

1. Self-Healing

Welcome to the Work

If we want to avoid unnecessary medication or when meds stop working, it's crucial that we realize just how profoundly the healing game changes when we cut back our reliance on conventional approaches.

Healing is not for wimps. Real healing, especially on an emotional level, sooner or later requires unflinching self-examination. Therapy definitely helps.

Many of the tools we can use to get more out of life and therapy are naturopathic in nature and do not lend themselves to conventional research approaches. That means the conventional evidence base is weak. Don't expect most MDs to understand or be supportive, although there are a precious few who do (many from outside the US.)

Healing also generally requires that we recognize that commonly accepted habits and attitudes often contribute to chronic disease. That's why investigation, change and growth are all essential parts of the healing process. Seen this way, disease becomes a teacher ... at times a very demanding teacher forcing us to come to terms with sides of ourselves we'd rather ignore or let run on autopilot.

When we're young many of us treat our bodies and minds as indestructible. As we age we learn better, but by that time we're often deeply invested in dietary habits, work habits, relationship patterns that may not be healthy for us. This causes stress. That stress in turn ages us and undermines good mental health.

These habits can be a bit like running a car with tires out of alignment. Sure, we can keep driving the car. We may feel some instability on the road. Mileage suffers. A wise driver aligns and rotates the tires from time to time, knowing that parts of misaligned tires wear out faster than the rest of the tire. The shoulders start showing fabric while there's still plenty of perfectly good tread left.

The money for the tire shop is in replacing the tire. Few remind their customers to come in for regular rotations.

Most of us wait until we've got thread showing before we start to take self-care (or any other medical care) seriously. It's not really our fault; most of the money in medicine comes from replacing the tires ... or in fixing their worn out shoulders once the wear can't be ignored. Medical knowledge and practice reflects this.

And for good reason. Doctors long ago noticed that most patients preferred to be taken care of rather than participate actively in their care. Epidemic non-

compliance with drug regimes and other instructions has soured most of them on the idea of trying to coach their patients in self-care. This general lack of patient compliance/physician interest reflects itself in medical education and practice, in medical research, and even in the understanding medical science has about how the body itself works. I'd suggest that it's at the root of the crisis in medicine facing the US today, with billions of dollars in research and care chasing diminishing returns in terms of the population's health metrics. In the US, these metrics are declining.

We've been taught to think that the body is such an impossibly complicated thing that we need an advanced degree in order to do anything to help heal it.

Still, many of us realize in the part of us that thinks without words that that's not true.

The best indicator of truth in conventional medical research is an approach called the randomized, controlled trial—the double-blinded trial. These experiments are expensive. In a day when pharmaceutical corporations fund so much research this allows corporate agendas to tilt the science playing field and destroy the consensus required for truth to emerge. Witness the debate in the US over climate change (though the technical issues and therefore the strategies there are different than the ones resorted to in the medical arena.)

Nutrients and herbs cannot be patented. This removes the potential for corporations to make the kinds of profits on these substances required to justify the huge expense of undertaking these kinds of tests. From the standpoint of the pharmaceutical industry, the biggest funder of medical research, natural forms of medicine are the competition. The goal is to defeat them. The primacy of the RCT trial—its status as the “gold standard” of research, its assumed lack of bias—makes this easy.

Lifestyle changes, comprehensive and individually-tailored herb or nutritional interventions—heck, surgery!—none of these kinds of interventions can be truly randomized and adequately double-blinded on humans. Best-practice, effective healing means adjusting the mix and strengths of interventions according to each individual patient’s responses. But RCT trials get very, very large and very, very expensive when they try to test more than one variable at the same time, let alone vary the doses of those variables in any individualized way.

RCT trials assume the primacy of western diagnostic categories, a practice guaranteed to throw false negative results when applied to medical systems with their own ways of understanding and categorizing disease. It’s extremely easy to use *incorrect* dosages, poor quality herbs, nutrients that aren’t prepared in the right forms or supplied with essential cofactors, too-brief a trial or one-size-fits-all regimes that don’t work for more than a few.

Consider this: the human body is a complex phenomenon based on multiple inputs. Nutrition studies that evaluate the effects of a single or only a few nutrients on a test population are a little like a guy who comes out of his house in the morning to find all the wheels stolen and missing from his car. If he goes about trying to determine which wheels he needs to replace to get back on the road by only installing only one or two at a time, testing, then removing those before checking the others, it's going to be awhile before he gets his answer.

Science-based medicine as it's been practiced since the mid-20th century has produced miracles. But just as powerful antibiotics kill off all but the most resistant microbes, so too the power of conventional, technology-based medicine has made many ancient medical scourges ancient history, leaving only the diseases that don't respond to its approach. We call these diseases chronic. And since we've come to think of the body as something so complex that only professionals with advanced degrees can heal it, we sometimes give up.

But this may not be the only reality. Could it be instead be the artifact of a medical worldview compelled by economics, intellectual inertia, patient disinterest and noncompliance to rely on novel substances and highly technical interventions while getting in the habit of dismissing legacy medicines as unproven and the everyday observations of ordinary people as anecdotal and easily ignored?

If one is not trained in medicine but has a stubborn problem to solve and wants to explore the world that exists beyond conventional approaches ... the learned helplessness that this overprofessionalism of medicine enables has to change.

Right now.

Fortunately, many of the healing tools we can use ourselves are found naturally in the body and so are less toxic than pharmaceuticals can be. That means we have a bit more slack as we set about putting them to work. It doesn't mean we can be careless, though (especially if we're medicated. In that case we need to be very, very careful—and get professional help.)

If we're not ready to shoulder the responsibility of learning a bit about how our bodies work, how common modern habits set the stage for anxiety, depression and other psychopathologies ... and most importantly, if we're not ready to confront our habits, grow and change ... please put this back on the shelf or return it; no need to waste our time and your money.

If, on the other hand, we're good and ready to embark on an empowering journey of self-discovery, change and healing, let's rock.

1.1 Understanding Stress

No stress? No life.

Stress keeps us awake. It makes us get out of bed in the morning. Stress makes sure we do the less pleasant things we need to do to make life possible.

But too much stress makes us sick. It makes us old before our time. So balancing just the right amount of stress and handling it well is crucial to life.

How do we know we're overly stressed? We start finding more (and always excellent) reasons to argue. Our friends start avoiding us. We stop doing the things we enjoy doing.

Some of us are constantly thrown into highly stressed and anxious states by small things; others are unperturbed in the midst of disaster. Why does stress affect us all so differently?

It turns out there's two very small parts of the brain that act as our stress "thermostats." Working together, the hypothalamus and amygdala are constantly alert to threats or things that appear to us as threats. They con-

duct a symphony of endocrine responses that work as a team to orchestrate our attempts to protect ourselves. They turn our “stress thermostat” up and down, monitoring blood levels to ensure the appropriate amounts of stress hormones are in circulation.

Cortisol is a stress hormone that makes us hyper-vigilant to threats. But it also weakens us. Among other things cortisol shuts down the tissue-repair processes the body uses to refresh itself and stay young. When we’re on alert we’ve got more important things to do, or so the body seems to think. More on that later, but that’s why folks who go through periods of extreme stress can age so quickly.

It turns out that the parts of the brain that control the cortisol stress response are unusually vulnerable to its age-accelerating effects. They have extraordinarily high densities of cortisol receptors so they can serve as “the canary in the coal mine,” an early monitoring and alert system ... the thermostat, in other words.

The upshot is that the more severe and prolonged the stress one experiences the more the cells in these parts of the brain start to die off. As they do things trend in one of two directions.

Some folks lose the ability to mount a stress response when it’s appropriate. One face of this is the action hero sauntering nonchalantly through a hail of bullets and exploding machines, emerging eternally unscathed. Another face is the perpetually depressed person with a flat unexpressive manner.

At the other extreme we have folks who can't turn their stress responses off. These see threats everywhere. Life becomes grey or worse, black and white, us against the world. A growing tendency toward suspicion and fatalism is validated by paranoia and cynicism. This mindset often claims to be realistic. But it's really just anxiety or the more agitated forms of depression, growing more and more adept at fulfilling its own negative prophecies.

The first type (if they're not too depressed) can become bullies and manipulators. The second type can become victims. Across species, extreme levels of stress, especially during the early days, weeks and months of an organism's life, can predispose it toward one extreme or the other by "burning out" the brain's stress thermostat.

Modern imaging studies and neuroendocrine research confirm that anxiety, depression and other mood and personality disorders can be driven in part by out-of-control stress hormones. Our brains become like a room with a broken thermostat. With the neuroendocrine furnace stuck on "on," stress hormone production doesn't shut down when it should. Things start to heat up and our moods deteriorate.

Fortunately there's a wide range of natural ways to fix our inner stress hormone thermostat. Soon we'll be looking at them.

1.2 Resetting Your Stress Thermostat

*How to Create Your Own
Before Meds/After Meds Program.*

If anxiety, depression and all the psychopathologies they drive are bad habits we get into in part as the result of a broken stress thermostat in the brain, the heater running non-stop—then let's take a look at ways to repair and reset the thermostat.

Baby steps are almost always better than giant steps, at least when it comes to the kind of personal changes we'll be looking at here. Issues arise when commonly-accepted habits are revealed as problematic. So it's best to take things gently and slowly.

Luckily there's a wide variety of Natural StressCare steps one can take; it's your job to decide which ones are right for you. They can be mixed and matched. But generally the more steps one takes the greater their combined effects. When done right, this allows one to adjust one's stress-control regime according to the demands of the day (something a bit more difficult to do with meds.)

1. Basic Micronutrients. This should always be the first step. If one is depleted in magnesium or omega-3 essential fatty acids, as many of us are, anything else one does about easing anxiety or depression won't work nearly as well. This applies in spades to natural stresscare methods, which rely for their effect on enhancing the body's natural metabolic pathways.

And this is often the first test of whether one is really ready to embark on a program of self-care. Whether or not one adopts the daily ritual of taking a good chelated trace mineral, a B vitamin, enough of the right kind of flax (or fish) oil blend to do the job, enough anti-oxidants—that's a good early test of one's commitment to one's personal Before Meds / After Meds program.

2. Diet Quality. The next step is to take a long, hard look at the food one eats. The more manufactured and processed the diet, the better the odds it's contributing to stress and making it harder to stay away from meds. What's your personal ratio of packaged foods to unpackaged?

In particular, watch processed carb consumption (ie: sugar, breads) and any foods eaten every day and craved. The first can set in motion stress-inducing blood sugar swings, and the second can be a sign of agitation-driving food allergies.

3. A Detox Juice Fast is a fantastic way to start a Program—for those strong and dedicated enough to do it, cleared by their docs and with the right support. It clears the body of stress-magnifying toxic accumulations and punctuates one's life in such a way that better habits are easier to keep. In any event, some form of detoxification is often helpful.

Once the Prep Work steps are in place there's a menu of advanced steps one can take:

4. Pick one or more amino acids according to one's needs,
5. If circumstances allow add a hands-on method,
6. Add a self-maintenance method or three,
7. Add a subtle energy method to turbocharge your personal change process.

If you're anxious or depressed and serious about staying off meds or getting off meds, it's important to roll up one's sleeves. Steps 1-3 are basic and essential; the rest very helpful.

The more advanced steps one adds to the basic ones the easier one's ride generally becomes. I'd say two or three advanced steps would be a realistic minimum for most who are considering or taking meds and want to explore their holistic options. But again, it's best to take one baby-step at a time.

It's good to write down the plan. Pick a start day for the Basic Micronutrients, and start them. Mark off every day you take them on your calendar.

By that time one should have chosen which Advanced Steps one wants to explore. Go get any necessary equipment or supplements. Write down a start day and start. I take my nutrients 5-6 days/week in a bow to the idea that the body needs a break from time to time.

As you grow your personal Before Meds / After Meds Program it's fun to keep a chart with the things you're doing on the left side and days across the top. Check off every step you take every day that you take it, and take pride as you watch the filled-in checkboxes grow. At the bottom of the left-hand column, write "Emotions" on the last row, and then every day rate how good you felt that day from 1 to 10.

This might seem silly ... but it's little rituals like this that help us implement changes. Want to keep your motivation going? Track your progress.

Before we're done with this book we'll have looked at a number of gentle, safe self-care strategies to reduce anxiety and depression. Even so it can help to have a coach. Someone who's been there and will stick around to help you make sure you stick to your plan. More on that later. (See Chapter 4.)

One last concern.

While the techniques and tools presented in this book can help us create a profound inner peace, they are no substitute for good psychotherapy. Consider your Before Meds / After Meds program the yin to therapy's yang.

When we're stressed we can develop some bad habits. It's important to recognize them, gain insight into them, and learn new ways of behaving. The tools presented in this work are excellent support for therapy. They cannot replace it.

That said, here's an inexpensive, quick, natural anti-depressant, anti-anxiety protocol for those in a rush to change their frame of mind:

- 1) Basic Micronutrients at daily value levels
- 2) Methionine. 500-1,500 mgs/day, in the am, no solid food for 20 minutes afterwards.
- 3) A brisk, 30 minute walk in the morning—preferably rapidly up a gentle hill.
- 4) Flower Essences: Gorse, Aspen, Mimulus, Blackberry. Mustard. See p.94 for dosing & preparation instructions.

1.3 Novel Substances, Refined Substances

The body's cellular machinery is a billion and a half years old—1,500,000,000 years. That's how long scientists tell us life's been in development on earth. It's a very, very, very long time.

All the methods cells use to grow, to carry things from one place to another, to talk to each other, to generate energy and repair damage, to reproduce—all these methods have been works in progress for a billion and a half years.

And that means that all the little molecules that take part in our dance of life have been dancing with each other for a very, very, very long time—long enough to learn how to get along with each other.

Now, consider a system of medicine that relies for its effects on invented compounds. Consider that system operating alongside a system of food production that also relies upon novel, invented compounds and organisms for its productivity.

The invented molecules are in many cases clever analogues of the ancient molecules they've been dancing with for the last 1.5 billion years, but they're not identical. Economics dictates that they be novel, different, if they're to be patentable profit generators. So they must be invented.

Which means that they sometimes don't quite fit into the ancient molecular dance making life possible.

If you could take the 1.5 billion years of life's evolution and compress them into a 24-hour day, the amount of time that's passed since the invention of agriculture—about 12-14,000 years—would be 0.7 seconds. It takes half a second (0.5 seconds) to blink your eye. The entire history of human civilization is little more than a blink in evolution's day.

So while the molecules making up life's natural, organic dance are like a functional family who've known each other long enough to work out all their relationship issues, novel substances—the invented molecules upon which medicine informed by conventional research must, by economic necessity, rely—are newcomers. They don't quite "fit" into the dance. And so they have an unfortunate tendency to gunk up the works, to interfere with the intricate chemical pathways upon which life depends in a flesh and blood demonstration of Murphy's Law.

Normally, we would call substances that gunk up the molecular dance of life poisons, and the signs in the body of this gumming up of the body's works toxic symptoms. But pharmaceutical companies are masters of marketing and draw from a research community compelled by economic, structural and intellectual necessity to restrict their efforts largely to examining the effects of invented substances (See Chapter 1.)

Meanwhile, the poisoning symptoms produced by the novel substances conventional medicine relies upon have been rebranded "side effects," the supposedly inevitable cost against which the benefit of taking a medication must be weighed.

There's a time and place for medication—it saves lives. Problems arise however when this approach is used for chronic disease. Side effects grow and multiply, especially when more meds are used in attempts to manage the side effects.

Research models similar to the ones relied upon in medicine inform the world of contemporary food production, processing, marketing and distribution. As is sometimes the case with pharmaceuticals, corporate-sponsored studies can miss the long-term toxic effects of the invented substances they introduce into the food supply. My general rule: the less a food looks like something humans have been eating for thousands of years, the less well some of its ingredients are going to fit into the ancient dance.

But it takes time for the full effects of indulgence in a chemicalized way of life to appear. The body is extraordinarily resilient, and has evolved biological pathways enabling detoxification and recovery. Given the timelines involved it's easy to get snookered by all this into thinking that the best food is the cheapest, easiest-to-prepare food. Until the damage is done.

Metabolic pathways for identifying, disarming and excreting the novel substances may not have evolved, or may themselves have been disabled by undernourishment or overuse and abuse. In that case the body's priority becomes moving the offending molecules out of the bloodstream and away from the internal organs. Fat tissue is the place where the body stores its toxins because it's there that they can be isolated and do the least damage.

Refined food products fit somewhere between the invented compounds and the natural ones. While resembling natural food components in structure and function, when present in excessive amounts they can overdrive whatever metabolic processes they take part in. This is a little like turning the volume on an amplifier up so loud the speakers start to distort and self-destruct.

It's easy for humans to fall into the habit of over-indulging in some of these refined products because the raw materials they concentrate were essential to our health but historically expensive and difficult to obtain. We therefore evolved neuroendocrine behavioral reinforcers that made sure we were sufficiently motivated to

go to the trouble of obtaining them. Sugar and salt come to mind.

But anything too white and granular tends to have so many essential cofactors missing that eating excessive amounts can be metabolically destabilizing. The last 120 years have seen humans become so clever that now refined products that were historically precious are now available for free on restaurant tables all over the world.

It's easy for us to forget what a recent historical development that's been ... yet at the same time it takes so long (in the life of an individual) for the full effects of indulgence in this way of life to appear that many of us can't seem to connect the dots.

1.4 The Teaching of One's Disease

Years ago I had an native american teacher. We'd go for walks in the hills. One day he warned me about how crucial it was to refrain from stealing the teachings of my patients' diseases.

In the old days (the really old days) it was thought an essential part of healing to make sure that sufferers learned whatever lesson it was their suffering was there to impart. Substituting technical expertise for the patients' process of coming to terms with relationships between their daily choices and their health issues was considered grandstanding.

Healers didn't advertise. In tribal communities everyone knew everybody else already. The first sign that someone needing healing was ready to learn the teaching of their disease was that they'd seek out the healer.

The elders would call a circle. Anyone in that person's tribe—people they'd known all their lives—could come and sit in the circle. The person requesting healing would sit in the center.

One by one, everyone who'd known the person requesting healing would have a chance to voice their thoughts about what the teaching of the disease could be.

It was understood by all concerned that any particular view might or might not be correct. But when surrounded by folks who'd known one all one's life, the idea was that somebody would have something relevant to offer.

It was also understood by all that any member of the tribe could, at any time, find themselves in the center of the circle. So mud-slinging was inappropriate.

The healer and elders would then watch to see if the person requesting healing would show any sign of putting any of these suggestions into action. That was the sign they were waiting for. Only the person requesting healing could really discover the teaching. But if they were making an effort, they could be helped.

The chants, the herbs, the rituals ... all the legacy medicines that generations of healers had developed and passed on would be brought to bear. Later the healer would teach the healed how to use some of these same tools to keep themselves from needing healing again.

It was thought this approach was crucial for three reasons:

1. Everyone knew the healer could relieve suffering. But they also recognized that substituting technical expertise for the patient's journey of discovery would rob the patient of their ability and motivation to master the connections between their choices and their health issues.
2. This meant the disease would return in a more serious and difficult to treat form. This was bad for the patient, bad for the tribe, and bad for the healer's reputation.
3. The karma of the disease would enter the healer's karma, because by short-circuiting the patient's self-healing process, the healer would be stealing the teaching of the patient's disease. This was also bad for the patient, the tribe and the healer.

To the western mind this can seem misanthropic and anathema. How dare one blame a suffering person for their disease?

This is not about blame. Blame has no place in this equation. It's really about looking for and recognizing relationships between the way we do things and the way we wear ourselves out. It's realizing that we're in the best position to bring ourselves back into alignment and health because even if we're making a daily parade to doc after doc, we only get 20 minutes with them on good days.

We're in our bodies 24/7. When it comes to managing chronic disease, the things we do every day are going to be at least as important as the things others can do for us.

Which isn't saying that what others do for us can't be crucial.

It *is* saying that we can do even more.

If we're motivated, disciplined and know what we're doing.