

The Five Pillars of Radical Well-being

By Deepak Chopra, M.D.

Thanks to the genetic revolution, we now know that our biology is not our destiny. As scientists have found, only 5 percent of disease-causing gene mutations are fully penetrant, the term geneticists apply when a gene directly causes a disorder. This means that 95 percent of our gene activity—and therefore our health—is largely under our control. Through our daily lifestyle choices, we can prevent chronic illness, influence aging, and even reverse some diseases, such as heart disease and bronchial asthma.

As we activate our untapped potential for health, we can create a state I refer to as “radical well-being,” which goes far beyond what we think is possible. Radical well-being is the wellness equivalent of being an elite athlete, someone who is dedicated and achieves the extraordinary. However, we don’t need years of training or special gifts to experience radical well-being. There are simple steps we can all take every day to tap into our boundless potential for extraordinary health. Here are what I consider the five most important pillars for creating radical well-being:

1. Get Enough Natural Sleep

Sleep is a crucial but much overlooked pillar of well-being. During deep sleep, your body releases accumulated stress and toxins while it self-regulates and repairs the cellular activity. If you’re perpetually sleep deprived, you are more likely to have a weakened immune system and chronic inflammation, which is associated with many diseases, including Alzheimer’s, obesity, fibromyalgia, digestive disorders, and some kinds of cancer. A lack of restful sleep also disrupts ghrelin and leptin, two hormones that regulate your hunger and satiety levels and metabolism. This disruption can lead to weight gain, particularly in the area of the belly.

The research shows that getting about eight hours of sleep every night (without drugs or induced by alcohol) is absolutely essential for good health. You can get the highest quality sleep by keeping your sleep cycles in tune with the rhythms of the universe, known as circadian rhythms. This means going to bed by about 10 p.m. and waking at 6 a.m. Ideally, eat only a light meal in the evening, before 7:30 if possible, so that your sleep isn’t hampered by the digestive processes. You can go for a leisurely walk after dinner and then be in bed by 10 p.m. It’s also very helpful to download your thoughts from the day in a journal before going to bed so that your mind doesn’t keep you awake.

2. Meditate Daily

Meditation is a simple practice that takes us to a state of profound relaxation that dissolves fatigue and the accumulated stress that accelerates aging and the development of disease. Research shows that people who meditate regularly develop less hypertension, heart disease, anxiety, and other stress-related illnesses.

For example, a recent study conducted at the Chopra Center found that after just a few days of meditation, participants experienced a two- to three-fold suppression of gene activity associated with viral infection and wound healing. There were also beneficial changes in the genes associated with risk for Alzheimer's disease. These changes suggest that it could be more difficult for the meditators to experience a viral infection, while at the same time their systems were less concerned about the need to heal wounds or tend to injury. Perhaps the most astonishing result was that the meditators experienced a dramatic increase in the anti-aging activity of telomerase. Telomerase is an enzyme that is found inside our cells and that replenishes and repairs telomeres, the caps at the ends of our chromosomes that protect our genes. Longer telomeres are associated with better greater longevity and health.

Keep in mind that these benefits happened quickly, within a few days. By meditating daily, even if just for a few minutes, you will experience many immediate and long-term benefits for your body, mind, and spirit.

3. Move Your Body

Your body is meant to move, and regular exercise is a key to health and longevity. The risk of disease rises sharply as you age if you lead a sedentary lifestyle. In fact, drastic inactivity eventually leads to a 30 percent higher mortality rate for men, and double the mortality rate for women. The benefits of regular physical activity are numerous, including increased muscle mass, bone density, aerobic capacity, and strength. Not only does exercise keep the body young, but it also releases stress, improves your mood, and increases the brain's ability to learn, adapt, and perform other cognitive tasks.

When it comes to exercise, the important thing is to find physical activities you enjoy and do them regularly. If you've been leading a sedentary life, start slowly. If the most you can do right now is walk around the block, do that, and you will be surprised how quickly you increase your endurance and enthusiasm for moving and breathing.

4. Cultivate Healthy Emotions

Our body is deeply affected by our moods. Chemical messages tell every cell how you feel. In its own way, a cell can be happy or sad, agitated or content, joyous or despairing. When you feel fear or anxiety, your body responds with the fight-or-flight response, which raised your heart rate and increases the production of cortisol, adrenaline, and other so-called stress hormones. Over time, living in a state of chronic stress can lead to increased inflammation in your body and the development of chronic illness. On the other hand, when you cultivate healthy emotions, you promote self-healing and self-regulation in your body. Healthy emotions include love, kindness, joy, compassion, equanimity, gratitude, and peace.

There are countless ways to cultivate healthy emotions. You can begin by making a list of the healthy emotions and writing down one activity or experience that expands that emotion in your life. Then each day devote a little time to engaging in that activity with the intention of expanding your emotional well-being and happiness.

5. Eat Fresh, Real Food

All food consists of energy and information. Energy is both the quantifiable calories a food contains as well as the vitality and joy that comes from eating that food. The informational aspect of food is the nutrition it contains, including the proportion of protein, carbohydrates, and fats as well as vitamins, minerals, and specific natural chemicals known as phytonutrients. A fresh organic pear contains high levels of energy and information. In contrast, a pear that has been grown with pesticides, canned in sugary syrup, shipped across the country, and stored in the pantry for several months contains a relatively high number of calories but offers little in the way of vital information that the body can extract for health and well-being.

Fresh, real food provides the greatest levels of energy and information to nourish your body and mind. For this reason, it's important to choose and eat the freshest foods and ingredients you can find while minimizing or eliminating the foods that are highly processed, artificial, and full of unhealthy chemicals.

About the Author

Recognized as one of the world's foremost leaders in the field of mind-body medicine, Deepak Chopra, M.D. is a best-selling author, teacher, and co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing. His medical training is in internal medicine and endocrinology, and he is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and an adjunct professor of Executive Programs at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

Deepak Chopra is also an adjunct professor at Columbia Business School, Columbia University, a senior scientist at the Gallup organization, and an assistant clinical professor in the Family and Preventive Medicine Department at the University of California, San Diego. For more than a decade, he has participated as a lecturer at the Update in Internal Medicine, an annual event sponsored by Harvard Medical School's Department of Continuing Education and the Department of Medicine, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.