



Directions for Your Healing Journey

By Mark Williams, RD, CLT

If you are like many Americans, you suffer from a chronic illness. The United States Centers for Disease Control reported that “in 2005, 133 million people, almost half of all Americans lived with at least one chronic condition. The medical care costs of people with chronic diseases account for more than 75% of the nation’s \$2 trillion medical care costs.” (<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/overview.htm>). Furthermore, you may suffer from more than one disease condition. Taking multiple medications for multiple problems has become a way of life for many of us.

Your healing journey and the questions you may have

Let’s assume that you have a chronic health challenge and that you are searching for a cure. You may be filled with the following questions: To whom do I turn to for advice? Where do I begin? What approaches should I investigate? You may wonder about the role that nutrition plays in the prevention and treatment of chronic illness. Can proper nutrition prevent and cure illness? Many individuals have the mistaken notion that they can simply take some dietary supplements (along with medications) and get well even without making changes in their current lifestyle. And let us not forget finances. In these economically trying times, you want to get the most bang for your health care dollars, particularly if you’re paying out of pocket. So what are your best bets?

To begin to answer these questions, let us examine the sorts of advice provided by the federal government and by books in the popular press.

What the government says

The federal government’s Department of Health and Human Services publishes a list of dietary guidelines for Americans every five years. The advice offered in the guidelines is often directed toward certain populations (such as the advice to the elderly to get extra vitamin B-12 in either food or supplements). Here is what the department says on their website:

“The Dietary Guidelines for Americans ... provides science-based advice to promote health and to reduce risk for major chronic diseases through diet and physical activity. Major causes of (illness and death) in the United States are related to poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle (one with little exercise). Some specific diseases linked to poor diet and physical inactivity include cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, osteoporosis, and certain cancers. Furthermore, poor diet and physical inactivity, resulting in an energy imbalance (more calories consumed than expended), are the most important factors contributing to the increase in overweight and obesity in this country. Combined with physical activity, following a diet that does not provide excess calories according to

the recommendations in this document should enhance the health of most individuals”

(<http://tinyurl.com/2bofar>).



In short, the government is saying eat less and exercise more. Realize also that these guidelines are written from a public health perspective. Government officials start out with the question, how can we create the greatest good (in this case, health) for the greatest number of people? Thus, the guidelines may not address your specific needs, your individual biochemistry and life history (the things that first triggered your illness). So for personalized information, you will need to look elsewhere.

Books on Diet and Nutrition

You could also turn to books on nutrition for advice. There are all types of diet books out there. These include Atkins, Zone, South Beach, Blood Type, Maker's Diet and raw food diet to name a few. I searched the word 'diet' on the books section of Amazon.com and came up with 317,323 results! Granted, not all of the books were about food diets (for example, several were about going on a 'money diet'). Some of my favorites are The Beer Drinker's Diet, The Orgasmic Diet, and The World Peace Diet. But the problem with these diets is they are one size fits all. They do not take into account your individual uniqueness. Even books that purport to individualize the diet (such as the Blood Type diet) only create a few categories under which everyone should fall.

Evidence that some diets work

Can diets successfully address disease? Yes. There are diets out there with good data showing that they can reverse disease processes. The three most well-known programs are Dr. Dean Ornish (Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease), Dr. John McDougall (The McDougall Program: 12 Days to Dynamic Health) and Dr. Caldwell Essllyn (Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease: The Revolutionary, Scientifically Proven, Nutrition-Based Cure). These are low-fat, basically vegan diets that don't make use of supplements. They may work if you have the fortitude to follow them. These physicians have demonstrated that diet and lifestyle (without dietary supplements) can reverse heart disease. While this message is true, it is not often one we want to hear. We want to keep eating meats and sweets, and take a pill or supplement to counteract their ravaging effects.

Another diet showing a good deal of promise is the Mediterranean diet. It has a great deal of overlap with the three diets listed above. This dietary pattern includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds; olive oil; moderate amounts of fish; little red meat; low to moderate amounts of dairy products; red wine as a beverage; and an active lifestyle. For a picture of the Mediterranean diet pyramid, see http://oldwayspt.org/med_pyramid.html. Following this diet appears to increase lifespan, protect against chronic disease, fight cancer and provide protection against diabetes. For scientific studies on the benefits of the diet, see http://oldwayspt.org/med_studies.html.

Finally, it appears that following one's ancestral diet may be a good strategy for disease prevention. Dr. Weston Price wrote a book a number of years ago entitled Nutrition and Physical Degeneration that compared ancestral diets with modern-day processed diets. He was a dentist who spent years travelling the globe and evaluating the dental health of native peoples. Those individuals who had maintained their traditional diets had good dental health, while those whose diet had become westernized (with processed food) had poor dental health. It appears that eating your traditional diet may be a good place to start, but for most of us the Mediterranean diet may not be our ancestral diet. And because we are more and more of mixed races, eating



your ancestral diet no longer makes sense. Again this is a one-size fits all approach. If it works for you, great. But if it doesn't, you will have to look elsewhere.

Let me point out that none of these diets can address your uniqueness in terms of adverse reactions to foods. These include any food allergies, food sensitivities and food intolerances you might have.

Complementary and alternative medicine

Beyond nutrition, there are a number of complementary and alternative healing modalities; they include Chiropractic, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, herbs, body work (such as massage) and homeopathy, just to name a few. In my experience I have found these treatments to be palliative rather than curative. That is, they provided some relief but no cure. But I can only speak for myself. Are they worth a investigating? Possibly. The role that these healing modalities will play in your healing journey is up to you to decide. Each can provide its own framework for providing individualized care, but I never found any of them to provide significant, long-term relief.

We now know that there are many paths to healing. This cacophony of voices of those hawking health solutions makes it hard even for health care professionals to decide where to put their energies. What should we as practitioners pay attention to? What can we ignore? That is what makes it so confusing. Often, there are many more questions than answers. Based on my experiences, a reasonable way to approach disease and begin healing is through the framework of functional medicine.

Functional medicine

What is functional medicine? According the website functionalmedicine.org, "Functional medicine is personalized medicine that deals with primary prevention and underlying causes instead of symptoms for serious chronic disease. It is a science-based field of health care that is grounded in several principles." One of those principles is biochemical individuality, which describes the importance of individual variations in metabolic function that derive from genetic and environmental differences among individuals.

Now, within this framework, illness has two causes. This was described by Dr. Mark Hyman in his article, "Functional Medicine Diagnostics: Redefining Disease." from *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*; Jul/Aug 2008; pages 10-14.

The two causes are this: you may be getting (or already have) too much of something you don't need, and/or, you may not have enough of something you do need.

I like the way Dr. Hyman elaborates on these two points by turning them into questions:

1. [Do you] need to be rid of something, such as toxins, allergy, infection, poor diet or stress?
2. [Do you] have some unmet individual need that must be filled for optimal functions, such as food (protein, fats, carbohydrates, fiber), nature-made molecules (vitamins, minerals, accessory or conditionally essential nutrients, hormones), light, water, air, sleep, deep relaxation, movement, rhythm, love, community, connection, meaning and purpose?



You can spend thousands of dollars and years of your life trying to address the second issue (adding what you apparently do not have enough of), but you may not become truly healthy until you get a handle on the first part (that you are getting or have something that your body doesn't need). How many times have you seen a supplement advertised on an infomercial, bought it, tried it, only to be disappointed in the results you got?

According to Dr. Hyman, disease has (at least one) of the following five causes:

1. toxins
2. allergens
3. microbes
4. stress
5. poor diet

Functional medicine practitioners must ask themselves, what caused the illness (antecedents or triggers)? What allows it to continue to be a problem (mediators)?

Underneath the outward manifestations of disease usually lie physiological imbalances. The seven imbalances include “hormonal/neurotransmitter imbalances; oxidation-reduction imbalances and mitochondriopathy (pathology to the mitochondria, the energy production engines of cells); detoxification and biotransformational imbalances; immune and inflammatory imbalances; digestive, absorptive and gut microbiological imbalances; structural imbalances; and mind-body/body-mind imbalances.” While this is technical material, just know that these are the seven areas where the imbalances may be found.

Functional medicine provides a holistic approach

Diet comes from the Greek word “dieta” meaning ‘manner of living’. So it’s not simply what you put in your body, it is also physical activity, stress reduction; all the things that Dr. Hyman has listed

in the second question. We need to think holistically. Every aspect of our lives is enmeshed with every other one; we cannot call something heart disease and assume that the pathology is located in the heart; it may manifest itself in the heart, but it may be caused by an imbalance in another part of the body. We have created disciplines in medicine with artificial barriers which prevents the traditional physician from looking outside of his or her boundaries.

For the most part, healing is not an overnight process. I have been on my own healing journey for over 20 years. Also, I continue to use prescription medication. I could not survive without it. My own healing journey has been a process of trial and error. I have reached many dead ends. To you I say don't lose hope. Sometimes it takes years for you to get a proper diagnosis and treatment for an illness. Keep searching.

Evidence of Wellness

How do you know that you are getting well? Mark Twain once said, the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between the lightning and the lightning bug. Based on my experiences, for me, lightning bug therapies included chiropractic, homeopathy, emotional freedom technique and intravenous chelation. These gave me very modest, palliative solutions that were short-lived. My lightning therapies include the use of essential fatty acids as dietary supplements and a diet based on my unique food sensitivities.



What should be clear from this essay is the problem I face when trying to address you the reader is the fact that you the reader are biochemically unique. You have unique genetics and life experiences; this makes it very hard for me to speak intelligibly about you. Every healing modality can and does claim its adherents, and has those who will provide testimony for it. But there is one thing for certain: to get well, you must take risks and make changes. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. Your chances of sitting around and waiting for a spontaneous remission are pretty slim.

Recommended practitioners

I recommend that you find and work with someone who can personalize treatment based on your unique characteristics and experiences. Who are these individuals? They include Registered Dietitians who are Certified LEAP Therapists (LEAP stands for lifestyles, eating and performance; see www.nowleap.com), Registered Dietitians who practice Complementary Care (www.complementarynutrition.org), Certified Clinical Nutritionists (www.iaacn.org), practitioners who have completed Functional Medicine training (www.functionalmedicine.org) and practitioners who have completed Food as Medicine training (see Center for Mind Body Medicine, www.cmbm.org). This is a very broad group of health care professionals. These practitioners often use testing from any number of specialty laboratories to help determine your core clinical imbalances.

Imbalances and priorities

For me getting well has been a process of taking risks, risks in seeing both new practitioners and in trying new treatments. Your practitioner may decide that you have a toxic overload. Do you need to assist your body in getting rid of stored toxins? If you have filling with mercury in them, will you need them removed? Will you need a treatment known as chelation to remove toxins from your body? Chelation is a process in which toxic molecules are literally 'grabbed' and then excreted by the body. Chelation may be of value. But that is not where I would begin. My preference is to begin with diet. Get testing done (such as the Mediator Release Test, which indirectly measures food sensitivity reactions) and eliminate food allergies and sensitivities. Then move on to addressing detoxification and other imbalances.

Even after working with a functional medicine practitioner, you may not be able to lower your medication dosage. But you might come to the point where you only need to take two drugs instead of three. That's a positive outcome to be celebrated.

I recommend that you interview all of your potential health care practitioners before deciding to work with them. Ask them what background they have in complementary and alternative medicine. Have they received functional medicine training? How long have they been using these approaches in their practice? Do they partner with other health care practitioners who share their philosophy?

Conclusion

In sum, there is an overwhelming amount information out there about diet, health and disease. We have the internet with thousands of websites, Google and other search tools, thousands of books and thousands of experts with hundreds of different credentials. The task of finding the best practitioner for you is daunting. To increase your odds of a getting a good match, find a practitioner who has experience and training in functional medicine.



Investigate the list of practitioners provided earlier in the article. By doing so you may be able to save yourself time and money and unnecessary suffering. Best wishes to you for good health.

Note: The information in this article is not intended as medical advice and should not be used for, nor is it intended to constitute, a medical diagnosis or treatment. You always should seek the advice of your physician or another competent medical professional to address any questions or concerns you may have regarding your medical care.

***About Mark:** Mark Williams is a Registered Dietitian and Certified Leap Therapist (CLT). He is a member of American Dietetic Association as well as a member of the Nutrition in Complementary Care and Nutrition Entrepreneurs Dietetic Practice Groups. He has completed the training Applying Functional Medicine in Clinical Practice. Mark's own journey to wellness is what has led to his education and expertise in working with food sensitivities and functional nutrition. Today, Mark incorporates into his practice the process of helping clients overcome stubborn health problems that won't go away. He does so by looking at what nutrients they may not be getting enough of by helping them determine if they are eating foods that contribute to their health problems. These two approaches have made a tremendous difference in his own health, and make a tremendous difference in his clients' health. Further information on Mark can be found on his website, www.MarkWilliamsRD.com. You may email him at Mark@MarkWilliamsRD.com, or you reach him by phone at 517-897-1907.*