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Many of you likely attended the first session of this lay ministry, in which I discussed the difficulty defining mental illness and the history of mental illness in the United States. Today I am moving into the present, to discuss mental health and how to achieve it. You might ask why this talk belongs in a church service. My position is that without some measure of psychological or mental health, it is very hard to be effective in the world. I believe one of our common goals as Unitarian Universalists is to improve our world; to bring about peace and justice, to treat everyone we meet with respect and compassion, to strive to live by our seven principles, to commit ourselves to use our love as a healing force in the lives of those we know and those we don't. That's a tall order, don't you think? The richer we are in psychological health and wellness, the more resources we have to commit to this goal. And, haven't you noticed that those great spiritual leaders who seem to have it all together smile and laugh a lot? Being healthier makes it easier to experience joy and satisfaction in life, and that's our other goal, also a worthy one.

In fact, the way many of us in the mental health community gauge recovery in mental illness or degree of mental health is to evaluate these two areas, one's level of suffering and one's level of impairment, or stated in more positive terms, levels of comfort and function, feeling well and doing well. Broadly defined, we are all at various times in our lives at different points on the spectrum from mentally ill to what some call wholeness, mental health, or wellness. Without going into detail, I can say roughly half of you have or will have a significant mental illness in your lifetime. Those who won't, will still have times where stresses overwhelm your ability to cope, when you feel rotten or your function is impaired. The line separating distressing symptoms from mental illness is somewhat arbitrary. We use most of the same approaches to treat serious illnesses and milder symptoms, and to prevent illness in people who want to become as well as possible.

Why are we at different points along this spectrum, with some of us seemingly saddled with major struggles and others having a much smoother ride? What are the causes of illness and symptoms? As I discussed in my last talk, conceptions of cause depend on the era and culture in which you live. In our current culture we consider many possible contributors to mental (and physical) illness. It's all chemical, it's stress, it's karma, it's punishment, a spiritual deficiency, you're not right with God, it's all genetics, it's poor nutrition, it's toxins in the environment, it's personal choice or lack of will power. In the medical model it's "many of the above." In the holistic health model, it's even more of the above.

Since I'm a psychiatrist, today you are getting the psychiatrist's way of viewing symptoms leading to distress or mental illness. There are multiple contributing factors, and we have varying degrees of control over these factors. I will describe 4 broad sources of symptoms and illness:

Your predisposition, or your vulnerabilities, are decided by your genetics. This is how you are “wired,” but not just what you inherited from your parents. We now know there is an intimate connection between genes and environment, because many of the genes we have get turned on or off by what happens to us and what we are exposed to, especially early in life. As far as we know, your genetics are NOT under your control, though someday we may learn to actively control the expression of our genes. Perhaps there will be genetic treatments in the future, either to change genes themselves or to impact their operation, but for now we will concentrate on the other three areas, since they are at least partly under our control. There is a tight interaction between all these factors, so the good news is helping something tends to help everything.

First, your physical status, your level of health and wellness. This is partly genetic, and partly under your control. We estimate approximately 70% of your health status has nothing to do with genetic predisposition or medical care, but rather is determined by what we lump together as “lifestyle factors,” which we’ll discuss more in a minute.

Next, stress – what comes at you from the outside, interactions and experiences with job, family, friends, what’s on TV and the rest of the culture you live in. We will discuss what stress is, and the impact it has on your physical and psychological health.

Last, your psychology or personality – how you respond to & manage stress internally. This is partly under your control, though temperament is partly predisposition. We will discuss approaches to modifying and strengthening your ability to cope with stress.

There are a wide array of approaches to modifying these factors, from the medical model to psychotherapy, self-help and so-called alternative or complementary medicine. Whatever the approach, the focus is on the factors you can influence or control – your physical health, your environment, and your psychological response to stress.

Today I am not going to discuss medical treatments since these are focused primarily on illnesses, but rather I will describe those approaches that you can implement yourself to improve your sense of well-being whether you have a mental illness or not. I am not going to go into any detail about the research behind these recommendations, though I will give you an idea about how much research there is.

So let’s get to the core of my talk today – what works to get us psychologically healthier, better able to manage the inevitable stresses that cross our path? I’m going to give you a menu of 16 things you can do that work. You can’t change everything at once. First do what’s easier for you and appeals to you, then maybe you can take on something else. A disclaimer – I am not in perfect mental health. I do not do all the things I am going to recommend. I am only suggesting that you may want try some of the items on the menu.

Let’s start with the most straight-forward issue – improving your physical health.

#1 – Exercise. Studies show aerobic exercise prevents heart disease, delays Alzheimer’s,

eases or prevents depression, and has multiple other positive impacts. The studies have converged on the recommendation of 30 minutes of aerobic exercise 5 times per week, of moderate exercise that makes you breathe a little deeper and faster. Alternatively think of 150 minutes per week that you can do in 10 minute chunks or whatever works for you. There are 2 other kinds of exercise that help in other ways – strength training and stretching, which help prevent fractures, help mobility and ease aches and pains. Though you need all three, it's aerobic exercise that has the biggest benefits on emotional wellbeing.

#2 – Nutrition. There is so much information on this available to you that I don't need to focus on it.

#3 – Limiting toxins. Alcohol, tobacco, pollution, caffeine, food additives. You probably know about this too.

#4 – Sleep. We generally don't get enough. Needing an alarm likely means you aren't finished sleeping. During sleep your body and brain tune up. Studies have shown kids do their growing in their sleep. You repair tiny tears in muscles, consolidate new learning, make new bone, and lots of other maintenance. Adults typically need between 7 and 8.5 hours of sleep per night, and you increase your risk for all kinds of physical and mental illnesses, accidents, obesity, and shorten your lifespan if you don't get it.

Let's talk about the second big issue – stress. Things happen. When do we call it stress? A medical definition of stress would be a non-specific result of any demand on the body, mental or physical. Most of you have heard of the “fight or flight” response. When there is a demand from the outside, your body releases stress hormones (your internal caffeine) to deal with the situation. You gear up to cope with the demand. In the short term it's very helpful – you are more alert, stronger, faster. But chronic stress leads to exhaustion. Your system can't run continuously at full capacity without time to refuel, repair, and maintain the machinery. Numerous studies show bad outcomes from chronic stress, including increases in accidents, infections, and many diseases with a relationship to inflammation like heart disease and depression.

But not enough stress isn't good either. Most folks have seen someone get depressed when they retire. Studies show boredom impedes recovery from illness. There is an optimum amount of stress that depends on your ability to cope with stress and your genetic vulnerability. We could think of stress as an interaction between you and your environment that taxes your resources. An important strategy in improving your management of stress is to learn to periodically assess your stress level, and try to find your own sweet spot.

Another way to think of stress is as a life change – something that forces you to adapt to new circumstances. Marriage, divorce, a new boss, a friend moving away, a new friend. Positive events can still be big stressors if they place a demand on you that requires adaptation, changes in your familiar routine. There are many factors that influence how you perceive an event that can cause it to be more or less stressful. One is a sense of

control. Studies show if you believe the change demanded of you is out of your control, it is much more stressful for you than if you thought it was under your control, even if the demands themselves are identical. Studies also show it's your belief that the situation is under your control, not actually being in control, that counts for helping with stress. A related perception is the feeling that the stress is a challenge vs. a tragedy. Those who approach life changes as a challenges find them much less stressful. Another factor is whether the stresses are clustered together, because that makes it more likely that your resources to cope will be overwhelmed. Pacing changes in your life if possible, like not starting an exercise program when you just started a new job, can help a lot in limiting the effects of stress.

Here are some approaches that directly affect the body's stress response:

#5. Relaxation training. Relaxation exercises teach you to turn off the stress hormones, and turn on what is often called the relaxation response. There are lots of variations that can be grouped into breathing, muscle relaxation, and imaging techniques including self-hypnosis. The simplest technique is to take a few moments when you are feeling your anxiety rise and just breathe. Focus on slow, deep breathing, using your diaphragm and feeling your belly move out and in. You can combine this with an imaging technique such as visualizing breathing in peace and breathing out tension.

#6. Meditation. The concept is simple. Focus on 1 thing, such as a word or phrase, or a candle or other object. Maintain a non-judgmental attitude toward your wandering mind. Just keep bringing your focus back. Practice, at a regular time and place, and try to meditate for at least 20 minutes at a time. At the beginning, it's not comfortable – you might find it disturbing to watch your own mind's twists and turns, seemingly out of your control. You can't try this 20 times and then say it doesn't work. Patience is required. But the benefits are enormous. Long time meditators are much happier, healthier people.

#7. Mindfulness. This is taking time to be in the present. The old phrase "Be here now" doesn't seem relevant to our lives today. We are supposed to "be everywhere now," multitasking constantly without full attention on anything. There is a story about a guy at his computer at work thinking about golf, then thinking about his girlfriend when he's playing golf, and thinking about work when he's in bed with his girlfriend. Sound familiar? You can practice mindfulness by using your 5 senses to ground you in the present. Work your way through each sense and become really aware of your surroundings. You can build this into your day, such as taking a minute before entering your home after a day at work or before starting a task. Try answering your phone on the third ring – before you answer, move into the present moment, prepare to be in contact with another person. That moment can allow you to listen, and have a much richer interaction. Practicing mindfulness has been shown to have numerous positive physical and psychological effects.

#8. Pets. I don't need to tell some of you pet lovers, but there is research backing up the stress lowering effect of a pet. Your blood pressure can drop literally as you pet your dog.

#9. Music. I think most of you know about this. Both listening to and making music you enjoy is balm for the soul and for the stress hormones.

Now let's move to the psychological, though you can see that all these factors interact with each other so much that my categories are somewhat arbitrary.

#10. Optimize social support. One of the most consistent predictors of health is social connectedness. To be helpful in managing stress, the social interaction must engender intimacy and a sense of belonging. Churches, support groups, friendships and family contacts can all be a part of the tapestry. In the studies, social connectedness was particularly potent at reducing stress hormones in women.

#11. Journal. Not a record of the sights you saw on your travels or what you had for lunch, but rather writing about issues that are emotional, meaningful, and somewhat distressing. This kind of writing tends to be uncomfortable at first, but soon you will reap rewards. Studies show robust improvements in physical and mental symptoms and in overall functioning. More introverted folks benefit the most from journaling.

#12. Spend time in nature. Studies show that driving by green spaces, having a room with a nature view, or even looking at images of a natural landscape lead to improvement in physical measures of stress within 5 minutes. Hospital patients can be discharged sooner if they have view of nature when they look out their window.

#13. Humor. You may have heard the quote, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." 15 minutes of laughter daily improves the cardiovascular system, reduces stress hormones, and improves cancer. The kind of humor does matter. Most effective is inclusive humor – we're all in this together. Exclusive humor (isn't he funny) isn't as effective.

#14. Play. Put the fun before the mental. There is the least research support for this, but we all have likely had direct experience on the healing power of play. Make time for fun even if you don't feel like it. There is evidence that smiling makes you happier, so put on a happy face.

#15. Cultivate a positive attitude. You may have heard that pessimists are more likely to be accurate in their assessments. You may not have heard that optimists live longer and have more joyful lives. There is research on both mental and physical illnesses demonstrating better outcomes in people who have a positive attitude. An hopeful approach has an obvious impact on our work to improve the world – it's hard for me to imagine putting much effort into making the world better if I believed this was already as good as it gets. There are many approaches to developing a more positive attitude, but most fit within the framework of what we call cognitive psychotherapy. Many of you will find these ideas familiar, and have likely discovered some of the methods of cognitive therapy on your own, even if you haven't used this language to describe it. I will give you a quick overview.

Many of your thoughts and chains of thoughts are “programmed” in. Dug in like a creek bed that directs your thoughts down a certain path, automatically. These chains of thought are created by experiences and beliefs that may or may not accurately represent the actual world, but tend to be self-reinforcing. I sometimes use the example of the teenager getting dressed for the party, noting her acne is flaring up. She thinks “No one will look as bad as I do. No one will want to hang out with the ugly girl. This party will be miserable.” She almost doesn’t go, but when she does she is inhibited, frowning, mildly irritable, and basically unapproachable. She also has a miserable time. You can see how negative thoughts led to feelings and behaviors that shaped her experience, reinforcing the thoughts. You can identify thoughts like these that get in your way, and you can choose to change them. You can identify thoughts that are positive and useful to you, and by choice and practice you can “dig a new channel,” overlying or replacing thoughts that you choose to reject.

The goal here is to take control of what you think about and exercise your power to choose who you are. The concept is simple, but it’s about as easy as digging a new creek bed. You have to keep at it, again and again, challenging negative thoughts over and over and inserting the positive ones. There are many words therapists have developed as shorthand to remind you of some of the common types of negative thoughts that hold folks back. Catastrophising is taking a potentially bad outcome and repeatedly thinking about the worst possible scenario. A difference of opinion with your boss? “I’ll be fired, no one else will hire me, I’ll won’t be able to make my mortgage payments, and I’ll lose my house!” Those who see bad events as a “temporary setback” instead of a catastrophe are more successful at managing stress and feel better.

The AA 12-step program is full of ready-made alternative thoughts that folks can use. You may know “one day at a time” which you can use to stop you from feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task ahead. I love the Serenity Prayer. Feel free to say it with me: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” It’s great for helping you stop useless fretting about things you have no power over. You have likely heard of the systematic practice of gratitude – taking time daily to focus attention on what is good in your life. This practice directs your creek down a positive channel. For many, saying grace before meals and regular prayers are daily expressions of gratitude.

Some of you may be thinking, that’s a bunch of bunk. I’ve tried stuff like that, it doesn’t work. If you lift a bar-bell once, or 10 or 20 times, you don’t get stronger. Just like meditation, exercise, or any of the other techniques I described, cognitive therapy is proven to work, if you work and work and stay with it. Effort is required, but the payoffs are really worth it.

#16. Develop your sense of purpose. The link between religious beliefs and mental health is another talk, but suffice it to say that there is a positive correlation between measures of religiosity or spirituality and health. Religion can increase stress – harsh religious beliefs can worsen mental and physical health. More often though, it’s a net positive for the individual. Ever heard the phrases, “Too blessed to be stressed,” and “Too blessed to

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be depressed?” There are books extolling these benefits with varying perspectives, from “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Victor Frankel to “The Purpose-driven Life” by Rick Warren. Developing our sense of purpose is one reason many of us come here Sunday mornings.

So let’s review the menu –

Exercise, good nutrition, avoiding toxic substances, getting enough sleep.

Relaxation training, meditation, mindfulness, pets, and music.

Social support, journaling, nature, humor, and play.

A positive attitude, and a sense of purpose.

Psychotherapy can help with many of these, as can self-help books and support groups or clubs. But the biggest thing is committing yourself to taking care of yourself, and moving YOU up on your priority list. For those of you who’ve ever flown, you know from the safety instructions that you have to affix your oxygen mask before helping others. What help can you be if you are passed out? If you feel good, you have more power to do good.

There are numerous excellent resources to help you with the menu options that are less familiar. I brought just a few books for you to look at that are on the table in the foyer. The best book I’ve found for relaxation training is called “The Stress Management and Relaxation Workbook.” There are great books on learning mindfulness, such as “Present Moment, wonderful moment” by Tic Nat Han, or “Where ever you go, there you are” by John Cabot Zinn. Books on cognitive therapy are often specific to a type of problem, like “Worrywart’s Companion” or “Stop Worrying and Start Living.” There are also workbooks like “Mind Over Mood.” If you want more references, just ask.