6-2010

More than Half Full

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A consistently cheerful attitude bolsters the body's disease-fighting forces, while pessimism is associated with poor health. A chronic feeling of helplessness depresses the immune system. Natural killer cell activity is decreased and T-cells don't multiply as rapidly to destroy foreign invaders like viruses and bacteria. Truly, pessimistic people have a more passive immune system and their health is impaired.

In a study by Craig Peterson, pessimists had twice as many visits to the doctor and twice as many infectious illnesses. Women with breast cancer who show a fighting optimist spirit are less likely to suffer a recurrence than those who respond to their diagnosis with stoic acceptance and helplessness. In another study of women with recurrent cancer, those who survived the longest were those who were optimistic in life.

Solomon told us that a cheerful outlook does us good like medicine. Optimists are more likely to follow advice about their health and make health behavior changes by modifying their lifestyle. In addition, they don't isolate themselves. They seek to engage in meaningful social support systems that are important for physical health. In contrast, pessimists are more passive when trouble strikes and tend to take fewer steps to sustain a social network. Loneliness puts a person at higher risk of disease.

A positive mental attitude is recognized as a very effective way to combat disease. The brain is connected via hormones to the immune system. A happy relaxed mind and feelings of hope react in a positive way on the body via the neurotransmitters. In this situation the immune system can operate at optimal capacity. On the other hand, during depression catecholamines get depleted and the immune system turns downward.

Courage, hope and faith promote health and prolong life. George Vaillant found that health at age 60 was strongly related to optimism manifested at age 25. Men in their early 20s who had a mature attitude toward bad events in life went on to live healthy lives and were in good health at 60. Those without a mature optimistic attitude at age 20 were found to be in poor health at 60.

Laughter and a good sense of humor are good for your health as they help you cope with difficult life situations. Laughter relaxes a person, reduces stress hormones, increases immunoglobulin A levels, helps you sleep better and helps create a more positive attitude. Over time, patients who receive humor therapy have lower blood pressure levels, less pain, fewer heart attacks and more active disease-fighting immune cells.

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