

Looking Beneath the Tip of the Iceberg of Health

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As with many things in life, there is the observable, or the “tip of the iceberg,” of health. There is also the rest of the story that lies beneath the surface. Being more aware of all these layers can help a person improve overall health.

The tip of the iceberg of health represents the state of one’s well-being in the present moment. This is the part that others see, that is, the signs and symptoms displayed. When one is under stress, these outward manifestations of health can include pain, fatigue, tense muscles, eye twitch, headache, depressed mood, and not smiling as easily. These signs are more noticeable. But they are a result of deeper underlying causes, just as the tip of the iceberg is supported by the rest of the huge block of ice that is underwater and not as easily seen.

The top layer in this model represents physical health. This aspect is a result of both a person’s genetics and lifestyle. Genetics is set, but lifestyle is something a person can choose to adjust when needed. This includes what one eats and how physically active one is. It also includes other choices related to substance use, sleeping patterns, and stress relief.

The next deeper level of health involves both mental and social health. Mental health (as opposed to mental illness) is how a person is able to perform intellectual activities such as communicating, learning new things, analyzing difficult situations, being creative and planning. It also includes emotional wellbeing such as dealing with difficult emotions in a healthy way and adapting to change. Social health is related to this, in that it means relating well with others intellectually and emotionally, listening to others and enjoying others’ company.

Deeper still is spiritual health which entails living a life of purpose and living in accordance with one’s beliefs.

Good health is made more accessible when one is aware of not only the tip of the iceberg of health, but also its various layers lying beneath the surface. There are many techniques and practices that can help a person increase self awareness and improve health. Mindful eating that I spoke about last time is one such example.

For more information on this or any other subject, contact your local University of Missouri Extension office. MU Extension programs are open to all.

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