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## Self-care for Healthcare Professionals

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# Self-care for Healthcare Professionals

PURNIMA HERNANDEZ, DDS, MA, MA, CHWC

At the peak of my career, I had a sudden onset of vague symptoms which included hearing impairment in the right ear, extreme fatigue and brain fog. Even though two ENTs cleared me and reported that my hearing was equivalent to that of a teen, there was an unexplainable sensory dampening of sounds in that ear. It was so intense that everyday pleasures were drowned out by the noise of my symptoms. Up until then, I prided myself as an energizer bunny who thrived off interacting with patients, and now found myself exhausted by the smallest interactions. It was then that I realized to succeed in a profession dedicated to helping others, I had to help myself first. It was time I committed to myself as my own patient and treated myself with the same love and care I provided to others. This realization of self-care has become a passion and purpose. It has led me to become a “lifestylist for kids” (of all ages) ...helping individuals develop their vision of well-being, co-create and meet their health goals.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr. Purnima Hernandez is triple board-certified in pediatric dentistry, applied behavior analysis and as a health and wellness coach. Dr. Hernandez was awarded the Dr. Solomon Rosenstein Visiting Professorship and Fellowship by the Columbia University College of Dental Medicine for her contribution to the field of special needs dentistry.*

## LIFESTYLE MEDICINE

After going through my journey visiting the silos of medicine, I gathered there was no medication for my collection of vague symptoms. Living with them was not an option. This realization led to a deep dive. I became fully immersed in reading books on diet and lifestyle and with this knowledge created a reasonable plan for myself. The diet and lifestyle changes took time, but my health began to improve. Within a couple of months, my hearing was restored, I felt re-energized and, quite frankly, better than ever. Even today mindful living remains a constant mantra because how I live my life daily greatly influences how my symptoms manifest.

## THE LIFESTYLE OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IS CHALLENGING

As health professionals our personal mindset and well-being are imperative when caring for others. If not, burnout is right around the corner. Just because we can walk, talk and engage in daily functions, does not mean we are in the best health. In fact, as healthcare professionals, we may have unintentionally designed a lifestyle that may not align with our physiology and/or genetics. For instance, the daily stresses of running a practice,

managing employees, managing patients, and meeting the needs of our families may leave us in a time famine for our self-care. Long-term engagement in such a strenuous lifestyle will reliably take its toll on the body, influence physiology, lead to the development of pathology and ultimately chronic diseases.

Chronic lifestyle diseases such as insulin resistance, obesity, hypertension, diabetes and auto-immune issues are on the rise. How we live has a huge impact on the genesis of these chronic diseases. The knowledge of “epigenetics” is in many ways a message of hope. We have control over the environmental factors that influence disease processes. So, no matter where you are in your lifecycle and no matter what your medical resume reads, know that lifestyle can make a difference.

## WHAT IS LIFESTYLE?

At most medical appointments, we hear “eat healthy and exercise”. These are only two important components of lifestyle. The five important lifestyle factors are Sleep, Diet, Stress, Movement and Relationships. These factors are necessary components of most interventions regardless ▶

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of the disease. It is a prescription that is assumed but rarely personalized or specified for the patient. Quite frankly, information on lifestyle should be primary to any intervention. Lifestyle in many disease processes is analogous to a cast for a fractured bone. Just as the cast supports the bone as the fracture line heals, these lifestyle factors provide a framework around which we build a physiology that influences our vulnerability to health issues.

Think of lifestyle as a label for a set of health behaviors. Engagement in a good lifestyle may lead to good outcomes and engagement in a poor lifestyle may lead to poor outcomes (disease processes).

### WHAT IS A GOOD LIFESTYLE?

We have all had experience with sleeping, eating, stress, forming relationships and movement from birth. We engage in a variety of health behaviors daily that influence our physiology for better or worse. The definition of a healthy lifestyle can vary from one individual to another based on the person's genetic makeup. An ideal lifestyle is one that is personalized and designed around the genetic differences of a person as well as how feasible it is to execute changes in the person's everyday life. This is the basis of "bio-individuality." Lifestyle medicine is a specialty in itself. The science is simple, well-researched, often free and something we have an opportunity to engage in daily. It is the best preventative plan yet.



#### HOW DO I GET STARTED?:

1. Create your vision of well-being.
2. Set health goals that match your vision.
3. Examine the discrepancies between your health today and your vision of well-being.
4. Develop a diet and lifestyle self-care plan.
5. Focus on small but sustainable changes in health behaviors.
6. Be consistent.
7. If you have a bad day or week don't sweat, just pick up the next day.
8. Stay accountable. It could be a coach, a data collection app or even public posting.
9. Get your family to join you. Moving in the direction of wellness as a team can be life-changing.
10. Self-care is not selfish. It is being compassionate to yourself.

#### MY TOP 10 LIFESTYLE NON-NEGOTIABLES:

1. **Starting the day with good thoughts:** listening to videos or uplifting podcasts.
2. **Meditation/breath practice:** about 5-10 minutes daily helps set the intention for the day.
3. **Morning sunlight 10-20 minutes:** gets my body ready for work and prepares for sleep.
4. **Movement:** getting in a variety of movements from yoga to aerobics.
5. **Hydration:** drinking filtered water at least half my body weight in ounces with a pinch of sea salt (if no medical restrictions).
6. **Eat fresh and mostly nature-served:** Mostly organic and grass-fed while avoiding processed foods.
7. **Healthy fats are good.**
8. **Targeted micronutrient supplements to replenish insufficiencies.**
9. **Eating within a time window and fasting at least three hours before sleep.**
10. **All things sleep.**



*These artworks were created by my daughter Sophia Hernandez. Bergamot, lavender, sandalwood, and the kitchen are her aromatic and visual memories of our journey to health. When we are unwell, oftentimes it influences the entire family. This is her view of how activities in our kitchen served as a dispensary aka pharmacy in influencing my health positively.*

MY FAVORITE READS ON LIFESTYLE FACTORS:

- a. Why We Sleep – *Mathew Walker, PhD*
- b. Food Fix – *Mark Hyman, MD*
- c. Why We Get Sick – *Benjamin Bickman, PhD*
- d. Childhood Disrupted – *Donna Jackson Nakazawa*
- e. The Obesity Code – *Jason Fung, MD*
- f. The Blue Zones of Happiness – *Dan Buttener*

I have come to realize that good health isn't the lack of illness, it is a constant effort towards wellness. A good lifestyle is the lowest hanging, cheapest, readily available fruit which can influence the trajectory of health and well-being. So, my message to each of you is take a moment and genuinely examine how your current lifestyle is serving you. Then become curious and inform yourselves on how to live in alignment with your physiology. ■



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