

The GM on Ten



My working life began several decades ago as an academic when I taught courses in various aspects of human behaviour to medical and allied health students enrolled at

tertiary institutions in Sydney. It was the 1970s.

One of the topics was stress management – what stress is, what causes it, the physiological and psychological effects, and how to ameliorate those effects. A key point in the framework was always that stress can contribute to the development and exacerbation of mental dysfunction.

I think of stress as “overload” – too much demand for the individual to comfortably and consistently manage. This implies that stress is individualised. A situation can be boring for one, comfortable for another, and downright stressful for another. So speaking to a group of 50 strangers could be a dreary chore, an easy but pleasant task, or the cause of near panic depending on the person.

But everyone has a ‘tipping point’ – a set of life circumstances where the demand is so excessive that the person’s functioning starts to deteriorate leading eventually to illness, dysfunction, or psychological burn-out.

The challenge for each of us is to identify how much and what type of demand we can tolerate before our physical and psychological functioning falters. We each have our own stress markers and identifying those markers is key to managing our own wellbeing.

Back to the 70s. As part of teaching students about stress, I included a suite of stress management techniques based on existing and emerging evidence – adequate sleep, regular exercise, regular relaxation/meditation practice, adequate nutrition, responsible substance use, and a psychological strategy now called cognitive behaviour therapy or CBT.

The decades passed and I moved away from academic life. But I’ve continued to watch with interest as each of the techniques bar one has acquired respectability for managing stress and maintaining optimal health. The “bar one” is nutrition which is still fighting for its place in the sun.

In December 09 I attended the *Mind and Its Potential Conference* at Darling Harbour in Sydney. The focus of this annual event is

mental wellbeing and how to enhance it. Key themes at the conference in 09 were positive psychology, cognitive behaviour therapy, exercise and meditation.

Nutrition alas was not mentioned. Even though orthomolecular psychiatry has been around for decades, and despite a growing body of evidence supporting its efficacy, nutrition continues to be treated with scepticism verging on contempt.

Although most of these 40-year old strategies are now well-supported with a growing evidence base, they don’t seem to have found their way into mainstream practice for the management and prevention of mental health problems. Responsible substance use has gained considerable ground, particularly in relation to the risk of psychosis associated with cannabis, but for the most part the others (eg sleep, exercise, meditation) are not being promoted as prevention or early intervention strategies when it comes to mental health.

We’re stuck in some unhelpful mindsets about these strategies. When it comes to sleep, I am sometimes regarded as having a character flaw when I tell people I need eight to nine hours a night. I’m sick, weak or just plain lazy. Others who boast about being able to get by on four are often regarded with envy and admiration as if this were some personal achievement resulting from hard work and self-discipline. Exercise is thought of chiefly in terms of its positive effects on physical health and weight reduction. Meditation is still seen as the province of hippies and hermits. CBT (the practice of examining and modifying one’s self-talk) is viewed as a treatment for the unfortunate few rather than a preventive strategy for the overwhelming majority. Manipulation of nutrients (including micro-nutrients) is accepted and lauded as a method for maintaining physical health but remains for many in the quackery box in relation to mental health.

The interest in prevention and early intervention is growing. In psychology there is a groundswell of support for positive psychology, thanks to high profile researchers like Martin Seligman. The focus in positive psychology is on how to maximise psychological wellbeing rather than just on how to treat dysfunction. Governments are also moving albeit slowly in the direction of funding prevention and early intervention programs.

So in this climate of maximising health rather than just minimising dysfunction, and given that we’re embarking on a new decade, I’d like to put in a plug for the suite of techniques I taught nearly 40 years ago.

Sleep. Take no notice of how much sleep the person next to you is getting or not getting. What is adequate varies for everyone, so find out what you need and get it. It will vary throughout your lifetime, so listen to your body.

Exercise. Aerobic exercise (eg walking, cycling, swimming) conditions the body which is the biological basis of the mind. It protects against the harmful effects of stress, so find out what you enjoy and do it regularly.

Meditation. The evidence is in and the effects are all good. Meditation declutters the mind and tones the nervous system. Find a technique that appeals and practise daily.

Substance use. Moderate alcohol and avoid just about everything else. It’s a no-brainer.

Self-talk. What we tell ourselves affects our moods, our emotions, and our relationships with others. If you’re new to this practice, purchase one of the many self-help books at your local bookstore. Learn to observe your thoughts (including your expectations of self and others), reflect on them, modify, and be happier.

Nutrients. Body and mind are connected, so what’s good for the body is good for the mind. Take as much nutritional care of your brain as you do of your heart. Both have to last you a lifetime.

So after 40 years, is there anything new to add?

Yes. Slow down. Focus. Do one thing at a time. Be present to the moment. Multi-tasking like four hours sleep a night is highly over-rated and generally not a good idea. We’re going too fast and trying to do too much. We’re at the limits of our human capacity and we’re scrambling our brains. Stop. Listen. Reflect. And be kind to your brain. It’s the only one you’ve got.

The GM on Ten is an opinion piece by Dr Gaye Emily Keir, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Mental Illness Fellowship of Qld. Gaye Emily Keir is a psychologist.

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