

FINDING MEANING

“The great and glorious masterpiece of humanity is to know how to live with a purpose.” ~ Montaigne

“For the secret of man’s being is not only to live but to have something to live for.” ~ Dostoyevsky

We talk often about being healthy or being well. As I contemplate these in terms of my own life and with my patients I’ve realized that finding meaning in life underlies all we do in health and wellness. Just because you don’t have cancer or another serious, potentially life-threatening disease doesn’t mean that you are well or that you are satisfied with your life.

Singer/songwriter Warren Zevon was on with David Letterman after learning that he had cancer that was probably going to end his life. Letterman asked him about what he was doing and how he was coping. He responded by saying that he learned to, “Enjoy every sandwich.”

Well-known physician Lee Lipstenthal wrote a book with that same title after he was diagnosed with life-threatening esophageal cancer. In the book he talks about finding meaning in life and living such that we are aware and living in each moment.

So often we live in the past or in the future but not in the moment. We focus on the material rather than the spiritual. We focus on things and titles rather than on relationships.

I often catch myself falling into a materialistic frame of mind. I see myself comparing myself to others based on meaningless parameters like my career trajectory or title, the size of my house, the make of my car, the size of my checking account and so on. It’s easy to do this in our society that can place such value on the material.

Most of us tend to believe that happiness equals pleasure. Studies have shown that this just isn’t the case. Real happiness seems to be centered much more on being able to use our strengths in the service of something we believe in. I guess you could say that happiness is more about what we can give than about what we can get.

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So spend some time thinking about life's big questions. Why are you here? Where are you going? What do you want to do? Finding meaning in life is probably the most personal and the most challenging thing that any of us can address in our lives. But the questions are worth asking. And trying to answer them is probably more important for our health and happiness than even figuring out what to eat or how to exercise.

Try one of these exercises:

- Write down how you would spend the next six months if you knew for sure they would be your last.
- Write down: "What would I do or be if I had no limitations?"

