

Health Insights Today

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EDITOR'S LOG

Fast and Slow

By Daniel Redwood, DC

We live in a society that rewards the swift and disparages the slow. We pay lip service to the notion that “slow and steady wins the race,” but our actions often betray our words. Like 19th century Sooners rushing across the Oklahoma plains to stake our claims, we like to set out early, moving quickly, pushing on through fatigue, focused intently on the immediate task at hand and plowing through all obstacles in our way.

The upside of this strategy has long been obvious; it is very efficient at accomplishing short-term goals. But what about the long haul? Is it possible to sustain a breathless pace indefinitely or does there come a point when the wheels start to fall off the wagons? To paraphrase something Ross Perot once said about economics, are we planning only 10 minutes ahead when we need to plan 15 years ahead?

The Long View

Long-term approaches, where we retain the quickly responsive edge that allows us to respond in real time to immediate changes, *while also nurturing the slower, steadier aspects of our being*—the grounding, as it were—are the key to a sustainable society and to the kind of vibrant, sustainable health we all seek. Short-term fixes don't solve long-term problems. Too much of our society's current approach to health relies on short-term fixes.

In this third issue of *Health Insights Today*, a special issue on the mind-body connection, we consider these questions, which underlie many of our current challenges. If the way we are living is healthy and sustainable, why are rates of heart disease, diabetes and other deep-rooted chronic illnesses surging, while trend lines for cancer and obesity appear to be stuck at dangerously high levels? Certainly poor diet, lack of adequate exercise, and environmental degradation play important roles in creating the health problems we confront. But as we envision a healthier future, is there something about our mindset that we need to look at as well?

Two Mind-Body Pioneers

Preparing this special issue, I had the unique opportunity to engage in extended conversations with two of our era's great pioneers in mind-body medicine, Drs. Herbert Benson and James Gordon. These interviews, taken together, offer a clear look at a side of the medical profession that is too often overshadowed by the glitz and glamour of new drug discoveries and high-tech medical wizardry. What these doctors offer are low-tech, self-care, mind-body approaches that are free of harmful side effects and worth far more than their weight in gold.

It was Benson's groundbreaking research at Harvard in the 1970s that first brought meditation into the realm of serious scientific inquiry and confirmed its powerful potential as an antidote to stress. During Gordon's stellar career in medical practice and education, he developed at Georgetown one of the first comprehensive medical school programs in complementary and alternative medicine (with a strong emphasis on mind-body medicine and educating patients in self-care) and later served as chairman of the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy.

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The Pace of Our Lives

A key theme in the Benson and Gordon interviews, sometimes clearly visible and at other points percolating below the surface, is the idea of *pace*. As someone who has practiced meditation on nearly a daily basis for many years, and who has studied the substantial body of research supporting its health-affirming effects, I feel strongly that the pace of our lives is a central factor in health and illness. Over time, too fast and unrelenting a pace leads to burnout. It can cause us to lose our moorings, in some cases doing real damage to our physical and mental health.

But the answer is not just to slow down. The remedy for the instability of a non-stop lifestyle is not a life lived in slow motion. That brings its own set of problems and imbalances. The answer—and yes, it is far more easily said than done—is to more finely tune our capacity for *modulation*, developing a sensitivity and sensibility that lets us know when we need to slow down and also when we need to speed up or double down.

Underscoring this point, James Gordon's description of the different types of meditation includes not only the commonly practiced contemplative forms where one sits quietly with eyes closed, but also "active meditation," which, as he describes it, "could be just putting on fast music and dancing to it, or shaking your body first for five or ten minutes, and then allowing the body to dance—this puts energy into this depleted organism and helps break up the fixed patterns, the 'stuckness' that characterizes depression."

Living in the Moment, Planning for the Future

As we seek to restore and maintain good health, there is no one method or practice that answers all needs for all people in all circumstances. As I tell my students fairly often, each patient has unique characteristics and all rules have exceptions. In evaluating what's best for our patients, and ourselves, it's important to draw on past experience, be open and attentive in the moment, and to carry with us a vision of the future we wish to create.

With that perspective in mind, the first question I'd ask you to consider is: what do you need to do right now to put things on a more even keel? The next step, even more important, is to ask yourself what you can do now (particularly if you are currently experiencing a stretch of relative health and balance) to nurture and strengthen yourself for life's inevitable downturns. Like the old fable about the grasshopper and the ant, are you willing to use summer's time of bounty to prepare for winter?

For example, if you are in your twenties or thirties (as are most of my students) and in reasonably good health, are you willing to improve your diet, exercise regularly and take up some form of meditation, even though many of the benefits you reap as a result may not manifest until decades from now? In other words, are you willing to practice prevention? The answer to that question—truly a big one—will serve perhaps better than any other to predict the future course of your life.

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