



Empowering Caregivers: Your Health Belongs to You

How would you define health? Is it to be without illness? Do you have to be a super athlete to meet your idea of health? Do you envision a healthy person as someone who only eats vegetables? Do you imagine you must be young, or ultra-thin to be considered healthy? Does being healthy require that you restrict everything fun and pleasurable? Does achieving health require that you be perfect? Is health an ideal that feels impossible for you to realistically ever reach?

Health is not about frantically pursuing perfection or depriving yourself of life's pleasures. Your health is really about caring for the treasure of the one body, mind, spirit that you are given. In this presentation we invite you, who are imperfect, aging, ill, unfit, exhausted, stressed and discouraged to join us in this invitation to embrace your health. No matter what condition you find yourself in; achieving the rewards of your health and wellbeing is truly within your reach. We are inviting you to reclaim ownership of your health and embrace the power that you have to restore your wellbeing. Your health belongs to you!

Do we understand feeling discouraged about keeping up with caring properly for yourself? Absolutely! We know that caregivers especially are at greater risk of ignoring the need for care and attention because so much of your energy and attention is focused on managing the care of another. We know that caregivers are at higher risk of experiencing negative physical, emotional, mental, and social consequences as a result of the demands and isolation that caregiving often requires.

We hear caregivers everyday say that they have no time for themselves. We hear how caregivers struggle to get enough sleep, to get themselves to the doctors when they need it. We hear how you often feel unappreciated and mentally drained from the worry and emotional strains of caring for another's needs. We hear how many of you have given up jobs that felt meaningful and set aside your goals and personal interests to care for your loved one. We hear how you have lost touch with friends and family and grown isolated in your caregiving role.

We hear your challenges, and our hearts reach out to you in your struggle. You and your health are the vital source which feeds all of your efforts. Your health and wellbeing feed your desire and satisfaction with your own life. Without care and attention to you, everything suffers. Without care for your needs, life loses its luster. Despite your challenges we believe that it is within your reach to take hold of your health. You can decide now to bring greater attention and care to meeting your needs



for health and nurturing. It is within your power to approach your wellbeing with a commitment not to perfection but to compassionate care.

Now before you begin to feel overwhelmed or discouraged, it is critical that this idea of perfection gets thrown out the door. We are not going to be exploring how you might reach some ideal state of perfection. We are going to be exploring how you can realistically take hold of all of the aspects of your current health status and find meaningful and reasonable steps to bring greater wellbeing to your life.

Let's not focus anymore on the challenges, rather let's focus on where your power is to bring the benefits of self-care into your life. This means getting creative. This will mean looking at all of the aspects and avenues you can explore to improve health and well-being. We are going to encourage you to decide upon small and manageable steps to improve the quality of your life. Take hold of the power that you have to make yourself a priority.

There is no getting around the reality that in order to improve the status of your health and wellbeing, you must make the decision to invest. You must put your attention to this, and you must put some effort towards making it happen. Now we know that if you are already feeling overwhelmed or discouraged there may be a compelling urge to just give up and not take charge. But this is the very place where the simple power of choice comes into play. This is the point where you tell yourself with understanding and kindness to not give up on yourself. Fight that urges to give up and make the decision to invest a little bit of effort so that you can reap the rewards.

Let's begin by identifying all of the aspects known to contribute to individual health. Your overall health encompasses many distinct and interconnected components. Each component that contributes to overall health and well-being is influenced by each other. Your health and wellbeing are influenced by what you eat, physical movement, your environment, your emotions, your thoughts, beliefs, values, social supports and the sense of meaning you attribute to your life.

When researchers scan the world to identify people that enjoy the longest life as well as the greatest quality of life and functioning in old age, they have identified a small number of communities that stand out above the rest of the world. What notable lifestyle behaviors contributed to such long and healthy lives in these communities?

They found that each particular community environment reinforced and naturally supported a healthy lifestyle. They were often communities where people were out in the environment, in nature, tending their gardens, fishing, herding or farming. They



were physically walking or working outdoors in the sunlight. They also found that they ate fresh non processed food, like fresh greens, nuts, rice, goats' milk and cheese, beans, and drank water and herbal teas. Not only were they active but they also made time for leisure and napping. Time was spent in community collaborating with others, socializing with family and friends. In these communities' seniors were viewed as a valuable part of the community rather than living in isolation. Also of significance was the spiritual beliefs, strong sense of purpose, positive outlook and sense of humor were strong qualities found in the people that resided in the community.

When we look at this research it is clear how the modern-day lifestyle has contributed to these protective life sustaining qualities having been lost to societal changes. What is helpful though, is to know what these protective qualities are and to find ways to bring them into your daily practice of healthy living.

The very first and most important part of taking ownership of your health is to simply pay closer attention to yourself. When life is moving so rapidly, when your schedule is jammed from one day to the next, when you are going through the motions of your life on autopilot and especially when you are focusing attention on others, it is very easy to lose sight of you. It is easy to lose sight of how you feel, what you want or need in the present moment.

Not only is it harder to pay attention when you are stressed but often you are more likely to look for quick relief from a quick fix of comfort that actually may strain your health and wellness further. When you are stressed are you more apt for example to; eat fast food, sit mindlessly in front of the TV or computer, isolate yourself, use alcohol to manage stress? These are just some of the ways you may be seeking quick relief from the stress and fast pace of your life. Think about it when you are running low on time, energy, or emotional stamina. What do you turn to in order to feel better in the short run? Are you making choices that further strain on your health?

While it is understandable to seek relief from quick fixes; often these quick fixes contribute to wearing at your health and stamina which then interferes with your ability to manage the challenges you do face. Interestingly, some of the quick fixes you may turn to can set up an actual craving so that you inadvertently crave those things as a habit. It can be powerful to notice what happens if you stop turning to your go to craving on a daily basis and mindfully chose to engage in a behavior that will support you in the long run. It can be powerful to begin to notice how many ways you can begin move towards improved health and wellbeing by making many small and purposeful decisions.



This isn't an all or nothing proposition. It is really paying attention to you and the choices you make each day. What choices are you making every day with the food you eat, what you drink, how you move? What choices do you make to get outside in nature or open the shades to sunlight? What choices do you make to connect with others, to reflect on what matters or engage in something that you enjoy? Pay attention to you and the choices you make and most especially pay attention to whether or not these choices lead to you feeling good in the long run. If you are listening to yourself, you will know better than anyone when something you are doing or not doing is contributing to your wellbeing.

One of the tools that can contribute to greater awareness and attention to yourself is a practice called Mindfulness Meditation. Practicing this can help you become more aware of yourself. Mindfulness encourages an attitude of self-compassion and non-judgement. It can help you manage the stresses that you are living with in the present moment and provides an inner calm that supports clear and mindful choices. Mindfulness meditation has been shown to have positive benefits on health, reducing the effects of stress, help in managing pain, restoring your immune system, and increasing your ability to manage your emotions. Even spending a few minutes each day can begin to provide benefits. There are a multitude of guided meditations you can access via the internet, to download on your phone, and through the VA and the VA Caregiver Support Program Web sites. Consider exploring this lifegiving tool as a means of bringing its powerful benefits into your daily health and wellbeing.

Now that we have talked about how important it is to begin to pay closer attention to yourself and one of the tools that can help you do that, let's move on to having you reflect upon where you are at right now and where you may want to go in terms of health and wellness. Again, you will want to reflect upon your health and wellbeing in a wholistic manner. When you are considering where you are at and what changes you may want to make in your daily life consider all of the many avenues of enhancing health and wellbeing. Include what you eat, how much and how often. How do you move, exercise, stretch? How does your surrounding environment support your health? Do you benefit from nature? Are you staying connected to others? Spiritual practices, values and beliefs are important when looking at well-being. What gives you a sense of meaning and satisfaction? How often do you laugh? How rested are you and what do you do for leisure and fun? Reflect on which areas are most ignored or depleted. Everyone is unique and what you need to support your wellbeing will be unique to you. How do you personally want to add more attention and care to your health and wellbeing?



The trick to enhancing your health and wellbeing is to recognize the power of making small and daily investments. The key to not getting discouraged is to simply focus on the positive steps you are making each day to invest in yourself, however small you think those steps are. Identify areas that you want to put forth effort or attention and decide what you want to do to invest in that area. Maybe it is deciding to take a walk outside for 15 minutes a couple times a week, calling a friend to chat, eating a salad or some greens every week, taking 10 minutes in the morning to meditate, spending time learning something new or listening to music. You decide what areas of wellbeing are depleted and you decide what steps you want to make.

Watch out for any critical self-talk as this only contributes to getting discouraged. Rather, be kind and supportive of each decision that you make to further your health and wellbeing. Then pay attention to how it feels when you make this effort. Observe the benefits as this will reinforce your decisions and build on itself. Put aside perfection and invest in what contributes to feeling happy and well.

The VA has developed a new initiative called Whole Health that emphasizes a holistic perspective in supporting Veteran health and wellbeing. The idea of Whole Health is not an inherently new idea but one that has been emphasized in Eastern Medicine practices for a long time. Whole health means you are noticing the many factors in your life that either positively impact your well-being or hurt your well-being. Noticing how one area of your life impacts the others is something that is gaining an ever-increasing abundance of research and talk within science and medicine. The VA Whole Health initiative asks you to think about what changes you can make towards a healthier and happier lifestyle. You have control over many aspects of your health and wellbeing, and this approach empowers you to make positive changes to support your health. Throughout this presentation we focus on the many aspects of whole health, including exercise, surroundings, personal development, food and drink, recharging, family/friends/coworkers, spirit and soul, and the power of the mind.

You are at the center of this idea. It is important to recognize health conditions you may be struggling with, but also to recognize what can impact your well-being in a positive way. This opens up the door to think about not just the problem, but the many ways in which you may find solutions to improve your life. Whole Health recognizes everybody has a unique story and history. Finding ways to improve in one area of your life may allow you to reap the benefits of how it can impact your life overall. The local VAMC closest to you has a Whole Health Coach or Champion, and this may be a way for you and your loved one to connect further with the ideas we are discussing today.



We encourage you to reach out and delve into the ideas we are sharing. Make the shift to think about your health, rather than just a diagnosis or disease.

Food and drink are a significant component of managing health and wellness. As the old proverb goes “You are what you eat.” As we mentioned earlier the people who were found to stay healthy the longest were those that incorporated plenty of fresh non processed food, like fresh greens, nuts, rice, goats’ milk and cheese, beans, and drank water and herbal teas in their diet. Your body uses food like fuel and the fuel you feed it can alter how well it functions. Food and drink contribute to the degree of health or disease, the state of your mood and the functioning of your mind, both in the short and long term. How are you fueling your body, mind and spirit?

Certainly, if you are rushed, have many demands on your time, or if finances are very tight, all of these aspects can contribute to making choices with food that in the short term may be cheap or convenient but in the long term negatively impact your health. You may tend to overeat more when tired and stressed which can contribute to poor health outcomes. When you are sleep deprived you may find yourself trying to compensate for the lack of energy by eating more than you need. When stressed you may eat mindlessly not paying any attention to eating balanced healthy meals or find you don’t pay attention to how full you are and end up overeating.

What choices are you making that you think aren’t really supporting your health and wellbeing? Do you find when you are worn out you run to favorite comfort foods and overdo it? Do you tend to seek out chocolates or sugary snacks, do you lose yourself in starches like a pile of pasta or cereals? Are salty foods like chips your go to? Do you gulp down caffeine to get some energy or drink alcohol to calm the stress? Do you ditch making balanced healthy meals and instead grab burgers and fries or other greasy fast food take outs? How does it feel to pile in these short-term comforts? Do you notice feeling sluggish, zoned out, or uncomfortably full?

What might happen if you were not mindless when you ate? What would happen if you paid attention in the moment to how these choices were really making you feel? You may think you want to eat that 1pound bag of M&M’s or that whole bag of chips but if you paid attention to how it actually made you feel in the moment you may make different choices or eat less of them.

Again, whole health isn’t about labeling food good or bad or expecting that you need to seek perfection in your diet. It is about paying attention to your choices, paying attention to when you are full and purposely incorporating more healthy choices into your diet. Strangely some food cravings often result in reinforcing the craving. For



example, if you skip the coke, you have every day for lunch you might find yourself craving it, same goes for sugars, starches and caffeine or alcohol drinks. If you got out of the habit for a period of time you may find if you actually go back to having that coke or bag of M&M's it may actually taste too sweet and unappealing. So, you can reset yourself by taking a break from some of these cravings and you may find the craving disappears.

Now we know that when you are tired or when money is short eating fresh and balanced foods can be more of a challenge. It may require being more purposeful and planning ahead meals, seeking fresh and affordable foods at farmers markets, or buying and cooking in bulk to help you prepare ahead of time for healthier choices. Listen to your body and what it needs and pay attention when you are eating. Notice when you are full and notice what feeds and supports you feeling good. Consider adding some healthy fresh choices to your daily life and notice the benefits these changes make.

One area you can think about is how are you working your body? When thinking of all areas of your lifestyle, exercise is a huge component that may be impacting how you are feeling physically and mentally. How is exercise or the lack thereof impacting you right now? First, think about a time when you might have stayed inside all day, sitting on the couch, eating a bag of chips, maybe watching a television show. How did you feel by the time night came around after a day like this? Typically, one may feel lethargic, or without energy, maybe grumpy, you might even be craving more junk food.

Inactivity that occurs for hours during the day, can impact many aspects of your health, including how tired you might feel. Surprisingly, staying stationary can actually make you feel more tired throughout the day. This is counterintuitive to think about but feeling fatigue might be from not getting enough of those "feel good" chemicals in your body activated. Endorphins are created when the body gets moving, something that can even have short term benefits like feeling more energized, sleeping more soundly, feeling less stressed, and feeling happier.

Now, let's think of the last time you participated in some physical activity, whether this is walking, biking, gardening, doing yoga, stretching, dancing, cleaning the house, walking up the stairs, or even walking the dog. How were you feeling before you were moving your body, and how were you feeling after? Even a small dose can bring positive results. It doesn't have to be intense, like lifting heavy weights or running for hours every day to benefit. Turning your attention to the bodies need for movement is a great first step in assessing if you are getting enough exercise, or if you are in need of making this a priority towards improving your health overall. It is crucial to think of



exercise in baby steps; think of this as a sprint and not a marathon, where small habits in exercise can make big differences in the short and long-term. This will make it more likely you form a habit and developing this habit can become a way to get out of staying stationary.

So, what is your starting point? You may begin by tracking your exercise in small chunks in a diary, thinking about your daily exercise as it adds up. If finances are a barrier to exercising more, be creative and think of ways to get around this, such as walking, because walking is free! Many senior centers, churches, or YMCAs have recreation centers that are free or based on income, or maybe even have special rates for Veterans and their families. Maybe you take the stairs when you are at the mall, or even walk up the stairs in your house a few extra times during the day. Maybe you are able to get out of the house for exercise and you choose to walk at a park, go bowling, go for a swim in a local pool, or even try borrowing an exercise video from a friend or getting it from your local library to stay fit inside your own home. If you are unable to complete any of the previously mentioned exercises, there are other ways to get moving. Stretching is another great way to keep the blood flowing in your body, increase your heart rate, and stay flexible to prevent injuries, and this can be something you can get information on through a quick internet search, or even by connecting with the local VA MOVE care team. We encourage you to think about the habits you may have, and how you can take small steps to bring movement into your daily life. Recognize when you exercise how much more in control you feel with managing weight, sleeping better, and improving your mobility.

Another component of the Whole Health initiative relates to the connections and relationships you have in your life and the quality of those relationships. It is well known that being connected to a community, especially as one ages, is a vital component in maintaining your health and wellbeing. Reflect on your connections to others and the quality of supports in your life.

Do you notice you are feeling truly lonely, that you need to seek out alternative forms of support and positive relationships? An overall sense of loneliness can occur easily, especially for caregivers, who give so much of themselves and are often isolated at home caregiving. Feeling lonely can increase stress levels, causing a vicious cycle of being isolated and not feeling support through human connection.

Who do you have in your circle of support? Do you volunteer, go to church, meet with family and friends regularly, or attend any special classes you find interest in? Do you use the phone or internet to connect with others for support? How do you feel after



you connect with others in your circle, knowing you can count on them when you need them? As social creatures, humans require the support of others to thrive, so it is important to think of your current relationships and whether these are giving life to you or taking it away.

Are you aware of how your surroundings, such as your home and work environment effect your overall health and wellbeing? Do you dread walking into your house because of the tension there? Is your work environment noisy, stressful, physically straining? Do you feel overwhelmed with the clutter or poor conditions of your home? Are you aware of the impact that noise, lighting, color, and smells, may have on your wellbeing and health? Have you been feeling trapped in the 4 walls of your home deprived of access to fresh air, sunlight, and the healing powers of the natural world? The environments in which you spend time has a significant effect on your wellbeing.

Eastern medicine has acknowledged for centuries the powerful effects of environment on health and wellbeing. The new VA Whole Health initiative supports exploring how your environment is both negatively and positively supporting your physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing. You can make positive change in developing a safe, supportive, and peaceful home environment for yourself with some attention to your environment. It can help to get some order in the home.. A clean and tidy home will provide a feeling of calm and doesn't cost you anything but some elbow grease. Open the curtains and let the light in. Listen to soothing music or fill your home environment with pleasing smells and photos or mementoes that matter to you. What little corner at work and home can you retreat to for a moment's peace and quiet?

There is truly healing provided in the natural world. Studies have been done in Japan that explore the impact of nature on one's health and wellbeing. Time spent in the quiet of nature, walking, breathing in the chemicals emitted by plants, has been found to lower stress hormones, support your immune system and actually increase your creativity, attention, and problem solving. Step away from the digital devises and get outside or bring the outside in. Open a window or look out and observe, add some plant life to your environment, sit by a fire, listen to the birds, walk in the woods, swim in a lake, breathe in the scent of pines, dig in the dirt, plant a small garden. The natural world provides for you not only visual beauty but can invite you into calm and restore your whole being by engaging with it. Find some time to engage in the natural world and experience its healing powers.



Next let's look at how you restore and recharge your battery to keep going. Are you a caregiver who neglects their own need for sleep and down time to the point that your health is depleted? Many caregivers run into problems with disrupted sleep due to caregiving responsibilities and often struggle to make the time for their own restoration. Are you a caregiver running on an empty tank? If you neglect your own need for sleep and your need for breaks in your daily demands; research shows your health is at risk. You cannot properly care for another without properly caring for yourself. Don't wait for that big vacation to restore yourself! You need some of it every day, just as you need adequate sleep. Without it what happens to you? Are you irritable, exhausted, easily frustrated, resentful, depressed?

Despite the fact that time may be limited, taking small 10,15, 30-minute breaks from your responsibilities to eat a meal in quiet, daydream, meditate, read something interesting, or talk to a friend on the phone can make a difference. These small moments can be the reprieve that supports you through the other challenges you face in the day.

Sleep can often be disrupted when caring for others so when you are able to sleep you want to make the most of it so that you are restored. There are several tips to help you get quality sleep. Sleep in a dark, cool room, don't have a TV in the bedroom, and avoid computer and phone screen light at least an hour before bed, avoid caffeine after noon and avoid alcohol which disturbs your sleep cycle. You can wind down for better sleep by taking a warm bath or shower to prompt a change in core body temperature can encourage sleep. Make your sleep schedule consistent; going to bed and getting up the same time every day can set your internal sleep cycle. If you are lying in bed unable to sleep don't lie there fretting. If it is longer than 10-15 minute trying to sleep, it is better to get up out of bed and do something calming and try again. Some people nap to make up for lost sleep. Short naps may give you the boost you need but a word of caution that too much time spent napping may interfere with your bedtime sleep. Finally getting some exercise and exposing yourself to sunlight will contribute positively to the quality and ease of your sleep rituals.

We spoke previously about Mindfulness meditation as a powerful tool to increase your attention and decrease stress. This is a mental tool that can enhance your overall health. Is your mind fraught with worry and bombarding you with constant troubling dialogue? Is your mind so cluttered that there is no room for inspiration, learning creativity or peace? Providing your mind with the food of learning, exploring and engaging in something of interest to you can keep your overall wellbeing in balance. Meditation is one way to train your mind to clear a path for calm and healing. Your mind



can be brought into your service when you recognize and interrupt negative thinking and can keep you focused on what will benefit you.

Having a sense of purpose and meaning is a critical component to your overall health and wellbeing. What is meaningful to you? Do you have certain spiritual beliefs or practices that give your life meaning? What goals, values, beliefs and meaningful activities do you engage in each day to inspire you to get up and keep going. Is it caring for your loved ones? Is your work an inspiration to you or do you have talents or interests that you derive meaning from? We all need to invest in living in our own way and what gives your life meaning is unique to you.

Finally, as the old saying goes an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Have you neglected attention to aches and pains until they become a big problem? Have you avoided getting to the doctor to care for the preventable problems? Even with chronic illness there is so much that the art of medicine can do to diminish pain and suffering and support overall wellbeing. Take advantage of all of the sources of medical and alternative medicine supports to care for a healthier you.

The Whole Health perspective is asking you to consider how you can bring some attention and care to any one of these areas of your life and in doing so support your overall whole health. You deserve this attention. Only you can make the many small decisions each day to support your wellbeing. But remember there is a wealth of information and support out there to help you in this journey. We at the VA Caregiver Support Line encourage you to make yourself the priority. We hope attention to this has given you some ideas of how you might bring a spark of life into your wellbeing.