

# Our Journey to Wellness

**Conversations along the Way**



Put your

into

Raising up Healthy Women and Girls

**Women of the ELCA**

## Living Well

**Tammy Devine**

*Diaconal Minister; Wellness Coordinator, ELCA Board of Pensions*

Through the waters of baptism we are new creations, members of the body of Christ. We are called to be Christ's light in the world, and when we care for our whole being—body, mind, and spirit—we are most able to do that. Living well is about a balanced life in Christ. God is at work in and through all our interrelated dimensions—intellectual, emotional, social/interpersonal, vocational, physical, and spiritual—and is central to our groundedness and balance.

Being in touch with who God has created us to be guides us on our journey toward wellness. We have been uniquely created, with gifts, talents, skills, and passions to share. When we live from our God-given gifts, we are joyful; and the body of Christ becomes a community of healing and wholeness.

How we care for ourselves impacts our outlook on life. It affects our flexibility—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When we are struggling physically, we often have less energy and less emotional tolerance. When we are emotionally out of balance, we may not feel motivated to care for our bodies. When we are distracted by physical or emotional dis-ease, our ability to communicate with God may also be disrupted. Indeed, we are multi-dimensional people.

How we care for our bodies, the temple of the Holy Spirit, impacts our relationship with God. This includes what we eat, how physically active we are, how we share and steward our resources (including finances and possessions), how we care for the earth, and how we honor the Sabbath (by balancing work and play).

Living well emotionally relates to how we respond to stress, anger, grief, love, giving, receiving, empathy, compassion—the whole spectrum of human emotions—and the way we express these emotions. There are many healthy ways to release our emotions—tears, walking, and laughing, for example—and sometimes we take ourselves, and life, too seriously.

Nurturing your spiritual relationship with God can be done in many different ways. For some of us, worship, prayer, and study of scripture keep us grounded. For others, it may be baking, music, art, retreats, walking in nature, journaling, or movement prayer that grounds.

We are called to live well. And God calls us to share our gifts with others. It is part of our vocational identity as friends, daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers to empower God's people to embrace health and wholeness. As nurturers and caregivers, we have the opportunity to shape a new generation, to equip them to live as whole people of God.

Dr. James Wind, in "A Letter on Peace and Good Health," writes: "We live in the tension between the real presence of both the health and the illness that surround us. We need to be able to discern the difference between the one and the other. And we need to practice ways of life that foster well-being and minister to the deep pathologies that afflict us. To meet those challenges, those of us called to positions of leadership in the church must recover the life- and health-giving treasures at the heart of our faith. We must put those treasures to work in new ways and teach a new generation to draw upon them."

We are all on a journey toward wellness. Let us live, wet from the waters of our baptism, as good stewards of God's creation—our whole selves, body, mind, spirit, time, and possessions. Let us live from the gifts God has given us to transform, reform and reclaim the church as a place of healing and wholeness, a safe place and a grace place where our gifts, passions, time, and talents create healthy communities for the healing of the world.

# Emotional and Mental Health

**Mary Stein-Webber**

*Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church, Oakland, Calif.; Director,  
A Safe Place to Heal Christian Counseling*

We are to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind. Our mental health—or the health of our mind—plays a crucial part in our ability to live life to the fullest and to love God.

Depression, anxiety, psychological distress, sexual violence, domestic violence, and escalating rates of substance abuse affect women to a greater extent than men. This is true across the boundaries of nations, cultures, class, and so on.

For many of us, mental illness and difficulties with mental health have been connected with shame and secrecy. We remember our Great Aunt Rita, who was “strange,” and how no one wanted to be near her. There was our neighbor who slept all day and whose children were running wild; but we were not to talk about it. We saw our classmate come to school with bruises and cuts that she would not or could not explain. We might even remember our mother experiencing times when she would buy up everything she saw—things we didn’t need—and would not sleep for weeks at a time. We had a friend who, after a near miss with a tornado, never was herself again. We were not supposed to talk about that either. We have all seen and experienced people who were not mentally well, but chances are we got little or no help from our elders in understanding what it meant. And so we also did not know if there was any help for them.

We sometimes assume that if Jesus is part of our life, we will be protected from “whatever it is that is wrong with these people.” And if we ourselves suffer, we do it quietly, perhaps because we think it reflects negatively upon our personal faith if we are depressed or anxious, are caught in addiction, are being molested by a family member, or have a troubled marriage. We may not be sure whose fault it is, but we suspect that it is ours.

Women who have compromised mental health are likely to have experienced traumatic events, such as the death of a loved one or infidelity. They also might be socioeconomically disadvantaged, be of low or subordinate social status, or have unremitting responsibility for the care of others. Overburdened women might include mothers of small children, caretakers for the sick and elderly, daughters of stressed or self-involved parents, and women with lazy or overbearing partners. The good news is that we have been freer to talk about mental health issues in the last 30 years. There is much more professional help available now, and it is more common to seek it. Mental illness is no longer considered a character flaw, and while stigma is still attached to mental illness, people are freer now to get treatment and relief than they ever have been.

Research shows that there are three major factors that protect against the development of mental problems, especially depression. They are:

- ▲ sufficient autonomy to exercise some control in response to severe events
- ▲ material resources that allow one to make choices in the face of severe events
- ▲ psychological support from family, friends, or health providers

Because mutual support makes the biggest difference in maintaining mental health, it is important that we talk to one another. When we feel terrible, let us not hesitate to seek out one another. And if we are afraid, let us seek someone who is not afraid. None of us has to suffer in silence.

# Spiritual Health

**Ginger Anderson-Larson**

*Director of Spiritual Formation, Wartburg Seminary*

Relationships and friendships are so important to us that it would be hard to imagine living without loved ones and friends to talk to and be with. We somehow become more of a person through our relationship with others. So it is also with our relationship with God.

God became one of us in Jesus—whose human life included all the daily realities of self-care, work, tiredness, loneliness, celebration, and choices that we know—so that we might more clearly see God's longings for an intimate relationship with each one of us, whom God has created in God's image. Relationship with God, like any human relationship, is a participatory experience in which both beings communicate and listen. A healthy relationship involves trust, which gives you the freedom to be who you are without fearing that somehow you are unacceptable. Trust also invites commitment: God offers unconditional acceptance (Isaiah 43:1-7) of us and the promise to never leave the relationship (Matthew 28:20). Jesus' farewell promise to his disciples is "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

It is up to us to respond to God's invitation of relationship. This gracious God, who knows us better than we know our own selves, patiently and continuously comes to us, as if wooing us into relationship. Should we neglect our relationship with God, we may not initially recognize the cost. Yet we are spiritual beings created with a longing for God, as Paul reminds the people of Athens (Acts 17:23-28). Giving good attention to our relationship with God opens a deep and amazing dimension of life to us. Self-doubt, self-putdowns, feelings of unimportance, messages from others of being no good, stupid, or of little value—all these gain control over us but are experienced differently when we really hear God's loving word to us, "You are my beloved." Trusting the presence of God's Holy Spirit in us gives us amazing power.

Spiritual living is living in relationship with God. Spiritual health is being whole or "at one" with God in the midst of daily living. The Holy Spirit will always be present, whispering and nudging us to be who God created us to be. This nudging is often manifested by thoughts that come to us, or comments a friend makes that catch our attention and do not go away, or a sense of dis-ease that is present as the day(s) and night(s) go on.

Trusting that God loves us as we are frees us to enter into prayerful conversation with God about what is catching our attention in body, mind, or soul. Giving God our attention as both listener and speaker takes intentionality and hard work: We must learn to sit quietly and listen to God, whether it is out in nature, in a favorite chair at home, or some other place of quiet. Prayerful conversation with God might also happen in ways other than what you are already familiar with; God has created and gifted us with interests and abilities, and God invites us to open all of them into relationship with God.

The power of the Holy Spirit at work as we nurture our own relationship with God will also direct our energy back into our relationships with family, friends, and those whom we do not yet know as friends, both in our community and around the world. How can this be? Try telling stories of your day in terms of relationship, and then ponder, "Where is God in the midst of these relationships? Were there moments when I turned my back on who I really wanted to be in that relationship? What energy and peace do I feel within me when I know that I have really acted and spoken as one who loves God, loves myself, and loves and cares about others?"

Relationship with God is personal, but not private. It is intended to be shared. Our spiritual health is real when we delight in relationship with God and share this joy with others.

## Physical Health

**Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, M.D.**

*Family Physician and Author of *The Right Road: Life Choices for the Clergy**

We live in a world of information, yet we are not familiar with our bodies and what it means to be healthy. Our bodies are miraculous gifts from God that should be treasured and protected. What is visible is amazing—eyes, mouths, ears, hands, breasts—and what is invisible is mysterious—brains, heart, lungs, uterus. Our culture worships external bodily perfection, and we all struggle in some way with that expectation of perfection: If only I were taller, smaller, prettier, younger, older, stronger. We rarely take the time to appreciate and to care for the entire, exquisite body that we have been given.

The female body changes dramatically during a lifetime. As children, we are just becoming familiar with the care of our bodies when puberty arrives. Sexual activity, pregnancy, breastfeeding, menopause, and aging all change our body as well as our understanding of it. We have so many questions about those changes: Is this normal? What should I expect? How should I prepare? How did this happen? What can I do to change things? Is this something to fear?

The medical world is just beginning to catch up on understanding the female body and how it is different from the male body in expressing symptoms of disease and responding to treatment. Most of the research done to date has been done on men, and treatment models have been developed based on that research. You may have heard that women's symptoms of heart attacks are different from the classic symptoms of chest pain and shortness of breath that appear in men. Heart disease is the number one killer of women, yet women receive fewer interventions to prevent and treat heart disease. As a result, while the death rate from heart disease is decreasing in men, it is not changing or increasing slightly in women.

Relationships and communication are central to women's lives, but we are either too embarrassed to talk about health or feel that it is not important. Now is the time to reclaim responsibility for our healthy bodies. We use our bodies (and brains) to work, learn, have fun, love, communicate, and express ourselves. Self-care is an investment in our future and is good stewardship of the gift of health that we have been given. Practice self-care, in partnership with family and friends, by doing the following:

1. Listen to your body. Hunger, thirst, restlessness, and sleepiness are signals of the body's needs. We habitually ignore them. Eat breakfast. Drink water. Get up and move. Sleep 7 to 8 hours every night. You've heard your mother's words. Take them seriously and be aware of the positive responses of your body.
2. Be knowledgeable about your health. Learn about how your body works and how you can keep it healthy. Ask questions and share information. Talk to your peers about health and wellness, and learn from the wisdom and experience of your elders.
3. Live a healthy lifestyle. Health and wellness is all about balance—mind, body, and spirit. A rested, well-nourished, and active body is the foundation for a healthy mind and soul. Celebrate healthy living with others, and enjoy their support and encouragement.
4. Plan for health improvement. We all experience changes and challenges. Whether you face disease or disability, stress or depression, being intentional about listening to your body, and being knowledgeable and living a healthy lifestyle, will prevent, delay, or protect from worsening health.

Let us raise up our health together as women to honor and serve God!

Resources:

<http://www.4woman.gov/>  
<http://www.girlshealth.gov/>

<http://www.4woman.gov/orwh/>  
<http://www.healthywomen.org/>

## **Discussion Guide**

Think a moment about someone whom you have loved who mentally, physically, or spiritually suffered. How did you feel about it? Were you afraid? What did you do? What do you wish someone else had done? In retrospect, what do you wish you had done?

Because we often isolate ourselves when we are not feeling well in one way or another, think of someone now whom you would call in such a time. Whom would you call?

We all have good intentions. Have you ever asked anyone to hold you accountable for keeping your good intentions to pray, read the Bible, listen to God, or whatever it is you want to do to grow in your relationship with God? What do you think it would be like to have someone ask you if you have been intentional in being with God today?

When you think about talking with another person about your relationship with God, what feelings are present? How did you learn these feelings? Do these feelings contribute to your spiritual health?

If you listened to your body, what would it be telling you? How often do you listen to your body? How often do you act on what it is telling you?

Who and what supports your good health? (Who or what are your partners in health)  
What do you do to maintain your spiritual, emotional, and physical health?