



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

taking care of our hearts

As I thought about this column, snippets of a Bible verse kept coming to me. The wonderful research librarians at the Durham Public Library found the quote and reference: "Above all else guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life" (*Proverbs 4:23, NISV*). Or in the NSRV "Keep your heart with all vigilance for from it flow the springs of life."

As we think about preventing illnesses and injuries I think it is important to focus on taking care of our hearts. To me the heart is the center of our being, the "wellspring of life." When we "speak from the heart" we usually mean that we have gone beyond our thoughts to a source of deep wisdom that integrates thought, emotion, and bodily knowledge.

Guarding our hearts is a fairly complicated process. Webster defines 'guard' as: to keep safe from harm; watch over and protect; defend; shield. We must think first of the physical needs of our heart: adequate rest, good nutrition and sufficient exercise. Unless those basic needs are met, everything else is compromised.

We can also take each of those physical needs—rest, nutrition and exercise—and think of them in emotional terms. "Emotional rest" may mean finding places of comfort and support—either internally or externally. Adequate "emotional nutrition" may mean developing healthy attitudes. "Emotional exercise" may involve developing practices that increase our resilience.

We can look to others for emotional rest or comfort, but even better is the ability to find rest and comfort within. Just as a friend can hold us, speak soothing and encouraging words to us, and remind us that we are not alone, so we can give that comfort to ourselves. We can imagine being held as a child is held by her mother or being held "in the palm of God's hand." We can sit quietly in a safe, soothing place or we can imagine such a place in our minds and go there in our imagination. We can take a warm bath or sit with lit candles and drink a cup of tea. Perhaps most importantly we can remind ourselves of who we are. We can think of times when we have felt competent and strong. We can remember when we have done something kind and loving for someone else and how good that made us feel. We can remind ourselves of the good things about us

and count all the blessings in our lives. If we are of a spiritual bent, we can remember that the Divine is always present and pouring forth grace—unconditional love.

For our hearts, adequate nutrition might mean engaging in healthy relationships. Being part of a supportive group has been shown to increase the longevity of people with cancer and heart disease. We are communal beings and need to have a supportive network of friends and acquaintances. We also need to have healthy attitudes toward life. Much of our stress is caused by overly personal and often inaccurate interpretations of the behavior of others. Two of the *Four Agreements*, by Don Miguel Ruiz, are "Don't Take Anything Personally" and "Don't Make Assumptions."

Changing our thoughts and attitudes isn't easy but there is a wealth of books in the self-help section of any bookstore that present cognitive behavioral techniques for shifting our attitudes and perceptions in a way that can greatly reduce stress and conflict. Hobbies and creative activities are also important. Having meaningful work nurtures us in profound ways.

Emotional exercise for our heart involves increasing resiliency through meditation, or other quiet centering practices. Reciting a mantra (your name for the Divine or another soothing, meaningful word) throughout the day slows our thoughts and helps us be more present. Listening to recordings of guided imagery or deep relaxation can help make us emotionally stronger. Ti Chi and yoga or other centering exercises can help. The gold standard of this kind of exercise is of course meditation. There are many kinds of meditation and it is possible, as with physical exercise, to begin slowly.

Taking good care of our heart makes it strong and healthy. The best indication of a strong and healthy heart is openness—like a swinging door opening in and out. A strong and healthy heart is open to bear whatever comes, to accept what is and to feel what it feels. An open heart is courageous, brave in the face of fear. Finally an open heart is loving, always growing in the capacity to love more and more. ❧❧

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