

Building Wellness Wealth

Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP



In times of economic stress, it is important to pay attention to our financial status. For many, the New Year is a good time for setting goals to improve our personal wealth. It is also a time to think about improving our personal wellness and building our health currency. Much like our bank

accounts, the more resources we can accumulate in our health account, the healthier we can be.

The current economic climate has raised most peoples' stress levels to an all-time high. Sadly, these increased economic stresses often lead to physical and emotional stress that may have long-term health consequences.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that individuals with stress and related disorders experience impaired physical and mental function resulting in more work days lost, increased impairment at work, and a high use of healthcare services. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that 53 percent of survey respondents said they cut back on healthcare costs by avoiding doctor visits, skipping dental check-ups, and not filling prescriptions. Furthermore, more than 25 percent reported sleeping less because of the economy.¹ Earlier studies show that the disability caused by stress is just as significant as the disability caused by workplace accidents and other common medical conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis.²

Unfortunately, stressed people tend to worry—about being stressed. This leads to more stress and can leave people feeling overwhelmed, disillusioned, helpless, or suffering from burnout or depression, making problems seem insurmountable.

Stress is more than just a state of mind. Physical components of stress include tight muscles, headaches, difficulty falling asleep and restless sleep, abdominal pain, allergies and asthma, inflammation, and high blood pressure. Prolonged high blood pressure may lead to heart disease, heart attack, and stroke. Long-term inflammation may lead to weight gain, diabetes, and even kidney disease.³

Our bodies expend high levels of energy to cope with stress—physical or psychological. Even when we have many responsibilities and excessive time demands, we normally have energy to spare. If we make the time to eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, and get enough rest, our energy levels exceed energy outputs. However, when we are fatigued, irritable, or in pain, our accounts becomes less fluid and the long-term outlook may include poor physical health or mental illness.

Our Personal Wellness Account

Much like building financial wealth, building wellness wealth requires

having the right information, planning, and making good choices. From a health perspective, wellness wealth requires growing and sustaining our energy. Energy is the currency of our personal health accounts.

Our theoretical health accounts are founded in our genetic donations, aptitudes and limitations, as well as our experiences, lifestyle, social environment, and psychological, physical, and emotional decisions. Our personal health account makes up our wellness wealth. And, as we have known since the beginning of time, if we are not healthy, little else matters.

When it comes to lifestyle choices, most decisions are either a withdrawal from our personal health status, or a deposit toward improved wellness. If we smoke a cigarette, it is equivalent to swiping our bank card, taking resources out of our accounts. If we meditate, eat healthily, exercise, or become a volunteer, we have just deposited positive behaviors into our accounts.

Both acute and long term stress can drain our accounts. To manage stress and the other challenges of life, we need to pay attention to the basic energy fuels of nutrition, exercise, and sufficient sleep.

If we do not receive sufficient amounts of any of these deposits, the debit side of our balance sheet increases. We have too little energy to accomplish our daily tasks, let alone do the things that add to our currency and make our wellness account profitable. With sufficient deposits, we will have energy to spare and help our health account to thrive.

Unfortunately, procrastinating also seems to be hard-wired into our DNA, especially when it comes to our health. Our busy lives make it difficult to schedule regular physician and dentist appointments. Many of us eat our meals on the run, work long hours, and simply find it easy to adjust to sedentary leisure activities.

Even if a person is healthy in other respects, cigarettes, alcohol, and negative thoughts and emotions such as resentment, jealousy, and anger can rapidly break down our health and energy. Negative emotions are especially insidious. When we are around those who consistently deplete positive resources, theirs and ours, our own wellness reserves are also lost.⁴

Stress, fear, anguish, and ill-will relentlessly add invisible workloads to the day, sapping our strength and aging us prematurely. Along with the basic currency of nutritious food, vigorous exercise, and sufficient rest, a positive mental attitude is also important to our well-being.

There are, however, many additional sources that enrich our health accounts. Positive relationships with our family, fulfilling friends, a well-chosen career, stimulating and challenging activities and interests, learning new skills, and exploring new environments can enhance our long-term health and contribute to our wellness accounts.⁴

The greatest wealth is health

Virgil

Setting an Example

When we spend time around people who take care of themselves, push themselves, and promote positivity, we tend to do the same. Nowhere is this more important than in setting examples for our children. Much like starting a savings account for a child, healthy adult behaviors provide good examples for fitness and well-being for their children. Research has shown that lifestyles that are learned in childhood are more likely to stay with the child into adulthood.^{4,5}

Childhood obesity is at an all-time high. Since 1980, the number of overweight children ages 6-11 has doubled. In adolescents, the numbers have tripled. Research suggests that multiple factors, including advertising, time demands, and availability of fast food influence food choices of adults and children. Furthermore, children of inactive parents tend toward inactivity themselves. Children need direct messages to motivate them to change their exercise and eating habits, as well as encouragement to learn to achieve fitness goals and take the steps toward healthy lifestyles.⁵

Mindfulness and Health

Self-care and the development of proactive strategies to improve or maintain our health can build our wellness wealth. Important to self-care are relationships, the physical environment, nutrition, movement and exercise, the mind-body connection, and personal growth and spirituality. They interact and affect each another. More importantly, they provide balance and sustainability.⁶

Some say that mindfulness is at the heart of good health and well-being. Mindfulness, the practice of staying alert to your physical, mental, social, and spiritual environments, has been integrated in many treatment methodologies for acute and chronic illnesses. Non-judgmental awareness enables individuals to recognize symptoms as they emerge, encouraging early management and treatment.⁶

Being mindful can help us with any number of aggravations such as coping with pain, improving a relationship, and even building confidence and self-esteem by letting go of self-destructive thoughts. Mindfulness encourages us to pay attention to our surroundings, our health and to remember to take care of ourselves.

Much like the fact that it takes time to build financial strength, it also takes time to build a health and wellness account. If we start by asking how is our work-life balance and what can we do to improve it, we are taking the first steps. Gradually adding positive actions and

behaviors can lead to improved health.

It is important to focus on being proactive and taking action steps that can reduce stress and support our overall well-being. Building wellness wealth requires a change in physical and mental habits. Change is certainly known to cause stress. However, feeling stress is also the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness.

We are all genetically inclined toward self-preservation and security. It is important to recognize the need to plan and develop strategies to strengthen our overall well-being in order to have lives that are happy, fulfilling, and long-lasting. Our goal should be a healthy body and a positive mental state. It is important to think about our decisions and behaviors, and how they impact our minds and bodies. We need to ask ourselves if we are debiting or crediting our health and wellness accounts. ■

Resources

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