aren't necessarily helping matters. Job-related stress can increase the risk of disease, burnout and depression, and can negatively affect time spent away from work. Recently a client said to me: "I wish I was 20 lb. lighter and had more energy. Work and relationship stresses cause me to lose sleep, and then I get sick more easily."

Real stress has a real impact – on health and peace of mind. Self-imposed stress can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, chest pain, depression, chronic fatigue and high blood pressure.

It leaves us with high levels of anxiety, and strained relationships with family, friends and other loved ones. It decreases productivity – trivial tasks start taking undue time and attention. We begin stagnating due to fear of failure. Personal satisfaction abandons us, so that nothing is ever quite good enough.

"I feel an unimaginable amount of pressure in my job," a client explained. "People envy me and my accomplishments, but they don't realize the costs. Now that I realize them, it's too late. I've invested too much getting here to give any on if up. And I can't admit this to anyone around me."

Relational Wellness

Friends, couples and families struggle to stay connected, given many of today's challenges: two-working-parent homes, an alarming divorce rate, aging parents who need care, career demands and a host of other day-to-day difficulties. Fast-paced days, at home and work and in between, create emotional isolation for many people, even those honestly seeking meaningful relationships. Where significant relationships do exist, work-related stress can still be caustic to emotionally nourishing pursuits.

I too often hear: "The biggest challenge of trying to achieve a balance is the fatigue I feel constantly and the job stress I take home. These affect my relationship with my spouse and the energy I have for my children. And I always feel guilty."

Emotional and relational problems are stressful in and of themselves, but they also have a negative impact on job satisfaction and work performance. Relational challenges travel with us from one setting to another and have a direct impact on us physiologically.

Stress takes its toll on our bodies in many ways. Unchecked, the relational-work stress cycle continues and a downward spiral begins.

Financial Wellness

But at least there's a goal. All this stress is building our personal wealth, right? Not necessarily.

Many continue to devote their best energy to living, but they never seem to realize their financial goals. Consider that

- The average credit card debt among North Americans with at least one card is greater than \$9,000
- The average household debt, not counting mortgage debt, is over \$14,500
- Families annually spend 40 per cent more than they earn.

"My friend would be shocked at my financial situation," a client told me. "My credit cards are maxed because I always assume more client cheques are bound to arrive next week. At month's end, I rob Peter to pay Paul and I spend more on interest than most people earn in a year."

Debt plagues people in every income bracket. No matter how much you make, poor financial decisions create havoc. The critical issue is not how much income is enough, but how to best manage the income you have.

An unbalanced cheque book, schedule, list of priorities, lifestyle or perspective can lead to a decline in overall wellness. But is genuine, comprehensive and pervasive health and wellness possible? Can one experience success in all area of life?

No one truly "has it all," but you can and should lead a life that's healthy, satisfying and rewarding.

There is hope. Keep reading this column to learn some of the proven strategies to bring your health and life into better balance.

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