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THE “OTHER” FIVE LEAVES OF VIBRANT HEALTH

By J. Morris Hicks

We’ve talked a lot about vibrant health in this book--we even mentioned it in the title. Now, we need to remind you that, while the food part is extremely important, there are a few other pieces in the *vibrant health* puzzle--at least when it comes to our own health.

In addition to diet, the American College of Lifestyle Medicine refers to five fundamental elements that make or break our health: smoking, exercise, sleep, stress and love. Those other five “leaves” are listed here, beginning with the most obvious one:

Leaf #1. Don’t smoke. We don’t need to waste space in this book telling you all about the health problems associated with smoking. Everyone already knows that smoking is TERRIBLE for your health, so if you really want to enjoy vibrant health, don’t smoke.

Nicotine is addictive and many smokers have difficulty quitting. If you are unable to quit on your own, see your doctor who can counsel you on the options available to

help you overcome this addiction.

Leaf #2. Exercise regularly. The healthiest people in the world are eating the right food AND are getting plenty of exercise. So how much exercise is enough? Many experts agree that we should try to keep our bodies in motion for at least one hour a day, just about every day of the week.

Ironically, most of the healthiest people in the world don't have gym memberships. That's because, unlike most of us in the western world, they are quite active in their daily lives. But since most of us are more sedentary, we will need to have a specific plan to get the exercise our bodies need to thrive.

Your exercise regimen should include both aerobic activity (getting and keeping your heart rate up) and strength training. These can be combined in the same activity if the aerobic activity is weight bearing (you are supporting your weight while you are doing the activity). Examples of this are running and playing tennis.

If you do non-weight bearing exercise, such as biking or swimming, for the aerobic component, you should incorporate a separate strengthening activity, like lifting small weights. Consider joining a fitness center or hiring a personal trainer if this is foreign territory for you. (See Appendix G for my own personal exercise routine.)

Leaf #3. Get adequate sleep. This is an area where people think that they can cut corners. Forget it! Getting adequate sleep is very important. The good news is that once you begin eating mostly whole, plant-based foods and exercising regularly, you will likely be sleeping much better.

How much sleep should you be getting? From the website of the National Sleep Foundation:

“Sleep experts recommend a range of seven to nine hours of sleep for the average adult. While sleep patterns change as we age, the amount of sleep we need generally does not. Older people may wake more frequently through the night and may actually get less nighttime sleep, but their sleep need is no less than younger adults.”

Sleeping more than your body needs is not good for you, either. Get to know how many hours of sleep you need to function at your best, and then make it a point to get the right amount.

Leaf #4. Manage stress well. Sure, it would be nice to have a stress-free life, but that is just not going to happen. And it would be pretty boring too. Bad things cause stress, but some of the very best things in life come with stress too—like getting married to the most wonderful partner, or having a baby or writing the book you’ve always dreamed of authoring.

Almost all of our stress comes from thinking about unpleasant things from the past or what unpleasant things might happen in the future. Very rarely is the stress coming from what is happening *right now*. So one of the most effective ways to manage stress is to bring your mental focus back to the current moment.

This is called Mindfulness, and there are many ways to do this: meditation, body scanning, yoga, poetry, music and many others. Find ways to cultivate Mindfulness in your daily life and you will find that you respond to life with greater ease and joy, no matter the situation.

Leaf #5. Find what you love. By that, I am talking about discovering your passion or your sense of purpose. This one definitely means different things to different people. Some people find it in their work, others find it in their church or charitable causes. It doesn't matter what it is as long as it gets you motivated and provides you with that warm, satisfying feeling of making a difference.

I recently saw this quote by a man in his eighties: "Everyone I know that is over 80 is either still working or is dead." The point is that we all seem to function better, have a more positive attitude and enjoy greater happiness if we have people to see, things to do and places to go. Life just seems to be so much more fulfilling if you've found your passion and are now on a mission.

It took me 58 years to find my passion and I plan to work on that passion diligently for the rest of my life. In my case, I simply got curious about the optimal diet for humans in November of 2002. Ten thousand hours of study and work later, I now have a new, highly-satisfying, never-ending career.

For me, it's all about doing my best to help people everywhere embrace a whole food, plant-based diet to promote health, hope and harmony on Planet Earth. I sincerely believe that there has never been anything more important in the history of humanity--and I absolutely love what I do.