

The Elements of Traditional Naturopathy

With the constant pressure and distractions of existence, it is perhaps easy to forget that daily routines are almost unconscious. It is important, therefore, to realize that much of what our life has been founded upon has been deliberately chosen. By reminding us of our basic self-direction, naturopathy offers guidance and influence at a fundamental level.

Unhelpful attitudes and inappropriate responses are, of course, notoriously difficult to alter or even adapt, but Naturopathy succeeds by explaining the attractive options: a more conscious life, awakened confidence in our own powers, and an increased understanding of self-healing.

While urging us to develop a philosophical perspective on health, Naturopathy stresses active participation and intuitive understanding in maintaining well being. This is very important because although accidents and other misfortunes, especially loss, surely have a detrimental impact on health, naturopaths contend that most of what is suffered as illness is more likely to arise from the habits of our everyday life.

Naturopathy affirms the benevolence of life and believes in simple lifestyle adjustments to meet challenges to our health. It draws on universal observations of human behavior yet allows for individual idiosyncrasies, and is truly original as a therapy: *its guiding principles for a healthy life are identical to its treatment of ill health, the only difference being in emphasis.*

To Discuss: being unwell is not an unfortunate brush with nature - it is a form of communication, the language of the organs; it is an opportunity to learn about ourselves and the world we inhabit and create.

Primary Element - Nutrition

For the naturopath, the most important factor for our health is the way we are nourished. This accords with conventional studies which have clearly shown that since 1900 the influence of improved nutrition exceeded that of any other health measure, including medical intervention. (1) The challenge of translating these findings for the public at large is perhaps the perception that a free and wide choice of foodstuffs are available, when in fact choices are conditioned by strong external forces, namely, the food manufacturing industry. This dominance, a departure from reliance on food grown to food manufacturing, has inevitably led to over consumption, which is possibly a greater threat to health than undernutrition.

We are indebted to Dr M.O. Bircher-Benner (1867-1939) for our greater understanding of food and health. A convert to the importance of fresh foods after clinical experience with a hitherto 'incurable' patient, Bircher-Benner demonstrated the role of vitamins before they were conventionally discovered, and the reason why raw foods are better utilized if eaten at the beginning of meals. (2)

In a self-applied study, the Japanese professor Katsuyne and his wife adopted a daily diet containing only the number of calories given in concentration camps but in the form of raw foods. They remained well for three months then changed to the same calories in manufactured foods. Within one month, they became so unwell they had to abandon the experiment.

To Discuss: relying on fresh foods for health; ignoring calorific measuring; eating raw before other types of foods. No shortcuts ('smoothies!')

Complementing Element - Posture and Movement

The marvel that is our body has the capacity to compete with, and on many levels, excel the physical capabilities of all other creatures. Evolution has ensured that by simply enjoying the use of our bodies as they are designed, we retain our uniqueness and derive much satisfaction from it (3). Conversely, our flexibility, strength and coordination and ultimately our prized poise, are forfeited if we do not employ them.

So it is that in the face of a multitude of mechanical disorders which infer inherent weakness - low back pain, prolapsed organs, eye strain- to name but a few, naturopathy contends that problems of posture and movement are more often a reflection of under use and more likely, misuse. Examples of this are: carrying loads with the arms, (rather than the head); prolonged sitting on the tail of the spine (rather than squatting); and monotonous upright positions (without occasional inversion). In addition, taking the obvious example of facial expression, it is evident that the muscular system is complementary to emotional expression, sharing potentially unresolved tensions.

Oriental methods of exercise such as Yoga and Thai Chi (4), which are based on the natural inclinations of the body and recognize the intrinsic nature of body-mind, can be recommended.

Benefits from attending to posture come not from eliminating body tension but from loosening it so that it becomes available for freer expression. This ensures that our muscles perform their vital functions efficiently. It is their movements, finding resistance in the skin, which helps circulation of blood and nerves; coordinated muscles hold the spine erect, allowing the organs to assume their ideal position; and not least, well tuned muscles readily absorb impact – physical and emotional – literally helping us ‘bounce back’ to life.

From infancy to old age, our bodies can be further supported by the application of massage. It is the original ‘treat’ of treatment! Provided by expert or friend and sensitively done, massage strokes are intuitively identified by the body and utilized according. (5)

To Demonstrate and Discuss: basic movements of Yoga and Tai Chi; examples of simple massage for aching muscles and joints; easy self –massage of the abdomen and face.

Subtle Element - Emotion

Naturopathy regards emotion as an articulation of our fundamental needs – e.g., to be nourished and grow, to be safe, to belong, and not to be underestimated - to contribute. At the same time, the evolutionary superiority conferred by human life does not necessarily guarantee their fulfillment. With such expectations to live up to, it is perhaps understandable that human beings display vulnerabilities not readily observed in other species. (6)

Further complication to satisfaction of personal needs is the pressure from infancy to accept the social norm. The intimidation to comply, to meet others’ expectations and to be successful (or not over-successful) can be just as demanding as in the world of competitive sport. Yet while a sportsperson can retire gracefully from competition, social pressures can continue until the end of life.

Expressions of emotion are intense, especially when conflicts of interest arise between external and internal pressures. If not expressed actively or verbally (which is their ‘civilized’ route), there is every likelihood that their somatic form, be it in raised blood pressure, skin response, or most often, digestive commentary, will assert itself. The naturopathic consultation, in sympathy with the underlying discord, offers the opportunity for the client to ‘speak out’.

Therapeutic conversation is not dissimilar to conventional counseling, and need not be confused with the uncertainty of ‘stirring things up’ (what is showing as a symptom is already ‘up’). The practitioner encourages the client to speak freely about the feelings associated with physical symptoms, not interpreting or offering explanation beyond confirming their validity. (7)

In a conventional setting, there is often a sense of failure if the client becomes increasingly emotional during the consultation. In naturopathic practice, however, this would be regarded as surfacing of conflict and would not be suppressed or 'dried up', but legitimized.

To Discuss: emotion requires articulation otherwise it tends to upset equilibrium; silence is not necessarily protective and can be isolating. The technique of 'Co-Listening' explained.

Intuitive Element - Symptoms as 'Friends'

Acute illness is classically termed as transient, self-limiting and common. In fact, being unwell is so common that we might suppose that human beings are morbid creatures who become progressively ill until death. From a naturopathic perspective however, the conventional view that common conditions are illnesses to be suppressed is both naïve and unhelpful.

Although symptoms of acute ill-health are disturbing and sometimes frightening, naturopaths regard such as somatic examples of intuition. A common feature of acute conditions, for example, is that they frustrate 'important' activities or occasions, causing cancellation or revision - and so often a great sense of relief follows!

Medical treatment of symptoms in extreme situations can also be relieving, but used indiscriminately offer other consequences. An unpleasant manifestation may be successfully suppressed only to reappear in another form; more alarming, treating a condition by purely pharmacological methods may lead to compromised immunity. (8)

The body's eliminative systems are responsible for many symptoms, suggesting that this is effectively an extension of normal activity. It would seem logical therefore to respond to symptoms sensitively – and reduce activities, of which over-eating is an immediate example. Competing with over consumption of food is the tendency to over work without adequate rest, while for the truly unfortunate, there is the inclination towards an over-consciencous attitude to life.

Naturopathic attitude to acute illness is often borne out by those whose conventional treatment is unavailable or contraindicated: that they feel much better not only after a short spell of 'illness' but also 'from having been ill'.

Most people would regard pain as the least acceptable of symptoms and naturopathy offers methods such as hydrotherapy to minimize discomfort. However, although bearing pain is challenging, using medication to induce insensitivity is not the same as not having pain. With natural support, painful sensations can be trusted to guide our appropriate responses.

It has been observed that at certain times the desire to escape from pain makes for increased discomfort, suggesting that fear may be the most pain-provoking condition. (9) What is called pain may represent a multi-layered experience. Fear of one type of pain can be associated with the partial awareness of other types that are often not fully realized but are still to emerge into consciousness. Without this link, many profound issues in life might remain inaccessible.

To Discuss: hints for 'easing up' on life; diffusing emergencies; natural prescriptions for pain. Interpreting symptoms to develop insight and understanding.

References

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