

A LINE ON LIFE

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A Balance of Pleasure *

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In our culture, the **Protestant Ethic** emphasizes work but minimizes the value of pleasure. Some religious leaders view pleasures as corrupting or at least morally suspect – especially any sensual pleasure. The pleasurable needs of the body are to be denied, the passions restricted and the mind disciplined.

If we want healthy sensuality, one way is to change the way we view health. We view ourselves as fragile and vulnerable to all sorts of disorders – cancers, heart diseases and other ailments. Fearing these diseases, we avoid many of life's pleasures.

Rather than *living* life, many of us spend our lifetime *worrying*. Essentially, our medical fears lead us to deny life's pleasures. If we worry *too much* about anything – calories, salt, cholesterol, cancer – it is unhealthy. Now is the time to be an optimist and look for the zest and pleasure in life. Pleasure not only pays in terms of immediate enjoyment, but it also pays in a second way – *it leads to better health!*

Just think about the healthiest, most robust friends you know. They don't take all the precautions to protect themselves from all possible dangers. They don't lead easygoing, "*stress-free*" lives. However, they do have an **optimistic** view about life. They expect things to work out well, their world to be relatively orderly, and most people to like and respect them. Specifically, "*they expect pleasure in much of what they do.*"

These healthy people enjoy the simple moments of life – watching a sunrise, building model cars and joking around with their children, spouses and pets. Little things seem to please them – a stamp collection, singing enthusiastically (even though terribly) or sending a card to a friend. They relate to their work, families and hobbies with a passion. Their absorption in these activities seems to block out the trouble in their lives.

Sensual pleasures can lead to better health.

These robust people often enjoy a good hearty laugh – even if they are laughing at themselves. They have unbridled enthusiasm for almost everything they do, and they seem to care more for those around them. They view themselves as part of life rather than separated from it.

This optimistic view seems to influence physiological aspects of the heart, the immune system and other parts of the body. In one study, people who had an optimistic outlook reported fewer indications of ill health and better well being physically. In contrast to optimists, pessimists are significantly lower in critical immune functions. It seems as if an optimistic view of the world can lead to maintaining better health.

When we talk about a "*touching*" moment, it can be more physical than we realize. **Touching** – especially light stroking – on almost any part of the body can be relaxing and pleasurable. Massage even helps people with chronic anxiety.

In one study, anxious patients had been given anti-anxiety medications, antidepressants and muscle relaxants – and they had even been trained in relaxation exercises. None of these methods helped. The researchers measured indicators of stress – heart rate, muscle tension and skin resistance – before and after patients were subjected to unexpected loud, blaring noises. Some of the patients were treated to ten sessions – each 30-45 minutes long – of deep massage. Each massaged subject improved in at least one of the measures of stress mentioned above. Most of them indicated less tension and pain.

Unfortunately, many of us physically distance ourselves from others – even others that are emotionally close to us. Our culture seems to view touching as predominantly sexual – and sexual activity outside of marriage is viewed as negative. However, touching can be sensual without being sexual. We can touch and massage others to contribute to our emotional closeness. Because infants are perceived as being asexual, our culture allows us to touch them extensively. However, touching is just as important for older children and adults.

There is an important perspective on what is *natural* for humans to be, do and feel. Our culture seems to have lost some of that perspective. Because of this, our health and quality of life have suffered.

Don't get me wrong. Various activities are necessary for a healthy life other than pleasure. Exercise and wearing seatbelts contribute to a longer, healthier life. We also need to avoid smoking, excessive drinking and overexposure to the sun.

The key concept is **balance**. It is fine to be cautious and avoid potential dangers. However, some of us are so busy avoiding the dangers, we rarely enjoy today – but we often mourn the yesterdays we did not appreciate. Enjoy now! Sense it fully – see it, hear it, smell it, taste it and touch it! *Enjoy the pleasures of today!*

* Adapted from Robert E. Ornstein and David S. Sobel's "Healthy Pleasures," American Health, May, 1989, pages 54-62.