

The Spa Prescription

Dr. Taub's personal adventures in wellness

Stress is a major cause of virtually all the chronic degenerative diseases afflicting Americans, and it's ruining health, happiness, and lives. It's ironic (but human) that as a Wellness Medical Doctor, I woke up one morning in July, 2009, to discover I was deaf in one ear. Doctors can't find the cause, but in my heart of hearts, I know it's stress.

I lost hearing in one ear 21 days after my younger brother passed away from cancer. He was my only sibling—a pediatrician like me, who I loved more than words can express; we grew up together, went to the same schools, practiced pediatrics together, and talked with each other most days of our lives.

When he was diagnosed with cancer, I promised I'd always be there for him as a doctor, big brother, and protector. I kept my promise during three heartbreaking years of failed surgery, failed chemotherapy, and failed radiation—and even though I thought I was taking reasonably good care of myself, chronic degenerative disease began in my body.

It's ironic (but again, human), that to stay objective for my brother, I had to turn a deaf ear to his constant pain and distress. In the process, I lost my hearing, too. Somehow my stress constricted the tiny artery that supplies oxygen to my cochlea (the tiny sea-shell shaped organ of hearing)—probably in the same manner that stress constricts the coronary artery, which leads to heart attacks.

Modern medicine has not helped me so far, but wise physicians recognize that the physiological and psychological resources of patients are an important part of any total treatment strategy along with the best that modern medicine has to offer.

I pioneered Integrative Medicine based on my belief in the body's ability to help heal itself by remembering wellness and seeking balance. I believe our health is primarily determined by personal responsibility, self-value, and reverence for life. I also believe God gives us

all special gifts and mine was to be a physician; thus, I'm embarking on a personal "Voyage to Wellness" that I'll be sharing publicly so that others can be supported in their own voyages.

I'll be visiting some of the world's best spas for health and healing to help recover my hearing, or at least build immunity and resistance to more chronic degenerative disease beginning in my body. I'm embarking on my voyage filled with the realization that God's presence is heard with our heart as well as our ears.

My wife and I visited the Cal-a-Vie Health Spa in Vista, California, for five days last November. Our visit was wonderful in all ways: A beautiful environment, a caring and competent staff, great food, a comprehensive wellness program, and totally outstanding spa treatments.

We were struck by the genuine kindness, caring, and warmth that permeated Cal-a-Vie. Bravo to the owners, John and Terri Havens, and the entire management team for sustaining

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such a special culture; it stimulates a palpable sense of community between staff and guests, and between the guests themselves—which translates into quick bonding and camaraderie. Indeed, the empathy and friendship that developed between the guests was therapeutic. There's a parallel between the chemical reactions occurring in our bodies when we show care for others and when we exercise—hence the "helper's high" is like the "runner's high." Speaking of exercise, I was especially appreciative of the staff who led the mornings' uphill hikes and somehow managed to turn

my not being able to make the final strenuous elevation into a personal triumph for me, anyway.

Okay, I'm 70 years old and must admit that my ego was a bit bruised to see a few women who were about my age stay way ahead of me on the morning hikes—especially since I try to practice what I preach by exercising regularly at my gym. So I changed my attitude and improved my stamina enough so that by the last day I could at least keep up! More important is that I've now increased the stretching, aerobic, and weight-training aspects of my regular gym workouts by at least 25 percent. I've also become determined to get more fit in my 70s than I was in my 60s. (My personal trainer is amazed!)

All the spa therapists we encountered at Cal-a-Vie were masterful with therapeutic massage, craniosacral therapy, myofascial release (see the sidebar), reflexology, and facials. After writing eight books about wellness, I

know gravitas and brevity are not mutually exclusive, so all I can say about our spa treatments is "Wow!"

Speaking of masterful, nutrition director, Linda Illingworth, R.D., is an exceptional teacher and motivator who has created a terrific nutrition strategy. Meals and snacks are calorie-controlled, yet everything is delicious and no one seems to leave the table hungry.

The Cal-a-Vie experience is characterized by total luxury, but nevertheless it's like a physical, mental, and spiritual boot camp for guests who are serious about wellness,



By Dr. Edward Taub

especially physical fitness—it's much more than just being pampered!

It was exactly what I needed to take my mind off my hearing loss. Specifically, I had been worrying whether my good ear would become affected. I was also concerned about socializing—especially during meals—because my one-sided hearing couldn't tell me where sounds were coming from. (I'd lost my ability to hear stereophonically!) Also, background noises had been causing my brain to go on "tilt"—making words too fuzzy for me to understand.



I was too occupied to dwell on my hearing, because I was hiking up scenic hills at 6:30 in the morning (there were also flatter hikes), participating in the various aerobics offerings (including riding some amazing bicycles imported from France in the shallow end of the Olympic-sized pool), doing yoga, walking through the labyrinth, and exploring the fruit orchards and fields of lavender. There was also an old chapel, a windmill, and other structures to explore that were imported brick-by-brick from France. When all that wasn't happening, there were leisurely meals, snack times, and of course, each day's ultimate rewards: Totally outstanding spa treatments!

As far as my hearing, I was pleased that gradually I could understand most of what the guests were saying—even around the dining-room tables if I positioned myself to listen with my good ear while also watching their facial expressions and staying as far away as possible from extraneous noises. I rediscovered the wisdom that healing is a process, not an event—which enabled me to stop worrying about losing hearing in my good ear. Also, while meditating in the middle of the

labyrinth, I remembered what I always tell my patients: worrying never helps.

I'm now hearing spoken words so much better with my good ear—my brain began accommodating to my surroundings at Cal-a-Vie in many ways that remind me of the neuroplasticity phenomenon that helps stroke patient increase the utility of their unaffected limbs. The result is that I'm hearing more stereophonically—even with one ear, and background noises are not affecting me as much. It defies my scientific medical training, but I began experiencing my

new sensation of stereophonic sound during my spa treatments—especially the myofascial release sessions. In any case, wellness begins in the mind, and it's a verb as much as a noun, so there's no doubt in my mind that my Cal-a-Vie visit advanced me on the path to wellness.

Wellness is the graceful dance between our physical, mental, and spiritual energies that leads to the point of balance where our natural healing forces begin to nurture and nourish our whole being. The Cal-a-Vie Health Spa provided me with the opportunity to seek this point of balance—and the motivation and means to achieve it. ☐

Edward Taub, M.D., F.A.A.P., is a founder of the Integrative Medicine movement and a family physician and board-certified pediatrician. He is also the author or co-author of eight books on preventive medicine, including the most recent *Stress Management in Today's World* (Reader's Digest, 2009). Last year, he redirected his life to become the Director of Integrative Medicine for the Southern California Hospice Foundation. He is also the ship's doctor on the historic tall ship, Curlew, where he conducts Voyages to Wellness.