

# A reason to eat healthy: The role of meaning in life in maintaining homeostasis in modern society

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## Abstract

Health is a state of homeostasis of four principle kinds, namely, biochemical, physiological, psychological, and social. In this article, we complete this theory with a fifth element, namely, spiritual balance. Existential attitudes have been found to be closely related to identity formation, moral development, value-related attitudes, personal goals, and lifestyle choices. Meaning in life and searching for meaning serve better health since they may encourage people to engage in health-promoting behaviors and avoid health-risking behaviors, such as obesity and eating disorders. The meaning-making model proposes that people's perceptions may contribute to content/discontent with life, body, and the world.

## Keywords

health orientation, health-promoting behavior, homeostasis, meaning in life, nutrition behavior, spirituality

## Complexity of health and homeostatic health

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely as the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 1946). This definition, despite lots of criticism, calls attention to the fact that health is a complex concept involving several dimensions and components that is closely connected to Engel's biopsychosocial model of medicine (Borrell-Carrió et al., 2004). It also suggests that health is relative in nature, and health has a different meaning for different people. There is a wide variation in people's concepts of health, and these interpretations may be depending on cultural values and social norms. In modern society, not only obesity has become a most common malnutrition but also a lot of eating disorders appeared that transformed our concept of health and illness (Fairburn and Brownell, 2002). These modern diseases of the civilization well fit into this multifaceted phenomenon of health and illness. This is even true when new aspects of health have been suggested besides the original definition that emphasizes the role of internal and external environment, that is, health is a state of equilibrium among the physical,

biological, and social environments, compatible with full functional activity. Therefore, health is the extent to which an individual or a group is able to realize aspirations and satisfy needs and change or cope with the environment (WHO, 1984).

The equilibrium and balance theory of health is not new since it goes back to the legacy of the ancient Greek medicine and Hippocrates: in this case, disease is a disharmony of certain elements of the human body, while harmony represents health. This concept appears in modern medicine as a theory of homeostasis, and health is a state of homeostasis of four principle kinds: biochemical, physiological, psychological, and social. Marks (2015) suggests a comprehensive conceptual model and introduced a homeostatic theory of obesity, where all these levels of homeostasis play a role in mutual interaction. This model is useful not only in

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the explanation of the onset of disease (due to deterioration of homeostasis) but also in the treatment and prevention (aiming at restoration of homeostasis). In this model, satisfaction (with body, life, environment, etc.) occupies a central place. While from social and psychological point of view, self-regulation and regulatory functions in social actions seem to be extraordinarily important to maintain health, and we also suggest a completion to this model, an introduction of spiritual aspects highlighting a core component of human existence, namely, a will to meaning.

### **Linking spirituality to health: the role of beliefs, goals, and sense of meaning**

The biopsychosocial-spiritual (BPSS) paradigm goes beyond the biopsychosocial model, although both use psychological frameworks to understand health beliefs and behaviors (Rumbold, 2007). However, this paradigm put an emphasis on a connection between spirituality—as overarching frameworks that orient them to the world and provide motivation and direction for living (Pargament, 1997)—and health. Viewed as a general orienting system (Pargament, 1997), individuals' meaning systems are therefore central to the understanding of the influence of psychosocial processes of their psychological and physical health (Park, 2007). This is particularly important for adolescents and youth for whom spiritual development may play an important role in identity formation, moral development, value-related attitudes, personal goals, pursuits, and lifestyle choices (Benson et al., 2003). Particularly because this is also a highlighted life period of diet-related attitudes and problems.

There are few conceptual models explaining the association between orienting system and health: some pointed direct linkage (including the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal and sympathetic adrenal medullary axes and their influence on inflammatory processes, see for example, Aldwin et al., 2014), whereas others argue for a more indirect routes through psychosocial and lifestyle factors (Masters, 2008).

One leading explanation based on the mediating role of psychological well-being in the linkage of spirituality and health outcomes is the stress-buffering effect of goals, beliefs, and meaning (Park and Folkman, 1997). This framework was grounded by Frankl's seminal work viewed sense of order and a reason for existence as coping resource which foster general psychological and physiological resistance against the adverse effects of stress (Krause, 2007). Empirical analyses revealed the incremental value of spirituality showed as sense of direction and meaning in one's life was associated with better cardiovascular health above and beyond the effects of other potential psychosocial factors (e.g. optimism and positive affect; Kim et al., 2013).

In other way, spirituality may reduce health risks by promoting healthy lifestyles and facilitate the adoption of

health-protective behaviors, rebalancing health status, and maintain and enhance health. Notwithstanding denominational effect by which some religious traditions promote health habits or other prescriptions or proscriptions that may prevent diseases, Koenig's (2015) review firmly attests that people with spiritual orientation generally lead to healthier lives.

### **Sense of meaning, proactive health orientation, and healthy nutrition behavior**

In the development of obesity and eating disorders, dissatisfaction plays an important role: dissatisfaction with body, own person and life in general (Marks, 2015). In general view, spirituality refers to ways in which people pursue and experience meaning in their life (e.g. Hill et al., 2000). This general meaning system comprise the lenses through which individuals interpret, evaluate, and respond to their experiences and encounters (Park, 2007). In this way, people's understanding of the reality in terms of complex, coherent, and organic processes that result in the unfolding of a larger whole has salutary health consequences from a lower level of premature mortality rates (Skrabski et al., 2005) to the adoption of health-promoting behavior (Kagee and Dixon, 2000). Daily spiritual experiences have been found to be related not only to better health in general but also better diet and treatment adherence in ill health states (Park et al., 2009). However, wrestling with existential issues was correlated significantly with higher occurrence of bulimia and body dissatisfaction in a sample of young women (Boyatzis and McConnell, 2006).

The media and their social pressure continuously represent a threat against homeostasis in which satisfaction/dissatisfaction occupies a central point. The media often project people with slim and perfect bodies and through a priming effect may contribute to body dissatisfaction, particularly for adolescents; those are particularly sensitive to this priming effect who are dissatisfied with their body (Johansson et al., 2005).

The amount of studies confirmed that meaning may play important and different roles in the lifestyle choices and health acting as a powerful predictor of nutrition-related behavior and weight controlling behavior. In a sample of undergraduates, sense of meaning was an important contributor for proactive health orientation (Steger et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a sample of adolescents, meaning seems to have a more specific importance in developing-health conscious behaviors like diet control (Piko and Brassai, 2009). More specifically, finding of Lytle's study (Lytle et al., 2003) conducted in a sample of adolescents showed that students who reported that spiritual beliefs affected their decisions about a range of health behaviors including eating habits were more likely to report greater intake of fruits and vegetables. In other view, in a national sample of African

Americans, active spiritual health locus of control (the belief that a higher power empowers a person to be proactive about health behaviors or that one works in partnership with a higher power to stay in good health) was positively associated with fruit consumption (Debnam et al., 2012). Finally, in a sample of undergraduate students, greater body sanctification (having spiritual significance and character) in both nontheistic and theistic ways was related to higher levels of health-protective behaviors: satisfaction with one's body, disapproval of unhealthy eating practices, and lower rates of binge eating (Mahoney et al., 2005).

Taken all these together, a sense of meaning may act as an impetus for people to invest in their lives, providing powerful motivation to maintain their health. When search for meaning in life is grounded in people's aspirations and insights to overcoming life's challenges—particularly in the formative years of adolescence—the feeling that one's life could have gone better may serve as a source of growth-oriented motivation to work toward improvement (Brassai et al., 2015).

### Meaning system and its regulatory function

Taking any empirical perspective on the multidimensional influences of spirituality—as orienting system provides individuals with cognitive framework with which to interpret their experiences and motivation—on health, meaning-making framework is a useful way to conceptualize the regulatory role of search for meaning in homeostasis (Park, 2012).

Like homeostatic model of health, the meaning-making model is discrepancy-based, that is, it proposes that people's perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a particular situation and their global meaning (i.e. what they believe and desire) creates distress, which in turn gives rise to efforts to reduce the discrepancy and resultant distress. Furthermore, the quality of meaning-making attempts is important to interrupt the circle of discontent. However, meaning-making typically involves searching for a more favorable understanding of the situation and its implications, and it can include changes in the way one appraises a situation as well as changes in global meaning, such as revised identity, growth, or views of the world (Park, 2013).

All in all, reviewing the behavioral control mechanisms driven by needs and desires, goals and aspirations, cultural norms, and social ideals is important to consider the top-down and bottom-up regulatory processes resulting from the vertical axis of human being (Piedmont, 1999) deeply grounded and firmly guided by a will to meaning.

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