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Role of lifestyle behaviours in maintaining physical and mental health

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Abstract

Physical health involves having a sound, disease free-body with good cardiovascular performance, sharp senses, a vital immune system, and the ability to withstand physical injury. Lifestyle factors enhance physical and mental health. Lifestyle factors include eating nutritious diet, exercising regularly, sleeping well, and avoiding use of illicit drugs. In the present article, we discuss five lifestyle related behaviours that may be helpful in maintaining physical and mental health. Maintenance of healthy body is central to good mental health. Lifestyle factors, namely, physical activity and fitness, healthy dietary habits, exercise, healthy lifestyle, good habits, and yoga are discussed in this article. Authors of the present article also suggest the role of parents in promoting healthy lifestyle of children and the ways how one can achieve the physical or bodily state.

Keywords: Lifestyle, physical and mental health, promoting healthy lifestyle

Introduction

“Strengthening of body is required in Islam.” Prophet Muhammad

“To keep the body in good health is a duty...otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear.” Buddha

Physical health involves having a sound, disease free-body with good cardiovascular performance, sharp senses, a vital immune system, and the ability to withstand physical injury. Lifestyle factors enhance physical health. Lifestyle behaviours include eating nutritious diet, exercising regularly, sleeping well, doing yoga, and avoiding use of illicit drugs. Unhealthy eating, lack of physical activity, excessive alcohol use, obesity, smoking are seen as the most important health threats.

The *Maitreyi Upnishad* (2.1) says that the body is “the temple of the indwelling Spirit.” The body is the temple of God and the means by which we worship Him through service. Hindu scriptures mention five ways to serve God, through service to the gods, the sages, the manes, human beings and animals. The ancient lawgiver Manu says, “Through the repeated practice of these five great *Yajnas* (sacrifices), the human body gets divinized” (*Manu-samhita* 2.28). This is the underlying philosophy of holistic health.

A healthy lifestyle is ensured by four modes: 1. Diet and Drinks (*Ahar*), 2. Exercise (*Vihar*), 3. Thoughts and Perception (*Vichar*), and 4. Attitude and Behaviour (*Vayawahar*). Diet and exercise can be easily managed by a set routine and habit formation. Maintenance of thoughts and perception, and attitude and behaviour are solely depends on individual’s behaviour.

Bodily and mental healths are the main components of holistic health. We cannot feel well without giving the rest to our body, get active, active healthy, and paying attention to healthy lifestyle choices. Health means complete physical, mental, and social welfare but these aspects of health do not have any meaning if one loses his/her inner strength.

A substantial number of studies have been generated reporting that university students engage in unhealthy lifestyle behaviours such as substance abuse (Fromme, Corbin, & Kruse, 2008; Halperin, Smith, Helligenstein, Brown, & Fleming, 2010) ^[11, 12].

Dale, Brassington, and King (2014) ^[5] examined the effect of healthy lifestyle interventions on mental well-being. Authors reviewed 95 full papers. In total, 29 papers met inclusion criteria, representing a range of interventions spanning physical activity, diet, alcohol intake, drug use and smoking. A range of measures were used.

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The majority (n = 25) of studies demonstrated improvements on at least one indicator of mental health and well-being. Health behaviour change interventions targeting physical outcomes appear to have benefits to mental health and well-being spanning healthy populations and those with physical or mental health problems. Evidence is strongest for interventions targeting exercise and diet, particularly in combination and the actual lifestyle changes made and adherence appear to be important. However, it is not clear from this review which specific components are necessary or essential for improvements in mental health and well-being.

There are five lifestyle-related behaviours that can help an individual in maintaining physical and mental health. These are: physical activity, healthy dietary habits, exercise, good habits, and yoga. Each of these behaviours with supportive evidence will be discussed here.

Physical Activity and Fitness

Physical activity is defined as ‘any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that require energy expenditure’ (Department of Health, P.A. Health Improvement and Protection, 2011) [9]. Physical inactivity has been identified as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality (6% of deaths globally). This follows high blood pressure (13%), tobacco use (9%) and high blood glucose (6%). Overweight and obesity are responsible for 5% of global mortality. Physical activity significantly reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, and colon cancer (Hu, Stampfer, Colditz, Ascherio, Rexrode, Willett, & Manson, 2000) [13].

Physical activity is defined by its duration, intensity, and frequency. Duration is the amount of time spent participating in a physical activity session. Intensity is the rate of energy expenditure. Frequency is the number of physical activity sessions during a specific time period (e.g. one week).

Types of Physical Activity

Aerobic: Light to vigorous-intensity physical activity that requires more oxygen than sedentary behaviour and thus promotes cardiovascular fitness and other health benefits (e.g., jumping rope, biking, swimming, running, playing soccer, basketball, or volleyball).

Anaerobic: Intense physical activity that is short in duration and requires a breakdown of energy sources in the absence of sufficient oxygen. Energy sources are replenished as an individual recovers from the activity. Anaerobic activity (e.g., sprinting during running, swimming, or biking) requires maximal performance during the brief period.

Lifestyle physical activity typically performed on a routine basis (e.g., walking, climbing stairs, mowing or raking the yard), which is usually light to moderate in intensity.

Physical activity play is a type of activity that requires substantial energy expenditure (e.g., playing tag, jumping rope).

Play – activity with flexible rules, usually self-selected, for the purpose of having fun.

Sports: Physical activity that involves competition, scorekeeping, rules, and an outcome that cannot be predetermined. There are two categories of sports: individual and team.

Weight-bearing physical activity requires people to move their own weight.

Many of these urgent physical health challenges, including

obesity and coronary heart disease, are also connected to sedentary and indoor lifestyles (CDC 1996; DCMS 2002; DoH 2004) [6, 7, 8]. Physically active people have lower risk of dying from coronary heart disease, type II diabetes, hypertension and colon cancer. Activity also enhances mental health, fosters healthy muscles and bones, and helps maintain health and independence in older adults (Paffenbarger, Lee, & Leung, 1994; Pretty, Griffin, & Sellens, 2004; Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham, & Dudgeon, 1999) [20, 21, 23]. The recent UK Chief Medical Officer’s report (DoH 2004) [8] indicated that: ‘physical activity helps people feel better, as reflected in improved mood and decreased state and trait anxiety. It helps people feel better about themselves through improved physical self-perceptions, improved self-esteem, decreased physiological reactions to stress, [and] improved sleep’.

Physical activity can positively affect both physical and psychological well-being (Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham, & Dudgeon, 1999) [23]. Physical activity promotes psychological well-being and reduces feelings of mild to moderate depression and anxiety (US DHHS, 2004) [24]. There is a strong relationship exists between physical activity and mental health.

The evidence indicates that physical activity can make positive contributions to our health, help us recover from pre-existing stresses or problems, have an ‘immunising’ effect by protecting us from future stresses, and help us to concentrate and think more clearly.

Fitness

Participating in physical activity is beneficial to people of all ages. Physical activity contributes to fitness, a state in which people’s health characteristics and behaviours enhance the quality of their lives.

Types of Fitness

- 1. Physical fitness:** A set of physical attributes related to a person’s ability to perform physical activity successfully, without undue strain and with a margin of safety.
- 2. Health-related physical fitness:** A physiological state of well-being that reduces the risk of hypokinetic disease; a basis for participation in sports; and a vigour for the tasks of daily living. Components include cardio-respiratory endurance, muscle strength endurance, flexibility, and body composition.
- 3. Skill-related physical fitness:** Common components of physical fitness (e.g., agility, balance, coordination, speed, power, reaction time) that enable participation in sports and other physical activities; also called performance or motor fitness.

There was one critical review which evaluated whether yoga can engender fitness in older adults (Roland, Jakobi, & Jones, 2011). Ten studies with 544 participants (mean age 69.9 ± 6.3) were included; 5 of these studies were RCTs, and 5 studies had a single-arm pre/post-design. With respect to physical fitness and function, the studies reported moderate effect sizes for gait, balance, body flexibility, body strength, and weight loss. However, there is still a need for additional research trials with adequate control interventions (active and specific) to verify these promising findings.

Healthy Eating Behaviour

Healthy eating behaviour is a pattern or style of eating behaviour that participants practice in order to consume a proper amount of specific foods or nutrients to maintain or

promote their health. Eating is an important behaviour for optimal health. Healthy dietary habits refer to avoiding eating fat and eating more fruits and vegetables. Eating healthy food is a non-sedentary behaviour.

A healthy diet emphasizes having the appropriate portions of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat or fat-free milk products and should include lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts. Fats and sugars should be limited. People experiencing mental health problems in particular should aim for a diet low in refined sugar as research has shown that a diet high in refined sugar is associated with worsening symptoms. Human nature, according to the Bhagwad Gita, is controlled by three qualities: *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* signifying goodness, passion and illusion. The soul, which is invisible and incomprehensible to material nature, apparently manifests through these qualities. By nature, a *saatvik* person is active, a *rajasik* person is good and *tamasic* is an ignorant person.

Ancient Indian literature has discussed in detail the type of food according to the *gunas*. There is *Sattvic* food, *Rajasik* food and the *Tamasic* food. So also, there are three kinds of company, three kinds of actions, three kinds of rituals, etc. The kinds of environment are greatly affecting the origin and the modification of the motives which ultimately are instrumental in shaping the personality (Gita 18).

The factors associated with poor eating habits among college students include a high perception of stress (Cartwright, Wardle, Steggle, Simon, Croker, & Jarvis, 2003)^[4] and low self-esteem (Hustinger & Luecken, 2004)^[14]. Studies by Oliver, Wardle, and Gibson (2000)^[19] and Zucker (2000)^[25] indicated the relationship between high stress levels and lower self-esteem and unhealthy eating behaviours.

Exercise

According to Husain (2015)^[15, 16], with the physical exercises, the soul or spirit becomes strong and healthy. Exercise helps people to feel better physically and mentally. There has been an emerging body of literature by researchers and practitioners on why to promote exercise participation and adherence by adopting behavioural techniques. We need to encourage continued exercise participation among people of different age groups. We follow routines to get us through the day. There is a far greater likelihood of exercising if it is planned in advance. The more specific that plan, the better chance it will happen. Choose the time of day that an exercise session is most available and when it feels best – physically, mentally, and emotionally – to do.

Exercise consists of activities that are planned and structured, and that maintain or improve one or more of the components of physical fitness. Exercise is often associated with fitness maintenance or improvement only.

Types of Exercise

Calisthenics

Isotonic muscle-fitness exercise that overloads muscles by forcing the muscles to work at a higher level than usual.

Flexibility (Stretching)

Exercise designed to stretch muscles and tendons to increase joint flexibility or range of motion. Specific flexibility exercises need to be done for each part of the body.

Isokinetic

Muscle-fitness exercise in which the amount of force equals the amount of resistance, so that no movement occurs.

Isotonic

Muscle-fitness exercise in which the amount of force exerted is constant throughout the range of motion, including muscle shortening (concentric contractions), and muscle lengthening (eccentric contractions).

Muscle-fitness

Exercise designed to build muscle strength and endurance by overloading the muscles; also called progressive resistance exercise (PRE). Common forms of muscle fitness exercise include isokinetic, isometric, and isotonic.

Exercise has both physical and mental benefits. It improves breathing, circulation, digestion and general muscle tone and condition, while decreasing feelings of anxiety and depression. Exercise helps in reducing the tension and excess stress.

Morgan, Parker, Alvarez-Jimenez, and Jorm (2013)^[18] summarizes research findings and advocate that exercise may help improve symptoms of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, and improve functioning and physical health in individuals with psychotic disorders. There is limited research on which to guide exercise prescriptions, but both aerobic and resistance exercise may be effective, as well as programs that consist of 3 sessions-wk⁻¹ of at least 30 min moderate-to-vigorous intensity exercise for a minimum of 8 wks. Higher doses may be more effective, but may have lower adherence, particularly given the additional barriers to exercise that individuals with mental disorders may face. As mental disorders increase the risk of chronic physical conditions, and tend to recur across the lifespan, exercise can be useful for both mental and physical health, and may maintain well-being and prevent recurrences of poor mental health.

Good Habits

Forming good habits can help us to maintain our physical in the most positive way. Swami Kriyananda wrote as follows: “Psychologically, what happens in any struggle between high aspirations in oneself and one’s worldly tendencies is that habit sides with worldliness. Our need is to replace our bad habits with good ones. Good habits, however, yield to a higher power, which is what gives us our true strength. Good habits, to become strongly established, require the use of awareness, energy, and will power.” Once we adopt good habits in our daily routine then it became as easy. Focus on at least one good habit i.e. habit of eating healthier foods.

Yoga

Yoga as a discipline originated in India. It is a mind-body technique which involves relaxation, meditation and a set of physical exercises performed in sync with breathing. Being holistic, it is the best means for maintaining physical, mental, and spiritual health. Hatha yoga emphasizes the most on exercise of physical body. It has been commonly used to describe the practice of *asana* (postures). The syllable ‘ha’ denotes the *pranic* (vital) force governing the physical body and ‘tha’ denotes the *chitta* (mental) force thus making Hatha Yoga a catalyst to awakening of the energies that govern our lives. More importantly, hatha yoga purifies the body systems and focuses the mind in preparation for more advanced *chakra* and *kundalini* practice.

As regards to Yoga, it is believed that it is an ancient technique. Most of us do not know that yoga is everything to control our behaviour. All living beings have souls. This opens up new vista of health-related quality of life. Yoga is a human creation, it is an art. One of the aims of which could be to unite body, mind, and spirit.

In Holy Gita, Lord Krishna has called Yoga as “Yog: *Karmasu Kaushlam*” meaning yoga as creator of efficiency in all deeds of human being. Maharishi Patanjali has written in his Yoga Sutra, “*Yogishatvriti Nirodh*”. Swami Ramdev says: “Karo Yog, Raho Nirog.” Yoga has been the greatest health treasurer since ancient days. Practice is the key to it. YOGA as an acronym stands for ‘Yearning’, ‘Observances’, ‘God consciousness, and ‘Abstentions and Awareness’ (Husain, 2015) [15, 16].

Desikachar, Bragdon, and Bossart (2005) [10] advocate that sustained practice of Yoga leads to important outcomes such as changes in life perspective, self-awareness and an improved sense of energy to live life fully with genuine enjoyment. Many people identify yoga only with *asanas*, the physical practice of yoga, but *asanas* is just one of the many tools for healing the individual, only three of the 196 sutras mention asana and the remainder of the sutras discuss the other components of yoga including conscious breathing, meditation, lifestyle and diet changes, visualization and the use of sound, among many others.

We found a number of relevant publications, including reviews on the effects of yoga on depression, fatigue, anxiety and anxiety disorder, stress, posttraumatic stress disorder, sympathetic/parasympathetic activation, cardiovascular endurance, blood pressure and hypertension, glucose regulation, menopausal symptoms, epilepsy, musculoskeletal functioning and pain (see review Büssing, Michalsen, Khalsa, Telles, & Sherman, 2012) [3].

Role of Parents in Promoting Healthy Lifestyle of Children

Children from birth to around twelve years are virtually captives in their own home. Their parents control them entirely. Parents told what to do and what not to do, and what to eat or what not to eat. Every step of children’s life is directed and controlled by parents. But the problem arises when parents and guardians exceed the limits in using their power to govern their children.

Parents believe the younger generation has adopted sedentary lifestyle. They fail to realise the problem of relationship in most cases, invariably stems from the lack of intellect to assess the psychological traits of their children. They operate from emotional pressures arising from their attachment and possessiveness towards their children, virtually strangulating helpless children with their ‘love’ and ‘care’. Parents, therefore, need to nurture their children in a more positive manner.

Hence it becomes the parents' obligation to understand, to maintain the physical and mental health of the children. Unfortunately, the well-wishing and well-meaning parents fail to recognise the importance of physical health. Instead, they expect that their children should secure good marks.

If the parents, guardians desire their children to adopt a better lifestyle, first they should adopt a disciplined way of living; they must possess and live with moral and spiritual values themselves. They must set the example of living the higher values of life and refrain from giving sermons to their children. It is observed that most parents more often do not set the example of a disciplined life and keep ordering their children to be disciplined.

How one can achieve the physical or bodily state

First, commit yourself to being happy in every circumstance. As soon as you experience or perceive negative feelings, strongly affirm your decision to be happy.

Second, you may not be able to change your circumstances, but you can control how to respond to those conditions. This

simple ability will change your life.

Third, positive reactions develop positive health. For attaining physical health, adopt the lifestyle habits and learn to be grateful for your challenges.

Fourth, learn to think less of yourself, and more of others and their needs.

Fifth, do not dwell on past events or future plans. If you can stay in the here and now, expanding your heart to all, you will realise that you can be happy and physically fit.

And, always try to live in a peaceful, calm, and joyful state. Release all attachments, all desires, and all regrets.

Conclusion

Every individual talk about his health and make an effort to maintain it through different ways. Lifestyle behaviours are definitely changing. Existing research showed positive relation of the above mentioned behaviours or practices with maintenance of physical and mental health. Physical activity suggests a wide variety of activities that promote health and well-being. The role of physical activity, healthy dietary habits, healthy lifestyle, good habits, exercise and Yoga is to be emphasized in developing healthy personality. Yoga causes stability of mind and cures physical diseases. Maintenance of physical health has an important impact on individual personality. It also provides an opportunity for young people to learn how to maintain health and how to cope with stress. The body must work tirelessly, energetically, and enthusiastically to maintain physical health.

More research is needed on exercise attitudes and adherence. Will scheduling enhance exercise adherence? Research is needed to answer this question. It is important to investigate psychological factors associated with physical activity and fitness, healthy dietary habits, exercise, healthy lifestyle, good habits, and yoga.

Health education in general and yoga education in particular should stress the importance of cultivating healthy habits in improving or maintaining health.

In order to improve health-related quality of life of people, psychoeducational interventions must be implemented. For effective interventions, groundwork on eating healthy diet, physical activity and fitness, and type of exercise must be prepared with respect to age and gender wise. Interventions may cover the topics related to knowledge of healthy diet, physical activity, exercise and their positive impact on physical and mental health.

Message

Choose the best lifestyle to maintain physical and mental health.

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