

# What Is a Highly Healthy Person?

As I hung up the phone, I groaned. “Dr. Larimore,” she had said sweetly, “this is Miss Bingham. I teach the second grade at Bryson City Elementary School over here on School House Hill.”

(I was learning that every hill in Bryson City, North Carolina, was named in this manner. My office was at the foot of Hospital Hill. Guess what was on top of that one?)

It was November 1981. My wife, Barb (seven months pregnant), and I, along with our three-year-old daughter, Kate, had just moved to this tiny town of about a thousand souls at the southern entrance to Great Smoky Mountains National Park to begin my chosen profession as a family physician.

Miss Bingham said, “Every Thursday we try to have someone give a brief talk to our class. Would you be able to come and talk to the students about health? You know, tell the kids what health is and what they can do to keep their health.”

She caught me off guard. I immediately thought of a thousand excuses. However, before I could verbalize even one, she said, almost in a whisper, “Doc [the folks in Bryson City liked to call health care professionals “Doc”—even the senior pharmacist at Swain County Drug Store was “Doc John”], some of the kids I teach aren’t the brightest. But I think they’d really like to meet you, and I know they could learn a lot from you. Will you consider coming?”

I was sunk. What excuse could be good enough?

“Yes,” I gulped. “I’d be delighted.”

My mind started reeling. How could I explain to a bunch of second graders what health is when I wasn't sure what it was in my own mind? During medical school, I had been taught to recognize and treat diseases. I had had very little training in keeping people healthy and even less on how to motivate people to become healthy.

I've never forgotten that day, although I don't have a clue what I said in my little talk. I do remember that the kids listened politely. They even clapped. They asked lots of questions. I think I knew the answers. But even now, more than twenty years later, I wonder what they heard. Are they healthier because of their brief interaction with me? I doubt it. But I am. On that day I began to think more about ways I could promote health, not just treat sickness. I realized I needed to learn more, so I could help people gain health and satisfaction in their lives.

## HEALTH AND WHOLENESS

Many people who came to me for medical care were highly unhealthy. One of my favorite examples of "unhealthy" comes from the movie *City Slickers*, in the scene where Mitch Robbins (played by Billy Crystal) is asked to make a presentation to his son's class about his occupation. Instead, he gives a brief oration that describes his view of life (and of his health):

Value this time in your life, kids, because this is the time in your life when you still have your choices, and it goes by so quickly. When you're a teenager, you think you can do anything, and you do. Your twenties are a blur. Thirties? You raise your family, you make a little money, and you think to yourself, "*What happened to my twenties?*" Forties? You grow a little potbelly, you grow another chin, the music starts to get too loud, one of your old girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother. Fifties? You have a minor surgery. You'll call it a procedure, but it's a surgery. Sixties? You'll have a major surgery, the music is still loud, but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway. Seventies? You and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale, start eating dinner at two o'clock in the afternoon, you have lunch around ten, breakfast the night before. You spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate soft yogurt and muttering, "How come the kids don't call? How come the kids don't call?" The eighties? You'll have a major stroke. You end up babbling to some Jamaican nurse who your wife can't stand but who you call mama. Any questions?

Can you imagine such a cynical view of life—of health? Yet over the last two decades I've encountered many patients who seem to think pretty much this way. By contrast, the patients who have expanded my understanding of health are those who are vivacious and full of life—and who *want* to become or stay highly healthy. They seem to live their lives with purpose, drive, and meaning, regardless of their circumstances.

One such patient was Terrie, an elementary school librarian. I was her physician for almost sixteen years—from her midlife, through menopause, and on into retirement. During that time she developed symptoms of diabetes and heart disease. Crippling arthritis slowed her down. Yet she always seemed to be on top of her game. She had a *joie de vivre*—an enjoyment of life. If you were to focus only on her list of physical problems, you'd say she had lost her health. Yet I came to realize that Terrie was one of my healthiest patients. Although her body was not operating as efficiently as it had earlier in her life, she learned how to manage her diseases and even improve her overall health. She was one of my first teachers of what it means to be highly healthy—not just disease- and symptom-free but *whole* in the most important ways.

Is physical health all there is to health? If you're in great physical shape, does that make you highly healthy? I don't think so. By the time you finish this book, I'm convinced you won't think so either.

## HOW DO YOU DEFINE HEALTH?

If you had been asked to speak to Miss Bingham's class about health, what would you have said? How would you explain what *health* is? Are people healthy if they don't feel sick? How healthy are *you*?

Here is a note from the wife of a man who "felt fine" and seemed to be in great emotional, spiritual, and relational health. But after a checkup, he got some bad news from his doctor. This is what his wife wrote:

*My husband has been feeling great for years—and hadn't seen a doctor for almost a decade. In my usual tactful way, I told him last summer, "Hon, someone will have to sign your death certificate someday, and we need to get your name in someplace. You're coming up on seventy, so let's just both go and get physicals for 'baseline info.'"*

*Turns out, while I'm fine, the doctor found that my husband has high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high glucose, and signs of possible colon problems. In mid-July he had to get two hearing aids. In mid-August he was operated on for Stage III colon cancer and is facing chemotherapy later. And just ten days ago (after further tests), he learned he has Type II diabetes and had to go on an oral diabetes medication. He's also on cholesterol and high blood pressure medications! Poor guy—he feels like he's*

*falling apart, even though he still feels okay physically (to our amazement). Emotionally we've both been through the wringer!*

Three months later, this man was dead—from diseases that could have been prevented or controlled if only he had committed at an earlier age to become highly healthy.

Or consider Cameron. Cameron focused on physical health. In fact he recently completed the Ironman triathlon, an amazing physical accomplishment. He is in top physical condition, physically disease-free yet struggling with severe depression. He focused so completely on physical fitness that essentially he had no friends and no social life. His wife and kids left him, and his business collapsed. Was it healthy for him to be at his physical prime yet unable to care about much of anything emotionally?

For a time, I provided medical care for prisoners in the county jail. Many had bodies that were healthy, yet a few described the sick pleasure they had experienced while raping or robbing or murdering someone. Some were totally unrepentant, and I was convinced that if they ever got out, they'd commit another crime. They had disease-free bodies, but were they highly healthy?

My training in conventional medicine initially led me to emphasize the physical side of health, particularly the treatment of trauma and illness. I viewed patients as healthy if they were free from diseases and injuries. But the more experience I gained, the more I could see that having a physically functioning body is not all-important. It isn't even the main factor in being a highly healthy individual. What, then, is the connection between physical well-being and total health?

## **WHOM SHOULD YOU TRUST TO DEFINE *HEALTH*?**

What motivated you to pick up this book? What results are you hoping for? Obviously, you want to be highly healthy. Before you can take some steps to achieve this goal, you need to be sure you've *defined* the goal. Whom do you trust to define *health*?

Let's take a look at three sources and compare their opinions: first, the conclusions of current health care providers around the world; second, a few definitions from throughout history; and third, the definition provided by the World Health Organization, a group that has influenced health care around the world since 1948.

## Current Health Care Providers

In preparing to write this book, I informally surveyed more than a thousand physicians and health care experts in many different countries. I asked them two questions: “What is health?” and “What are the essentials of health?”

After cataloging their surprising responses, I began to search the medical literature from around the world. I reviewed scores of studies and medical reports (many of which I’ll refer to in the upcoming pages). I especially examined studies that focused on wellness and longevity. I looked at the histories of men and women who had lived a long time or who lived well to discover what kept them in this state of being highly healthy. Their stories and the data I cataloged all revolved around the same themes. All the evidence suggests that living well and living a long time involve a powerful connection between our physical bodies and our emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual well-being.

## Historic Definitions of Health

In medical libraries there is a great deal of information on how ancient physicians, philosophers, and clergy defined health. I’ve noticed certain trends in writings that go back many centuries.

Our word *health* is said to be derived from an old English word that means “whole.” The definition of health is intended to include those things that “make a person whole.” Obviously, this means much more than just physical well-being.

Some ancient writers taught that hard work—both physical and mental—would result in health. One school of thought emphasized that work is compatible with improving health as long as it is *ego-syntonic*. In other words, work must be coupled with “enthusiasm” to be healthy. By implication, work that could not be done enthusiastically—work that was depressing, in other words—would actually steal from one’s health.

Eighteenth-century authors posited the view that a calm temperament or tranquil spirit was a key to true health. Many associated health with a good sense of humor and an ability to laugh at oneself.

In their attempt to define health, some philosophers and physicians pointed to the Greek word *praus* (“gentle, meek”)—a quality they promoted as a virtue of high order. According to Aristotle, *praus* had to do with one’s ability to temper the feeling of anger, or what he called *thymos*. The ancient Greeks used the term *thymos* to describe a force that boiled or welled up or “went up in smoke.” Therefore, to the Greeks this quality called *praus* was one’s ability to acquire an even temperament. *Praus*, the Greeks claimed, created much good health and very little ill effect on others or on oneself.

Many modern-day writers and physicians have wrestled with the meaning of health and how to achieve it. Like the ancients, virtually none equate health with physical health alone. Historically it has meant much more.

### **The World Health Organization's Definition of Health**

In 1948 a modern definition of health was included in the constitution of the fledgling World Health Organization (WHO):

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic, or social condition.

In 1984, the WHO added *spirituality* to its list of factors necessary for optimum health.

The WHO definition was, at least in part, created as a reaction against certain modern definitions of health that neglected the emotional, social, and spiritual factors associated with human well-being. I considered the WHO definition of health as being on target—but in my heart of hearts I wasn't sure the definition was adequate.

A doctor who practices in an inner-city neighborhood articulates my perspective when she says, “[Unlike the WHO definition of health,] I think that true health involves our entire beings. The physical, mental, and spiritual elements must all be functioning as God designed them to function if we are to be truly healthy. The physical may actually be the most unimportant of the three, because with good mental and spiritual health we can still be content, even though our bodies may be unhealthy.”

As you can see, multiple “authoritative” sources from ancient to modern times indicate that health is continually defined in terms of physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual well-being.

*Spiritual?* you ask. *Are you saying I can't just focus on physical health? Why isn't that enough?* You will discover in these pages that our spirituality is key to becoming highly healthy persons and has a profound effect on our physical health.

So I have a rather bold suggestion to make. I'm going to recommend that, in addition to paying attention to thousands of medical studies, current medical advice, and historical medical wisdom, we also consider a book with proven timeless principles that can be applied in any culture at any time, a book that can teach patients the essentials they need to know in order to become highly healthy. Millions around the world refer to it as “The Good Book.” That book is the Bible.

*You've got to be kidding!* you may be thinking. *How can a book that is thousands of years old be of any use in our era of science and modern medicine?*

To be highly healthy you have to think way beyond your body. Looking at what “The Good Book” has to say about health can give us some clues as to what makes up a high degree of overall health.

I admit I'm not a trained theologian. But as a student of the Bible for more than thirty years, I am familiar with many of its precepts and principles. I have become convinced that this ancient book of wisdom contains timeless principles of health that are *supported by scientific research*. Let's take a look.

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HEALTH AND HEALING

In the Bible, health is viewed as completeness and wholeness. In his book *The Bible and Healing*, John Wilkinson, a British physician who was both a medical missionary and a biblical scholar, says that while the Bible appears to say little about health as defined in strictly medical or mental terms, “human wholeness or health is the main topic of the Bible. . . . It is only when human beings are whole and their relationships right, that they can be described as truly healthy.”

Health in the Bible is a multifaceted concept. The Hebrew word *shalom*, while sometimes connoting “peace,” is not just the absence of conflict, just as health is not just the absence of disease. Its root meaning is that of wholeness, completeness, and general well-being—but not just physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It also carries a strong emphasis on relational well-being, especially with regard to one's relationship with God. In fact, the Bible teaches that true *shalom* comes only from God: “The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.” The Bible seems to indicate that one cannot be highly healthy physically, emotionally, and relationally unless one is also growing spiritually.

Also in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures is the root word *rapha*, which more than any other word describes the process of healing. The various noun and verb derivatives of this root occur at least eighty-six times in the Bible's Old Testament. The variety of uses of *rapha* tell us that God's activity as healer is not limited to the physical realm. He is depicted as wanting to restore every aspect of a person's life—physical, mental, social, and spiritual.

The Bible uses various terms to describe health broadly and comprehensively. King Solomon connects emotions to physical health: “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” King David poignantly describes how guilt over wrongdoing affects physical, spiritual, and emotional health. After committing adultery and murder, David wrote,

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” The apostle John links our overall well-being to our spiritual vitality: “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”

Health is a major topic in the Bible, and it is viewed primarily as the restoration and strengthening of one’s personal relationship with God. It is also viewed as a healthy lifestyle (physically and emotionally) that focuses on pursuing healthy relationships with your family and with other people.

## **A TIMELESS PERSPECTIVE ON TRUE HEALTH**

The biblical view on health can be summed up with the word *blessed*. Blessedness is a theme in the Old Testament and is most clearly described in the New Testament in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The Bible makes the bold assertion that people who aren’t socially, financially, physically, or mentally gifted can be blessed by God, not rejected by him, and as a result their overall health is enhanced.

Our overall health depends not just on our physical health, important as that is, but also on our inner life. It is this inner emotional and spiritual life that God most wants to nourish and promote, for he knows that without spiritual and emotional well-being, we are less healthy than we were designed to be.

Why am I stressing this timeless biblical view? Does it really matter in the twenty-first century? I believe it does. I’ve had many patients who were physically healthy, yet were social, emotional, and spiritual disasters, unable to grasp what it means to be highly healthy. I’ve had patients who have suffered trauma and disease, leading to chronic disability or pain or fatigue, who suffer daily—in ways most of us could not begin to imagine—yet who have been able to develop strategies for becoming highly healthy. I’ve also had patients (and a daughter) who live with permanent disability from a birth defect or congenital disease, whose prayers for healing have been answered in ways they never would have imagined.

From all this I have come to believe that being healthy—truly healthy—is *not* dependent on physical well-being alone. Being highly healthy means being healthy in every area of your life during every stage of your life. It means being balanced in these areas: body, mind, spirit, and community—what I call the four “wheels” of health—which you will be putting to the test in the next chapter. By balancing these aspects of health, you can become blessed and, thus, highly healthy.



## LET'S GET PRACTICAL

Are you ready for a few surprises? Within these pages you'll find a number of practical and reasonable choices you can make that can improve your health.

This book draws on the latest medical research, as well as on stories and experiences of physicians and patients from around the world. And it unashamedly uses the health-related principles from "The Good Book" as one of its foundations. Through these sources and my experience in medical practice, I've found ten principles that I believe are essential to being highly healthy. At first glance you may suspect that these essentials don't have much impact on your physical health. You're about to discover otherwise.

1. The essential of balance
2. The essential of self-care
3. The essential of forgiveness
4. The essential of reducing SADness (stress, anxiety, and depression)
5. The essential of relationships
6. The essential of spiritual well-being
7. The essential of a positive self-image
8. The essential of discovering your destiny
9. The essential of personal responsibility and empowerment
10. The essential of teamwork

These essentials are designed and programmed into the very core of our beings. If you understand them and learn to apply them in your life, you will be taking the first steps to becoming highly healthy. Putting into practice the essentials explained in the rest of this book is . . . well . . . essential.