

# Improving Your Own Health and Wellness While Saving the World

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Having worked on several public health projects and in several human services settings, I have a strong concern for the health and wellness of others. The overlaps I've recognized between individual health, environment, global discord, and social justice have led me to make some major changes in my own life.

If our work involves helping others and improving the world, it's particularly important that we manage our own health and wellness. Fortunately, there are several ways we can do both simultaneously! In fact, many habits that benefit our health or the environment also have personal financial benefits (Blix & Heitmiller, 1997).

Uncontrollable factors like genetics and injuries aside, we generally stand a greater chance of living a long and productive life if we proactively maintain our own health. This gives us more time to pursue our visions in the world, share our gifts with others, and leave a lasting legacy.

However, we sometimes neglect ourselves while saving the world. In settings where the focus is upon helping others, I have seen and heard numerous examples of people who don't give themselves the care they deserve.

Upon returning from a trip to assess public health needs of tsunami victims, a colleague told me of the signs of stress exhibited by many of the professional aid workers. Many of them, he observed, appeared highly anxious and engaged in behaviors like smoking at very high levels. The trauma surrounding them was taking a toll. Likewise, I have noted many visibly unhealthy professionals (including medical doctors) in health and human services settings where poor health was also a common issue among clients.

So what can we do to take better care of ourselves while also saving the world? Outside of addressing obvious factors like overextended workweeks in high-stress settings, there are a number of possibilities.

First, we may generate health-related benefits for ourselves simply by giving generously to others in our own unique way. This doesn't need to be money; it can include expressing gratitude for someone's friendship, sharing an artistic talent, or even lending a listening ear. Outside of fulfilling us and making us happy, giving can actually improve our health and longevity. Post and Neimark (2007) cite studies suggesting the following:

- Giving as a high school student predicts good physical and mental health up to 50 years later, into late adulthood.
- Giving and helping others reduces mortality in older adults, and depression and suicide risk in adolescents.
- Giving is more powerful than receiving in reducing mortality.

These powerful impacts, note Post and Neimark, may occur through a variety of mechanisms. Giving increases our feelings of self-efficacy, allows us to forget about the stressors in our own lives, enables us to forgive ourselves for our own mistakes, and enhances our sense of being part of a supportive larger community.

Secondly, we can assess where we are in different health-related areas of our life, and take actions in each. In his holistic wellness model as cited by Michael Arloski (2007), Don Ardell suggests that we need to take personal responsibility for our choices in several dimensions of life:

- stress management
- physical fitness
- nutritional awareness
- sensitivity to our physical, social and personal environments

I'll outline a few ideas that blend the above dimensions while connecting personal and collective health and wellness.

As for stress management and physical fitness, think beyond traditional "exercise" like going to the gym if you find it difficult to motivate yourself. Arloski suggests viewing exercise as "movement." To do this in a way that benefits both yourself and the world, consider your modes of transportation throughout the day.

For example, rather than getting in the car, can you walk or ride a bicycle? Rather than taking an elevator, can you use the stairs? These options give you a workout, save energy, and minimize pollution. Additionally, they can reduce stress, as "pedestrian rage" is much less common than "road rage." They also have social benefits, given that it's difficult to talk to a friend as they're speeding by in their car, but relatively easy if you bump into each other on the sidewalk.

Perhaps you live in an area that has few or no sidewalks, no safe places to ride a bicycle, and no amenities within walking distance. In such cases, you may wish to look at how your choice of living location impacts health and well-being on both a personal and community level. Does your location support your values and priorities? If not, what would your ideal setting look like, and what steps would it take to attain that?

Also consider the energy efficiency of your home, and take steps such as insulating and utilizing low-energy lighting and appliances. Are you heating a house that's much larger than you need? Fewer costs require less time at work to pay the bills, which contributes to life balance and well-being. These considerations also benefit others' health in that energy savings often decrease air pollution (e.g., mercury) from coal-fired power plants.

Next, consider your diet. This has not only personal nutrition implications, but extensive environmental, economic and public health implications. What do you choose to put directly into your body every day, and does it support the self and world you envision? Food production and distribution requires energy and resources that affect the world in various ways.

Learn where your food is grown--the further it is shipped, the more energy it utilizes, which contributes to greenhouse gases. According to the "100 Mile Diet" project, our food ingredients travel an average of 1,500 miles. It's a bit more challenging to eat produce in season year-round in colder climates, but making an effort to eat as locally as possible can have sizeable benefits. Support your local farmers and grocers carrying their goods.

Also related to diet, consider organic foods when possible, as pesticides can have unintended and unpredictable impacts upon your health and the environment. As more people demand such products, they will continue to become more available and more affordable. If you have some spare time and a little space in your yard, consider planting a garden. Then you'll know what's going into your food and where it comes from, and you'll get some exercise, too!

You may also wish to explore the personal and environmental benefits associated with reductions in animal protein consumption. There is a sizeable well-documented (but not yet well-publicized) body of public health research on the risks of consuming animal-produced proteins, particularly meat and dairy, as well as literature on the "protein myths" that continue to circulate. Other important factors include consumption of whole foods (i.e., as they occur in nature) and dark leafy greens, but the animal protein factor alone is a significant one (Campbell & Campbell, 2006; Eisman, 2006; Robbins, 2006).

Additionally, it takes many times more energy, food and water to produce animal flesh than it does to produce plant-based food with the equivalent energy and nutritional value. By some estimates, it takes five pounds of grain and 2,500 gallons of water to produce each pound of beef (Kostigen & Rogers, 2007). Imagine how many additional people could be fed by taking out the "middleman"--or "middlecow."

Concentrated animal farming also takes a toll on both individual health and the environment. Five tons of animal manure are produced every year per every individual in the U.S. (Greger, 2006). Waste water and runoff, which often includes hormones and other chemicals, pollutes local water sources. Not all chemicals can be filtered out by drinking water treatment, and their impacts upon humans are still being discovered.

When large numbers of animals and humans are frequently in unnaturally close quarters to one another, it creates additional opportunity for diseases (e.g., avian flu) to mutate and jump species (Greger, 2006). Additionally, when forests are cleared to support animal production (e.g., growth of food crops), it increases breeding areas for disease-transmitting insects like mosquitoes (Greger, 2006), and destroys larger pollution-absorbing vegetation.

Maintaining personal health and wellness takes a certain degree of time and commitment, as does improving the world. However, it doesn't always have to be an "either/or" dilemma. Depending upon our own values and priorities, there are a number of ways in which we can integrate our efforts on both fronts and maximize our positive impact. I invite you to conduct your own research on these areas, and to create a life that works for you!

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Tips For Your Body's Health

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