Wellness Milestones

The Attitude Factor

Medical science is making amazing discoveries about the relationship between your state of mind and your mental and physical health. The research has shown that the right attitude, along with mental and emotional expectations, do influence medical outcomes. Attitude is a psychosocial factor of the mind-body connection that affects your physical and emotional wellness. Attitude is about having the fortitude to do what you want to do, when you want to do it.

Stress comes from how you have chosen to react to the stresses of everyday life, rather than from the stressor itself. A strong mind and understanding of those behaviors that influence well-being can lead to a positive attitude toward getting and staying healthy. Having a strong mind; being responsible, self-disciplined, capable, and easygoing; having a low level of anxiety; and possessing enthusiasm, sensitivity, and warmth are factors strongly correlated to successful aging. Studies also suggest that living with a sense of purpose and self-worth and feeling optimistic, soothed, and supported, greatly increase positive outcomes.

Developing a positive mental attitude toward wellness is also considered essential to success. By adopting an attitude of wellness, we take on a belief that being well is a natural, normal state. The goal is to have outstanding, vibrant health, not just to be free of disease. With a wellness attitude, we know that we have control over our own body and how healthy it will be. Most importantly, you know that you have a choice. You can either choose good health and wellness or opt for poor health and sickness.

Does my outlook on my health really matter?

How healthy do you feel? When it comes to health, your opinion definitely matters. That’s what Duke University found when their researchers asked almost 3,000 heart patients to classify their health as poor, fair, good, or very good. As reported in the December 1999 issue of Medical Care, 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. In the study, researchers adjusted for age, smoking, activity levels, socioeconomic class, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, current diseases, and practically everything else that could affect a person’s survival. Bottom line: A person’s opinion of his or her health still stands out as a key to longevity.

In another 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. Further, individuals with more positive emotions are less likely to become frail and retain greater memory, according to 2004 studies published in Psychology and Aging.

Why is attitude so important?

Studies seem to suggest that attitude alone can tip the balance between life and death. Certainly, 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.

A good attitude is critical to accepting good habits as a permanent part of life. In matters of health and wellness, a more forgiving attitude that lets you make mistakes and move on to make better choices next time is a positive approach to making changes in your life.

It takes about 21 days to form a habit, good or bad. It is said that habits determine 95 percent of thoughts, feelings, and actions. Habits are an intimate and fundamental part of one’s self. Habits are the result of repeated and intelligently controlled actions. Individuals have two major types of habits; habits that revolve around desires and habits that revolve around fears. The habits that revolve around desires for health, happiness, financial independence, and success are life-enhancing. The habits that revolve around fears and negative behavior can act as brakes on

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potential. Poor habits interfere with success, trip you up on a regular basis, cause you to sell yourself short, and may result in negative consequences.

Everybody knows that you can acquire a particular physical skill by learning how it’s done, and then repeating it over and over again until it becomes automatic. But when it comes to positive attitudes and mental habit patterns, most people are less likely to follow the same process. They don’t realize that you can learn mental habit patterns by following exactly the same process that you would use to learn physical habit patterns. And mental habit patterns will have a far greater impact on your life and happiness than any physical habit pattern ever could.

How long does it take to develop a new habit pattern? It depends on how complex the habit pattern is. You can develop a simple habit pattern in 14 to 21 days. For example, if you want to begin getting up half an hour earlier so that you can plan and organize your day, it might take just two to three weeks to develop the habit. If you want to develop a new habit pattern of behavior that goes deeper into your character, it might take several months, or even a year or more. The most important thing is that no matter how long it takes, the end results are achievable if you are really determined.

Choosing to Change

A passing thought about changing your habits, if allowed to persist, becomes a strong idea. This strong idea creates a desire for that particular object. The desire becomes resolve, which then leads to action. When we continue to repeat that action it becomes a habit. This passing thought gains power and momentum by the attention and encouragement. The more we attend to it, the stronger it gets.

A passing thought can be negative or positive. Hence this pattern could apply equally to developing positive or negative habits. If we follow this pattern we can learn to develop good habits and also to unlearn bad habits and substitute them for healthier ones. Replacing bad habits with good ones is a very important part of the habit change process. Good habits fill the void left by eliminating the bad habit. Developing good habits is often as challenging as breaking bad ones.

Making a change starts with the thought process. First, resolve today to take action to change. Second, determine one good habit you would like to develop and start practicing it immediately. Third, decide on one habit you don’t like and stop doing it from this moment forward.

When you decide to develop a good habit, you’ll need to set a goal. Do you want to stop a problem habit because it leads to some particular problem? If so, then you can choose a new habit or pattern of behavior that is inconsistent with the old habit and that moves you toward the goal. When you are contemplating developing a good habit, list the advantages and disadvantages of the habit. When the advantages of the habit outweigh the disadvantages, you are more likely to stick to your habit change goal.

Support is important for any type of behavior change. You can find support in the words and actions of others and also within yourself from your own self-talk. Or, professional coaching may be necessary. Many employers offer such assistance, as do community centers, church organizations, social clubs and fitness centers. It is critical to remember that you can be your own best support person or you can be demanding, nagging, and critical of yourself. A negative attitude can derail your good intentions. Finally, the most important thing you and the significant others in your life can do to help you break a habit or develop a new one is recognizing that small steps in the right direction can make a difference.

People with positive attitudes generally enjoy life more, but are they any healthier? The answer is often “yes.” Breaking old habits and forming new ones, choosing to change your behavior to benefit your health, and maintaining a good attitude, is a recipe for life. Your body responds to your thoughts, emotions, and actions. Staying fit, eating right, restful sleep, and managing stress, along with the right choices and right attitude improves your wellness quotient and promotes a longer, healthy life.

Attitude is Everything!

The Council for Public Interest in Anesthesia (CPIA) promotes patient safety through consumer education and practitioner risk reduction strategies. AANA Director of Practice Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP, is the primary staff member responsible for the all the CPIA activities and the Wellness Project as well as the staffing for the AANA Peer Assistance Advisors Committee. Questions and comments may be addressed to stunajek@aana.com or (847) 655-1115.