

# Illness Prevention and the M.E.A.L Strategy for Making Lifestyle Changes

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## Part 1

### Why a prevention strategy for achieving “Good Health” should be a priority for us all

For many people in today’s society, illness is just a normal state of health that we have accepted and have little or no control over. To begin... there seems seem to be an epidemic of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and so many other diseases, viruses, infections, allergies and disorders to numerous to mention here. I believe that most health and wellness professionals will agree with the following statement: “Many major, common illnesses that we have today are preventable”. For example, The American Association for Cancer Research’s 2014 Progress Report States the following:

“Many factors that increase the risk of developing cancer **are related to lifestyle**, and it is estimated that **more than 50 percent** of the 585,720 cancer deaths expected to occur in the United States in 2014 will be related to **preventable causes.**”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, other reputable research has put these numbers **as high as 90 to 95 percent**<sup>2</sup> Both obesity and cardiovascular disease are both well known to be preventable causes of premature death. Obesity alone is linked strongly to many of the major diseases we die of prematurely today! We are also aware that that most cases of Type Two Diabetes are preventable, sometimes even reversible with “proper” lifestyle habits. Colds and viruses are reduced with improved hygiene and a more effective immune system (there are many things we can do to improve our immune system). It is so much easier to prevent illness from happening in the first place, then to deal with them when they happen! Why in the world are we spending huge amounts of time, energy and money on looking for cures and treatments for illness and by comparison, very little for prevention? It seems like a much larger focus on prevention would give us the biggest bang for our buck. We must also consider not just premature death, but our quality of life and the pain and suffering we are enduring in dealing with these illnesses. Many people don’t even realize how sick they are until they start doing the things that will revitalize their health. I have seen amazing revelations in short periods of time when people change to make their health a priority! **Just feeling better changes everything.**

Doing things that we know are eventually going to make us sick is akin to putting a sign out in front of your house alerting thieves that you are not home and doors are

unlocked. Why do things that will invite illness into our bodies in the first place? We simply need to stop doing the things that are making us sick! **Unfortunately, this is easier said than done.**

**“Only when we are sick of our sickness, shall we cease to be sick.”**

Book of Tao – Verse 71

Another reason for prevention is relieving stress on entire families. Today most families consist of dual wage earners with children are mostly dual wage earners with children. When anyone in the family unit is sick, this creates a stressful situation for more than just the sick individual. The interruption of work due to illness can also create economic problems and stress for families. In addition, many families are also dealing with ill and/or aging parents at the same time, this can create an extra burden, both financially and emotionally.

We can also look at this from a national economic standpoint. In North America, we have an aging population, with overburdened healthcare, welfare and pension systems, we need both healthy working people to support this system and healthy retired people not overburdening the systems we have in place. Many people are also finding it necessary to work to work into their retirement years (for economic reasons or just to keep busy), this would not be easy for a person in ill health. **The healthier people in a society are, the better everything works!**

I want to clear up a misconception that many people have about what I mean when using the expression “good health”, I am not merely referring to our physical health; I am also considering mental, emotional and spiritual health. For example, we are seeing more and more studies finding strong links to high stress (or the way we deal with stress) and illness. We must be able to think clear, positively focused thoughts in order to make changes in our behavior that positively impact overall health. Furthermore, the spiritual, mental and emotional aspects of health are extremely important and should also be evaluated when developing an effective and complete action plan for health.

Although an individual may come to the realization that they need to make some positive changes to their lifestyle, there is an extremely high failure rate in maintaining these changes. What is the main reason for this high failure rate? We tend to create oversimplified solutions for problems that are more complex than we believe. Most of us create a plan for a solution then execute the plan. Unfortunately, **if the plan itself is unsuitable for the individual, failure is likely.**

I use the analogy of building construction to illustrate this point. We can construct a beautiful looking building where we follow the construction plans to the letter. However, if there were errors in the plan regarding the structural supports or the foundation requirements for the particular structure, the whole building will likely come crashing down! In this respect, creating a building and creating good health are much the same. It’s all in proper structure planning! As with building construction, it is always

wise to get help from professionals in both devising and executing a suitable plan for making positive, permanent lifestyle changes.

Over the past twenty years, I have trained hundreds of clients, many of whom I have come to know very well. I ask many questions of my clients and have noticed certain traits that are common in my more successful clients. From these experiences and observations, I have developed a strategy and thought process plan that seems to be working to with clients but can also help anyone who desires good health (or even just better health). I call it The **M.E.A.L. strategy for planning**, I firmly believe this is a good place to start on the road to good health. Below, I will explain the general outline of the strategy. Keep in mind, **this is only a guideline for establishing a level of readiness to make healthy lifestyle change.** The complete philosophy is much more specific and encompassing. Another important note is that because everyone is different in their needs, goals and limitations, each individual's plan and the pace and intensity to which it will be followed will be much different.

## **Part 2**

### **The M.E.A.L strategy for planning and executing successful lifestyle changes:**

No, this is not the newest diet craze; specifically, it is an all-encompassing strategy for making successful lifestyle changes. According to the M.E.A.L strategy, improved wellness and illness prevention will stem from the combination of four main factors: Motivation, Education, Addiction treatment (if necessary) and Lifestyle management (**MEAL**). Let's go into a little more detail on all four:

1) **Motivation:** The bottom line here is that there has to be a motivating factor for someone to make positive changes. The fact remains that there is a tendency for us to be reactive rather than proactive when it comes to our health. People will wait until they become sick, then seek out medical treatment (usually to treat symptoms of much more serious root issues). Once the symptoms of illnesses are gone, people tend to go back to their old behaviors. Root causes of illness (usually to do with unhealthy lifestyle choices) tend to be ignored, many times until it is too late. If an individual's motivation is not strong enough to create a need for a permanent lifestyle change, prevention strategies will be extremely difficult to carry out successfully. **A total change of mindset is required by the individual, health must become a priority!**

When I am consulting with a possible client for the first time, I am able to determine almost immediately if the individual has the proper mindset for being successful at achieving good health goals. By no means am I indicating that they will never be able to achieve good health, we can help a client change their mindset, but only if they are aware of the need to change it! I frequently encounter people who insist that their health is a priority, however they will, in the very next sentence tell me that they do not have the time to make the changes necessary to improve it. For me, the basic tenet of priorities is that: If we are not prepared to **make time** for our priorities then they are not true priorities, they are merely passing interests, only deserving of attention when convenient.

**“If you really want to do something, you’ll find a way; if you don’t you’ll find an excuse.”**

Jim Rohn, Entrepreneur and Motivational Speaker

Needless to say, if an individual cannot accomplish this first step, the rest will be extremely difficult.

**2) Education:** We are bombarded with advertising, information and marketing (some is very clever) offering products such as foods, diets, supplements, exercise equipment, exercise classes promising better health if we use them. In some cases, there may be some truth to the advertising, however, in many cases, clever manipulations of wording and study results may mislead well intentioned consumers in their purchasing decisions. For example, the words natural, wholesome, goodness and healthy are very general terms commonly used in commercials selling food products. You may also see other terminology such as: low-fat, sugar free, Gluten-Free, high-fiber and low-calorie on labels. These terms may seem positive, but unfortunately, the only real way to determine the healthiness of a product is **to read the ingredients on labels and be educated as to what those ingredients are.** Even advice on proper and effective exercise techniques can be disputed. There is much misinformation and outdated dogma out there. Often, the most reliable information comes from qualified sources that do not have a financial vested interest in the information they are dispensing. For example, how many books, products and supplements are sold in order to promote fat loss? The most telling statistic in my opinion (and most experts) is that **ninety-five percent of “fad” diets fail.** In-fact, there is data showing that **in the long-term, people who follow periodic restrictive diets gain more weight than non restrictive dieters!**<sup>3</sup> Why is this true? The bottom line is that most people are looking for that “quick fix” or that “magic pill” that is going to make them fit or healthy. The truth is that for complete health, a multi faceted approach will be required. Companies realize that many people will be more likely to purchase products if they perceive them to be healthy (even though an individual “in the know” will be able to see otherwise!) The truth is: we must educate ourselves and beware

of such fantastic claims. **If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!** We also have to look at our individual needs, what may be good for one person, may actually harm another! This is why it is a good idea to contact qualified health and wellness professionals to help you determine what is really best for you. This could be one of the best investments you make! We must constantly educate ourselves so that we make the best decisions possible for good health! There is always new and changing information with regards to our health. It is my job to continue educating both my clients and myself.

### **3) Addiction Treatment Strategies (if necessary):**

There are many cases where we cannot simply tell people their behaviors are unhealthy and to stop them at once. (This is much more common an issue than many believe.) An individual with an addiction often knows that their behavior is damaging their health, however this knowledge will often not halt their addiction. We realize this seldom works for smokers, alcoholics, drug addicts, compulsive eaters and gamblers. Most of us fail to realize that many of the behaviors causing ill health are in fact addictions. The solution is not as simple as some may believe. With addiction, the first step is for the individual to recognize the problem and the need to rectify it. Sometimes professional addiction counseling can be a good second step for many of these individuals, especially if they have failed in past attempts.

### **4) Lifestyle Management:**

Once an individual is motivated, making changes to their lifestyle is possible. In fact, the last three factors in this M.E.A.L Plan can be grouped together. Education, addiction treatment are also components of lifestyle management. Lifestyle management includes an action plan or schedule for making changes that will positively affect health. We must have both long-term and short-term goals in our plan.

**“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.”**

Benjamin Franklin

The changes we make should not be overwhelming, but gradual, this will make it less difficult for our bodies and mind to adapt to change.

Once again, I will stress, a good health and wellness professional is a fantastic ally in working with individuals, helping them make the types of **reasonable, healthy** changes that are timely and right for them. It is also extremely important for individuals to be around family and friends who are supportive and understanding (especially if they are also health focused!).

I want to make something perfectly clear, a person who is at this stage will be committed to any reasonable change they make to their lifestyle and will almost always prioritize their healthy habits. Remember, these are lifestyle changes, if you do not feel that you can make changes and maintain them for the rest of your life, then rethink your

motivations an your plan. For many individuals the first general goal should be simply put: **“stop getting worse!”** I see many people jumping into aggressive exercise and restrictive nutritional programs, which are not maintainable for them in the long-term. Secondly, improving your **overall health** must be far and away the number one goal in any lifestyle change plan. Once again I must stress the following point: When we refer to lifestyle changes, we **must** have the intention of making changes for life. **When behavior changes are permanent, the results will also be permanent!**

#### References

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