

NATURAL HEALTH AWARENESS

maintaining the health of the planet by maintaining optimum personal health

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As consumerism grows year on year, there are impacts not only on sustainability but also on human health. Economic structures push people away from physical activities such as walking, playing, gardening, singing and cleaning because they do not have an impact on economic growth or involve consumption. Instead consumers are offered an incredible range of labour saving devices from cars and artificial grass to powerful chemicals, which allow cleaning to occur without 'moving a muscle'. Entertainment is delivered conveniently at the push of a button, and food supplied frozen in a plastic tray, allowing the sedentary consumer to simultaneously eat and be entertained. At the same time, however, buying into this sort of lifestyle leads to debt and stressful employment to repay the debt, often requiring sitting in front of a computer screen for long hours or repetitive movements on a production line. All this is terribly bad for health, but bad health itself supports even more industry and consumption as medical corporations supply products and services to keep people going, despite the inhuman conditions in which they live their lives. And conventional medicine itself has a strong negative environmental impact through all the machines, hospitals, medicines, instruments and products it depends on.

There is enormous potential for a win-win situation as people reduce consumption, fulfil human needs in ways that are physically active, grow and prepare fresh organic food, work less and spend more time in nature with friends, and rely on natural health to avoid becoming ill, allowing conventional medicine to act as an efficient safety net. In this sense, natural health means lifestyle activities, which contribute to wellbeing and stimulate the body's innate power to maintain health and heal itself, and complementary therapies which aim to stimulate this same power. If learners can gain skills in natural health awareness, they may be able to avoid the continual dis-ease of consumerism, a sedentary state of being not-dead, and instead start to live, with benefits not only for their own wellbeing but also for the wellbeing of the planet.

Unfortunately though, in today's consumer society, even the concept of 'natural health' is big business. Advertisements, shops windows, magazines books all present 'natural health' as something that can be purchased. So, while 'natural health' might seem an obvious concept, it is presented as a desirable idea whose meaning is differently determined by the ways in which it is represented. The idea of 'natural' health is, of course also used to sell 'natural' products as well as complementary and self-care therapies. As health and illness are complex ideas that relate to mental physical and social wellbeing, we might usefully consider to what extent the idea of 'health' can in fact, be not-natural and why current perceptions of health are frequently not sustainable. Exploring ideas about natural health and considering how the

core principles of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) can help learners gain natural health awareness.

The World Health Organisation defines health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. Yet in many of the wealthier populations in the world, ‘health’ is routinely maintained through the use of drugs and interventions rather than a more holistic process of ensuring and maintaining overall wellbeing. Not only are current sedentary consumer lifestyles environmentally damaging in terms of resources and energy, they signal an individual absence of responsibility for a system of healthful self-maintenance. They result in an emotional and spiritual disharmony and dysfunction between self and environment, manifesting in unwellness. In other words, there seems to be a block about doing what has been historically ‘natural’ for healthy humans - eating fresh, seasonal local foods, socialising and engaging in daily physical activities, all of which are more personally and ecologically sustainable.

The basic principles of complementary and alternative medicines consider the body as a self-maintaining system that requires balance between itself and the natural world of which it is a part. CAM theories consider the human body on physical, emotional and spiritual levels to be symbiotic with the local and wider environments in which it exists. In a healthy state, energy levels are excellent and the body is in balance and able to heal itself in the same way that the skin heals a cut. An unhealthy state is viewed as an imbalance or a dis-ease. Some therapies lean more towards the biochemical view of the body, using natural substances such as herbs and vitamins to bring it back into balance. Others espouse energetic principles of intervention. In both approaches, the primary aim is to work towards integrating, balancing and harmonising the system on all levels to manifest optimal health rather than targeting specific diseases when they arise.

The prevailing discourse of medical science considers the body in a mechanical way, as separate from the environment and made up of discrete parts, which can be 'fixed' by interventions and new technologies. Thinking about the body as an object has origins in modern scientific views of the world, in the practice of surgery and in new knowledge of the physical, chemical and biological body, which lies behind developments in drugs. It is related to modernist frameworks for thinking about human existence and our relationship to the world originating to a large extent in the divisions between body and soul in Cartesian dualism. The ideology of the relationship between man and the world that promotes human control of nature through scientific rationalism has become the prevailing mainstream view. No one would argue against conventional medical interventions having their place when serious illness prevails, nor deny the value of technological advances, drugs and surgery in such instances, despite environmental costs and other consequences, such as further treatments for side effects. But these major interventions have to be the last resort, after all efforts to avoid getting ill in the first place have been exhausted, rather than a means to prop up an unhealthy and unsustainable lifestyle. When conventional thinking presents the idea that the physical frailty of the body can be ‘fixed’, it becomes easy to externalise responsibility by believing there are easy solutions to physical problems and so there is no need to care about health until illness arrives.

There are, however, discourses used in some areas of CAM which also present interventions as maintenance and fixing, albeit in ways which have fewer side effects and avoid synthetic chemicals or invasive surgery. Learners will have to gain critical awareness of the different discourses which surround the concept of natural health to ensure that their own conception is a genuine paradigm shift away from unsustainable consumerist concepts of health.

Perhaps one reason why people are prepared to live sedentary and unhealthy lifestyles and rely on conventional medicine to prop them up when they get ill as a result, or continue to over-consume despite the environmentally destructive consequences, is because of an overconfidence in the ability of science to ‘fix’ problems. Of course, the reality is that science cannot fix everything, and the metaphor of a machine that can be fixed applies only to a very small aspect of complex biological-social-spiritual reality. For modernists, the idea that not everything can be measured, that science does not have all the answers and that humans are not in charge can lead to a direct confrontation with mortality and chaos, an unknown beyond which is terrifying. So it is not surprising that modern consumer culture plays an important role in constructing and maintaining a simplistic and misleading vision of reality, where what is un-natural is promoted as being natural, and health and happiness are things that can be bought. Advertising messages using images of people doing healthy things frequently promote and sell unhealthy products (see *Advertising Awareness*, this volume). This construction of a pseudo-reality offers security and is one in which the modern consumer-orientated human is heavily invested. But it is wholly a unsustainable and unrealistic commercial view of health.

From a sustainability perspective, definitions of health need to ensure that people seek health and wellbeing through healthy, stress free, and satisfying lifestyles in balance with the environment around them, and through techniques for stimulating their body’s natural ability to heal itself. For learners, it is important therefore to gain awareness of the direct links between simple and effective measures that improve and maintain their own health in terms of physical and mental and social wellbeing and sustainability outcomes.

Learning about the links between personal health and the health of the larger ecosystems that support life can help learners gain ecological awareness and feel part of the world rather than apart from it (see *Being-In-The-World*, this volume). Within Gaia theory, it is not just ecosystems which can be considered ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’, but the planet as a whole organism. The importance of this extended concept of health is that it highlights that our own health is dependant on the ecosystems that surround us and the global system of life, and that interference with ecosystems and Gaia will have a direct impact on our own health.

Modern consumer ‘demands’ interfere with ecosystems in a great number of ways. Intensive farming relies entirely on synthetic pesticides and nitrate-based fertilisers which require the use of fossil fuels, pollute water systems, and damage soil. Foods are often transported huge distances and processed, packaged, frozen, and canned. This has a negative impact on health as diversity in foods is reduced, nutritional quality is reduced, and people suffer directly from the pollution. The over-demand for meat products leads to de-forestation of land for grazing

and fodder, releasing huge amounts of CO₂ and reducing the ability of terrestrial ecosystems to absorb CO₂ in the future. Combined with the methane gas produced by an excess of ruminative animals, the demand for meat contributes significantly to climate change. Climate change in turn has a major impact on human health because of decreases in the ability to grow food, extremely weather conditions, displacement and resource conflicts. On the other hand, the use of organic manures and fertilizers and the practice of crop rotation or permaculture, ensures soil regeneration in organic farming. Organic farming creates more jobs than intensive farming because it needs more human care, and these jobs are physically active ones which require a variety of tasks to be completed rather than repetitive or sedentary jobs. The impact on both health and planet is positive.

The situation is entirely win-win: if learners gain an awareness of natural health they will eat an appropriate rather than excessive amount of red meat, and be healthier as a result. They will reduce the amount of unhealthy convenience food they consume, instead gaining satisfaction in growing food in small communities such as allotments, and cooking with others using fresh, local ingredients. They will become more physically active – not in a treadmill in a gym- but in carrying out everyday tasks and entertainments which require interaction with others and nature. All of these things will not only protect them from obesity and ill health, they will also help satisfy their needs and fill some of the emptiness that would otherwise make them turn to the hollow promises of shopping and consumerism.

The basic principle of natural health is that human beings evolved in an environment which fulfilled their needs without the need for fossil fuels, chemicals, a mass of electronic labour-saving devices, pollution, or waste. Advanced technology has come with great benefits but also great costs, as market economies push technological ‘solutions’ where there was not a problem in the first place. The ideal is not to move away from the many benefits of advanced technology, including conventional medicine, but to use them only when their use actually improves situations, and not just for the sake of it.

Formula milk is an example of a product marketed to ‘solve’ a problem which for the vast majority of mothers does not actually exist, with multiple negative impacts to health and the planet. The health benefits of breastfeeding for both mother (reduced cancer risks) and baby (immunity) have been amply demonstrated by research and the breast provides a free, fully contained milk supply ready to go. It does not need sterilising or heating and is natural, sustainable and physically and emotionally healthy. The idea that a mother’s life is better and more convenient without breastfeeding, if she can afford it, is a deep cultural message that ties into historical perceptions of class and social status (Hardyment 2008), which has been manipulated by manufacturers of formula milk. Advertising legislation has helped, yet baby clubs and a wide range of other ‘informative’ sites present formula milk as more convenient. For example, a baby milk website uses the linguistic device of presupposition to represent it as completely taken for granted that bottle feeding is more convenient:

Combination feeding is a mix of breast and bottle feeding, using infant milk in the bottle rather than expressed breast milk. Many mums find this is a very practical way of

giving their baby the benefits of breast milk along *with the convenience of bottle feeding*. (www.smanutrition.co.uk/feeding/bottlefeeding/)

The same website does give a strongly positive description of breast feeding, which is to its credit, but at the same time represents bottle feeding in similar glowing language:

“What are the benefits of bottle feeding my baby?” Breast milk is best but not all new mums choose to or can breast feed and some prefer to bottle feed. Bottle feeding doesn’t mean that your baby will miss out on all the cuddles and intimacy that comes with breast feeding – it will still be a very special time for you and for your baby. (www.smanutrition.co.uk/feeding/bottlefeeding/)

This presents bottle feeding as a lifestyle choice rather than an unfortunate medical necessity in extreme circumstances.

Overall, natural health awareness is a way of getting beyond the dis-eases of consumerism to find ways of being healthy that enhance wellbeing and protect the systems that life depends on. The ability to maintain personal optimum health that makes use of the natural methods that humans have always used to stay healthy (through physical activity, social relations and contact with nature) is an important element of sustainability literacy. Critical awareness of consumerist discourses of health can help learners avoid the idea that the body can be ‘fixed’ or health bought in packets or bottles. Instead they can gain skills in resisting these discourses, investigating alternative ways of living, and putting these ways into practice. In doing so they will be improving their own lives, contributing to the maintenance of the systems which support life, and providing an example for others to follow.

ACAS (2006) www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=976 [on stress]

Blythman, Joanna (2006) *Bad Food Britain* Fourth Estate Harper Collins

CBC news <http://macrobiotics.co.uk/sugar.htm> [two inspirational 45- minute Canadian documentaries about sugar, how it is used and consumed. It presents the relationship between sugar and obesity as a murky story of politics, lobbying, threats to funding for the World Health Organisation and slavery].

Hardyment, Christina (2008) *Dream Babies: Child Care Advice from John Locke to Gina Ford*, London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2008

Lawrence, Felicity (2004) *Not on the Label* London, Penguin

UNICEF <http://www.babyfriendly.org.uk/page.asp?page=11> (accessed

WHO <http://www.who.int/hhr/en/> [The ‘Health and human Rights’ diagram that appears on the link demonstrates the interrelatedness of physical and emotional health and human rights]