

IID1 Lifestyle Introduction

Hey, everyone,

In this next unit we're going to talk about the importance of optimizing lifestyle factors such as sleep, stress management, physical activity, and exposure to environmental toxins.

During the first week of this course I introduced the concept of the exposome, which refers to the sum of all non-genetic exposures in an individual lifetime, starting from the moment of our conception. This encompasses the food we eat, the air we breathe, our social interactions, our lifestyle choices, and our inherent cellular and metabolic activity.

We now know that collectively, these factors that comprise the exposome account for over 90 percent of human disease. Our genes certainly do play a role—particularly in determining which diseases we are predisposed to developing—but the exposome is the primary driver of our health.

In the conventional model, very little attention is paid to the exposome, despite some lip service around the importance of a “healthy diet.” If you go to your primary care doctor, he or she is very unlikely to spend more than a few minutes—if any time at all—discussing your diet, and since physicians typically only take one class on nutrition in medical school, they may not be the people you should be getting dietary advice from in the first place.

In the functional and integrative medicine worlds, there's a lot more focus on the role of diet in health. In fact, I would argue that there is sometimes too much of a focus here, at the expense of other aspects of the exposome, such as physical activity, stress management, or sleep, that may play a more important role in the patient's chief complaints.

The longer I do this work, the more convinced I am that lifestyle and behavioral modification are often the “elephant in the room” when it comes to our work with patients. Why? Because it's a lot harder for most patients to make changes in how they manage stress, or how much sleep they get, or whether they allocate time for pleasure and play, than it is for them to change their diet or take some supplements or herbs.

Changing your lifestyle and behavior often requires a fundamental shift in how you relate to yourself and the world around you. For example, let's say you're the kind of person that has trouble saying no. You'll be likely to pack your schedule with more commitments than you can handle, which leaves little time for getting enough sleep, leisure, or pleasure—especially if you have a family and a job! If I simply tell you to get more sleep and have more fun, it's often not as simple as just deciding to do that. You'll have to confront your “caretaker” pattern before you're able to make those changes.

Nevertheless, as challenging as it often is for patients to adjust their behavior and lifestyle, I believe it's absolutely essential to a successful treatment. I've had many cases where the patient had their diet completely dialed in and we'd done everything we could to address underlying mechanisms, but they were still unwell.

In these situations, the “dis-ease” was more about their relationship with life than it was about any particular pathology or food they were eating. And making changes in how much time they spent outdoors, or how often they made time for fun and play, or allowing eight hours of sleep a night instead of six, or creating more opportunities for social connection is what allowed them to return to health.

As clinicians, it's up to us to shine the light on these factors and emphasize their importance with our patients. This can be challenging when we're occupied with doing everything we do to identify underlying mechanisms and address them.

One solution to this challenge is to have a health coach on staff. This person's sole purpose can be to work with the patient to dial in all the finer points of diet and lifestyle modification that you may not have time to address with your patients. You can make a visit with the health coach required as part of your case review process; for example, after the initial consult, while the patient is waiting for their case review, they can be working with your health coach in the meantime.

Whether you hire a health coach or choose to address these factors yourself, the important thing is that you do address them. If you don't, the long-term outcome of the treatment won't be as positive. Remember, we're practicing root cause medicine. If you see a patient with HPA-D, and you give them supplements to correct their cortisol levels, that might help ... but if their cortisol levels went out of whack in the first place because they were burning the candle at both ends, whatever improvement you make with your treatment will be temporary unless they address that pattern.

The good news is that throughout the lifestyle section I've included resources that you can use to help your patients to implement the changes you recommend. There are a variety of apps, hardware tools, and other technologies that have made lifestyle and behavior change more effective and easier for patients, so I encourage you to use them.

Okay, that's it for now! See you next time.