

Eat well, keep fit and let go of stress

Psychologists can help clients stay on top of their health-- a timely goal in cost-saving times, says Jane Brody.

By Tori DeAngelis

Monitor staff

A the health-care industry tightens its financial belt, it will increasingly choose to help only those clients who are taking care of themselves. Psychologists are the best professionals to help people change their unhealthy behaviors and be better prepared for the changes ahead, New York Times personal health columnist Jane Brody told psychologists. 'Chances are that people with self-inflicted ailments will find themselves increasingly out on a limb, medically speaking,' said Brody, the keynote speaker at the presidential mini-convention on health.

While the media devote growing coverage to the importance of leading a healthy life, Americans have actually been getting less fit, Brody noted. In the last 30 years, Americans 'have done nothing but gain weight-- If you came here from outer space and just landed here on the planet, you'd be forced to conclude that most Americans have a death wish.'

Psychologists are probably the best professionals to help Americans cut through the morass of unhealthy behaviors, including smoking, overeating, failing to exercise and overworking, Brody added. Through behavior-management and other techniques, they can help people change habits for the better and start leading healthier lives.

One of the best ways to encourage fitness is to stress the immediate benefits people will accrue from adopting healthy behaviors, she said.

There are numerous instant rewards for quitting smoking, for example. They include ridding your 'hair, clothes, house and breath' of offensive odors. Quitting also gives people increased stamina: When you smoke, one of every five of your cells carry carbon monoxide instead of oxygen--the equivalent of 'a slow suicide,' she said.

Stopping smoking can also be financially rewarding, she said. A friend of hers who quit put the money she would have spent on cigarettes in her piggy bank, 'and before she knew it, had saved enough money to go to Europe.'

Likewise, adopting an exercise routine fosters a host of immediate benefits including more energy, heightened productivity, improved appearance, higher self-esteem, and less stress and depression. She knows therapists who won't treat patients for depression 'unless they agree to participate in a regular exercise program,' Brody said. Not exercising means 'missing probably the best free lunch in town.'

Keeping bad genes at bay

New findings about genetically based diseases give people an extra opportunity to choose healthy behaviors, Brody said.

While findings about genes will tempt some to be fatalistic about their health, in truth genes only establish a predisposition to illness, she said. 'And predispositions need a conducive environment in which to express themselves.'

'A bad family medical history should not be considered a portent of doom,' Brody noted. 'Rather it should be welcomed as an opportunity to keep those nasty genes from ever expressing themselves.'