

Health and Disease: New Definitions

We need to look at ourselves from a systems point of view—as an organism comprised of physical elements and an energy field constantly in flux the whole. We are influenced at all times, endlessly, and in many ways difficult to pinpoint, by countless disturbances and inputs. We must redefine our concepts of health and disease. Once we are aware of what represents health, and what represents disease—what is all right to feel, and what forebodes trouble—we can make more responsible choices about how to improve our condition.

What Is Health?

First, what it is not. It is not a condition we can attain once and for all. Just as our body changes by breathing, coughing, getting hungry, and all its other activities, so does our health. We don't just "get there" and stay, as if we had arrived home and plunked down in our easy chair. And even if we did, how long can we stay in an easy chair without getting up for something? How long can we stay anywhere without generally moving on?

Our movement, our direction toward health is toward wholeness and integration, oneness of mind and body, connectedness with fellow humans with our environment. Or it can be towards disease, which manifests itself in alienation, disintegration, and separateness. Almost invariably, if we are following the first path, we feel good and optimistic at our core. If we're on the second, we feel worried, sad, and dissatisfied.

It is not enough to define health as the absence of disease. Rather, health is the aggregate of a series of specific conditions. These are ideal conditions and can in some way be viewed as goals to be obtained. (So health is truly a goal with multiple priorities, all working together to achieve this ideal state.) Because we are looking at human beings as whole systems, internally complex and externally interactive, their appropriate functioning, or "health," must be manifested not only on the physical but also on the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual levels.

PHYSICAL

1. **NO FATIGUE.** This means not waking up tired in the morning, or feeling "exhausted" all the time, a widespread condition nowadays, and a definite sign of "imbalance". The feeling of "no fatigue" also applies to psychological outlook: It means being ready to accept the challenges and work without saying, "Oh, it's too much for me, I can't handle it," and other such expressions.

2. **GOOD APPETITE.** This means enjoying food fully, whether it's a plain bowl of soup and some bread or an elaborate meal. In addition, it means an appetite for life, a thirst for knowledge, an eagerness for enriching new experiences, and a healthy and joyful appetite for sex.
3. **GOOD SLEEP.** Falling asleep within four or five minutes of lying down, sleeping deeply for five to seven hours, waking up at the right time with a clear head and without an alarm clock—those are the main characteristics. Good sleep also means a minimum of dreams, no tossing and turning, no snoring, and no talking out loud. In short, this condition means having the ability to relax and rest completely in a clearly defined time period and to emerge from it totally alert and ready to go.
4. **GOOD MEMORY.** Remembering what we have said and done, seen, heard, and read is crucial for good health. Without memory, we cannot learn and grow, for we are doomed to repeat our forgotten mistakes. A good memory will help us remember how we got to where we are, and if we're in a pickle, it will help us retrace and rethink our actions for a more satisfying result.
5. **GOOD HUMOR.** One of the trickier conditions. It means never getting impatient or angry—not repressing anger, just not feeling it. It means being genuinely cheerful, having a positive approach to life, seeing the good side of things, being able to laugh at ourselves and our foibles. In traditional Chinese medicine, anger is related to imbalanced energy in the liver; an angry outburst, chronic impatience, crankiness, and similar moods could be the expression of a congested liver. Conversely, the Chinese believe that allowing violent anger to be expressed regularly can injure that same organ.
6. **PRECISION IN THOUGHT AND ACTION.** Just like a cat that always lands on its feet, the healthy person is capable of making correct split-second decisions and of carrying them out accurately. This condition presupposes the existence of a sound nervous system and a strong fluid body-mind connection. Knocking things over, dropping things, grazing the garage door with the car, even saying the wrong thing, are always indications that our judgment, our perception, and movement are not correctly integrated—and thus our health is less than it could be.

SOCIAL

7. **TAKING RESPONSIBILITY.** This means that we realize the futility of blaming others for our problems. If we accept the fact that we are creators of our lives, it follows that we also created whatever mess we are in, health wise or otherwise. Guilt is unnecessary at this stage, for it paralyzes. A straightforward noting of the facts, on the other hand, helps us see the way out. If we made the mess, we can unmake it as well. Taking responsibility is the basis for Personal Power, for the ability to change ourselves and thereby the world, in a positive and healing way.

8. **MAKING CHOICES.** Exercising our capacity to choose could be the most crucial among the conditions of health. To fulfill it, we need (a) knowledge of the options available; and (b) the ability to communicate our decisions. And of course, to choose, we must accept responsibility for both the situation and the outcome. In the area of health, we should be able to make considered choices about the best healing technique to correct what ails us, with possibilities ranging from prayer and fasting to CAT SCANS and laser beam surgery. (It may be of interest to doctors and other healers that when the patient freely and knowingly chooses a particular therapy, with full knowledge of its limitations, malpractice is rarely an issue. It is so only in cases when the patient, instead is taking responsibility for his condition and his healing personally, blindly gives over the responsibility and power to the therapist.)

SPIRITUAL

9. **HONESTY.** When our health is good, we have no fear, and thus no need to lie. This does not mean that we have to say everything that comes to our minds—tact and discretion are not dispensable. It does mean not lying to ourselves, being fair and honorable, trustworthy and upright—it means, in fact, integrity.

10. **GRATITUDE.** This condition presupposes a good memory; as we remember how bad things can be, or how easily we can lose that which is dearest to us, we become very appreciative of all things around us. When our body is healthy and we feel good, everything seems magnificent and admirable. At the same time, a sense of wonder and appreciation can in itself be an expression of health, regardless of our physical condition.

11. **HUMILITY.** About this one condition of health, we can do little, for we cannot cure ourselves of arrogance, that intractable disease of the spirit. If we have humility, only age, the memory of our mistakes, the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the whips and storms of time,” can heal us. Our humility, if it is genuine, must not be noticed by us—only by others.
12. **LOVE.** We may change our diet, clear our skin, heal our cancer—but if we have no charity, it’s of little avail. Health is but an ego trip, vanity, and a striving after wind if we don’t unconditionally *accept life*, ourselves, and our fellow humans as they are—that is, love them. Finding fault with how our brother eats, judging him sick when he doesn’t do as we do, disapproving of his lifestyle—all these only betray our own sense of incompleteness. Those who are capable of unconditional love at all times are forever healthy, no matter what their physical condition may be.

What Is Disease? (Illness)

The conditions (or goals) of health listed above present us with a very precise model against which to measure ourselves. We will invariably fall short of some of them (if we think we don’t, then we are short on 9 & 11 for sure!), but it is especially our shortcomings in the first six conditions that will quickly alert us that we are, in some way, ill. We are in fact right when we feel, for example, that being tired all the time is a sign that something is wrong, even if “nothing can be found.” A loss of memory often accompanies hardening of the arteries, while habitual falling and dropping things can indicate the beginning of degenerative diseases of the nervous system. Even if there is no actual “classifiable disease”, in the Western modern medical sense, this health model will help us identify imbalances in our system that can be corrected.

Modern medicine recognizes mostly physical causes for our disorders: bacteria, viruses, genes, pollution, malnutrition. In cases where none of these seem to apply, the finger is pointed at psychological problems—stress, or “nerves”. At times the latter seem simply catchall categories for “causes unknown,” rather than actual causative agents.

“It appears to me that one ought to know what diseases arise in man from the powers (forces) and what from the structures,” wrote Hippocrates. Ancient healing systems, old medicine, and occult wisdom are all based on the premise that “all is one—accept the nonphysical (the “powers”) as coequal with the physical (“structures”). Holistic healing (in accordance with the systems viewpoint) realigns itself with the venerable worldview; therefore a listing of the causes of disease must encompass all levels of reality if it is to be accurate—just as health, as we have seen, is manifest in all aspects of human life.

Of all such listings, the one I have found the most comprehensive and useful is that advanced by Paracelsus, the great sixteenth century Swiss mystic and medical reformer. He recognized five major causes of disease:

1. ***External and Environmental:*** Heat, cold, wind, rain, trauma, and in our modern terminology; bacteria, viruses, and pollution.
2. ***Poisons and Impurities:*** Spoiled food, wrong food, poisonous substances, chemicals of all kinds, herbs, and medicines with undesirable side effects.
3. ***Genetic and Hereditary:*** We must include here not only long-standing genetic conditions, but also those caused by alcohol, drugs, medications, malnutrition, and an unhealthy diet in either parent, as well as during the mother's pregnancy.
4. ***Psychological:*** Stress, grief, psychological trauma, hysteria, and other emotional conditions.
5. ***Spiritual or Karmic:*** In the worldview of Paracelsus, as in the many societies and philosophies; past lives are real, and we are accountable in our present life for wrongdoing during past ones. Disdain for cripples in one life, according to this belief, may lead to being a cripple in another.

In this listing, wrong diet is only one of many causes of our disorders. We now know, however, that it can exacerbate the effects of the others by weakening our resistance and undermining our immune system.

Right diet is, then, not always a direct cure but works indirectly by strengthening the body once again and allowing the immune system to regain its power. For this reason, many different diets appear to be "cures" for any number of diseases; and people who experience them are neither mistaken nor lying about their stories. What happens is simply that each individual case history is a story of how one person's immune system was stimulated back into operation, rather than how a way of eating "cured" a disease.

All symptoms carry a message about conditions within our system. They are the only forceful method of communication between the body and the waking consciousness, which is usually focused on the outward. In fact, they are almost like the "red lights" on the dashboard that indicate when the car is low on gas or oil. Early symptoms whose messages are not heeded eventually give way to other, stronger ones. If we still don't understand what the body is trying to tell us, serious trouble is bound to ensue.

If only the symptom itself is eradicated, and its deeper, underlying cause is not found or attended to, it is akin to smashing the dashboard with a hammer instead of adding 3 quarts of oil to the engine. It is possible to do both—eliminate the symptom, or the area in which the symptom appears (i.e. tonsillectomy), and its cause (wrong diet). But that is like smashing the dashboard and then adding three quarts of oil. The car will run well enough, but future communication between the car and the driver will be impaired—how will the car signal its need for oil the next time?

Symptoms are always a change in the function and eventually the structure of the body. What does this mean? Change can be part of the movement of items through the system; it can be part of a structuring of the system; and it can be the system decaying. Symptoms could, then, be classified into two opposite yet complimentary categories, according to whether they indicate movement toward healing (“structuring”) or away from it: (a) symptoms of the integration mode; or (b) symptoms of the disintegration mode.

This classification, as with most classifications of observed phenomena, is somewhat arbitrary, for all activities of the body are essentially designed to keep it functioning. It is when the symptom pits the body against itself that disintegration has hastened. For example, the formation of a cyst or tumor can be seen as the immune system’s confinement and isolation of unexcreted cell waste or useless cells. But if the tumor begins to grow excessively, obstructing vessels and pressing on nerves, it is no longer useful; it has become detrimental to the system’s functioning.

The integration mode is the one in which the body operates unconsciously most of the time. Paradoxically, consciousness can obstruct its smooth functioning by trying to “improve” things, through mechanical or chemical intervention. Often these interventions (surgery, drugs) seem perfectly rational and appropriate. But they end up having devastating side effects because they are based on the notion that without intervention things will get worse. This is rarely so: **“The great secret, known to internists but still hidden from the general public,” wrote Lewis Thomas, “is that most things get better by themselves. Most things, in fact, get better by morning.”** When we don’t acknowledge and co-operate with our body’s inherent self-organizing abilities—with our immune system—our most elegant healing techniques invariably backfire.

I have come up with a classification of symptoms according to degree or stage, of disease they represent. It is based in part on the work of various natural healers especially Michio Kushi, as well as my own observations. I do not intend it to stand as a definitive categorization of stages of disease, but rather as another aspect of the mental model of the human system—a practical model that is easy to use for lay people, and true only insofar as it is useful in making accurate appraisals and predictions.

This classification of symptoms has served me well in determining which disease conditions can be taken care of with food and home remedies and which need professional interventions. Symptoms, then, can be seen in the following:

1. **Adjustment:** Minor symptoms, such as fevers and headaches, that can easily disappear without treatment or simple natural remedies; they are the system's efforts to keep itself in homeostatic balance.
2. **Discharge:** This is the system's attempt to rid itself of useless noxious matter through other than normal channels. These include sneezing, coughing, skin eruptions, mucus discharges. Most of these symptoms can and should be treated with diet and natural home remedies.
3. **Accumulation:** This stage ensues if the discharge is suppressed or is not adequate. It includes cysts, benign growths, excess weight, fatty deposits, and stones. From here on, professional attention may be required.
4. **Malfunction:** When the accumulation gets in the way, or when the body's electric (energy) system goes awry, the organs and the immune system work less and less efficiently, as in diabetes, appendicitis, early cancer, heart attacks or fibrillation, hepatitis, and kidney failure.
5. **Structural change:** Eventually, the very shape of the organs or other body structures changes, sometimes irreversibly. Included here would be arthritis, cirrhosis, cataracts, enlargement of the heart, ruptured appendix, late cancer, advanced arteriosclerosis.

These five stages are handy for us to keep in mind, especially when we are dealing in the world of practicing dentistry. The first stages of gum disease are relatively easy to reverse. With advancing disease, structural changes occur. When is the ideal time to interrupt this disease process? As early as possible, but one must take into consideration that most diseases are multicausal, therefore treatment must also be multi-factorial or failure will result.

Occlusal disease and tooth wear. Is occlusal disease limited to the non-regenerative capacity of the enamel? No, occlusal disease evidences itself in changes in the structural form of the face; changes in the structural form of the joints, changes in the structural form of muscles, nerves.

As disease of any kind advances one can be relatively certain that the structural changes at the cellular level will evidence themselves eventually in observable changes in form of the teeth, muscles, bone, TMJ and face.

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