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Mental Health Quick Notes

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Healthy Aging

HEALTHY AGING

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Have you ever heard of the Delany sisters? Sarah and Elizabeth Delany wrote a book in 1993 entitled **Having Our Say**, in which they talked about their personal perspectives on life and aging. They had many life experiences to share, given that Sara was 103 and Elizabeth was 101 when they authored their book. Anyone who believes that old age is a time of stagnation clearly never heard the Delany sisters' stories.

As far back as I can remember, society has held a negative view of aging. People experiencing mid-life and old age are often described as dowdy in comparison to the sparkling beauty of youth. People often deny their aging because, after all, no one wants to be viewed as less than glamorous. Myths such as "memory worsens with age" cause people to be so frightened about their aging that they will do anything to distract themselves from the warning signs. Thankfully, it is through the experiences and wisdom of people like the Delany sisters that we have learned that older age can be a very enriching, satisfying, and, yes, even glamorous time in a person's life.

So, how can we maximize our potential for a satisfying life in our later years? There is no time better than the present for any of us to adopt healthier habits. Perhaps our greatest motivator to make these changes is the realization that we are all aging! Regardless of whether we are age 20 or 60, the following suggestions can enhance the quality of our lives, both now and in the future.

Let's begin by talking about ways we can maximize our physical health. Exercising three times a week should be at the top of our lists. Finding an exercise activity that you enjoy is a must – otherwise, exercise will create stress instead of reducing it. Diversifying your exercise routine or encouraging a friend to join you are excellent ways to prevent boredom. If you have physical limitations, involving your physician in your decisions about exercise is a must.

Maintaining a healthy diet is such a challenge these days. Often, we are drawn to fast food, which is convenient when we are on the run. Maintaining good nutrition doesn't have to be difficult. Between the media and the internet, there is an abundance of information readily available about creating easy, nutritional meals. When eating in a restaurant, why not consider splitting your dish with a friend or taking leftovers home for the next day. We should all be watching our sugar, caffeine, and soda intake on a daily basis. If you have questions about your unique nutritional needs, meeting with a nutritionist can be a beneficial way to address your concerns.

How well do you sleep? As we age, we may not need as much sleep as when we were younger. We may also find that our sleep patterns are more erratic. Often, problems with sleep can result in depressed mood and decreased energy. While routine exercise and good nutrition can contribute to improved sleep, it may not be enough to restore adequate rest. Talk to your physician or search the internet for non-medication alternatives to enhance sleep.

Speaking of physicians, we should all attend routine appointments with our physicians in order to be more proactive about our health. The fact that people often deny signs of illness or aging may cause them to be less inclined to schedule routine appointments. The overall quality of your health is greatly enhanced when you are consistently monitored by your physician, instead of visiting the doctor only when you sick. You may find it helpful to keep a notebook of your physician's appointments and the recommendations that are made during those visits.

Promoting physical health is only the beginning. Attending to our mental health is equally as important when developing a healthy aging plan. Developing routine activities that stimulate your mind is important as a means of maximizing your cognitive functioning as you age. So, if you like crossword puzzles or cross-stitch projects, these are excellent activities to help keep you sharp. Computer games and brain fitness programs, while new on the scene, are also welcome activities for maintaining and improving brain function.

Another way we can enhance our mental health is through activities with people in our lives. Social isolation is a real concern as we get older. Plan outings with friends and family members as a way of reducing isolation. Consider destinations that you have never tried before so as to alleviate boredom. What about engaging in volunteer activities in your community? You may be amazed at how great you can feel helping someone less fortunate. Other ideas may include taking a class at the local college or high school or joining a book group or Bible study class. The possibilities are endless!

It is essential to inform your physician when you are having difficulties with cognition or mood. While many of the suggestions made above can be helpful in managing mental health, they may not always be enough. Your physician can be most helpful with medication suggestions and can also recommend a therapist to help you address your concerns.

Additional Reading:

Delany, Sarah and A. Elizabeth. (with Hearsh, Amy Hill.) **Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years.** 1993: Kodansha America International.

WebMD's Over 50 Healthy Aging Center.

<http://www.webmd.com/healthy-aging/default.htm>

Science Daily: Your Source for the Latest Research News.

<http://sciencedaily.healthology.com/healthyaging/focusarea.htm>

Family Disorganization

FAMILY DISORGANIZATION

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Can you and your family not remember the last time you saw the top of the dining room table? Can your children not invite their friends over for a sleepover because their beds are covered with boxes and clothes? Does no one want to clean the pots and pans in the sink because they have been there for a week? Do you often run two and three months late renewing your car registration? Do you have a hard time parting with last year's magazine articles because you are sure you will soon have time to read them?

If you answered "yes" to more than one of these questions you and your family are having some problems with organization. If one of the leaders in the household has a serious problem with organization, all of the members are likely being affected. Lack of organization can be anywhere from a minor irritation to a serious problem in a family. Lack of organization can lead to academic and workplace difficulties and even marital conflicts and divorce.

Serious lack of organization and clutter is linked with a number of mental health diagnoses namely obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and cognitive disorders such as dementia (Mandres, 2008). Serious lack of organization is typically referred to as hoarding. Hoarding is identified as a person who answers "yes" to any of the following questions:

*Do you become anxious at the thought of throwing away your things?
Is your home so cluttered you are unable to use spaces for their original purposes??
Do everyday tasks take longer because of clutter?
Does the clutter affect your ability to maintain relationships or socialize?
Are loved ones distressed by the condition of your home and encouraging you to seek help? (Mandres, 2008)*

If hoarding is identified as a problem for you or a family member, please have the person consider a professional consultation with a licensed therapist. Successful treatment of compulsive hoarding involves the use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The CBT recommended for hoarders involves focusing on the deficits in attention, categorization and organization, and decision making that lead to hoarding. Also an integral part of this approach is systematically making steps towards eliminating the clutter. Medication has not been found to be effective unless the person is experiencing extreme anxiety, depression, inattentive symptoms or other cognitive symptoms (Neziroglu, 2007).

Family members of hoarders are intimately affected. There is a loss of space and order in the household and tension between the members of the family especially, if they do not understand the reluctance of the person hoarding to make changes. This can cause some family members to discard items without the person's knowledge which may cause further resentment. Psycho education for the family, as well as treatment for the person hoarding, is recommended. Family members who are most helpful to persons who hoard have been shown to take a firm and

non-anxious stance. (Sketee, 2003).

Even if the level of disorganization does not reach the level of hoarding with one member the results can be very difficult for families to handle. Disorganization can turn parents into clutter cops. Disorganization of one partner can lead the other to perceive their partner as lazy, passive aggressive or inconsiderate. All may be true, however, as stated before, anxiety, depression, ADHD and cognitive difficulties may also impact a person's ability to be organized.

In *Tips for Organizing the ADHD Household* (2008), Keath Low quotes David Goodman, MD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University, about five organization techniques that work for households. These techniques would be helpful to any household experiencing organizational challenges, with or without an individual with ADHD

- 1) The household needs a "central calendar". The calendar serves as "the memory bank" for the ADHD individual. The calendar relieves the non-ADHD members of exhaustion and frustration of always being the point person.
- 2) Visual Cues such as lists and prompts are critical for the ADHD individual who does not have automatic routines.
- 3) Auditory Cues such as alarms in watches, cell phones, digital organizers and computers allow ADHD individuals to remain consistent.
- 4) Routines, doing things in the same sequence daily, is a simple but effective technique. Goodman recommends the routine of emptying his/her pockets in a central place immediately upon entering the door each day.
- 5) Divvying up the household responsibilities is critical for families to ensure equity in the relationship and avoid resentments.

Disorganization should not be looked at as an insignificant problem for families. Organization is the backbone of the family's physical comfort and psychological order. Organization helps children organize themselves and their school work as well as providing a way for family members to cope in stressful times. The pace of the American culture for most families makes organization all the more critical to handle the excessive amount of information and stimuli in an effective manner.

References

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