

Good Advice is Easy to Give but Hard to Take

Health and mental health professionals, and others, frequently give advice about how to cope with adversity. The advice they give sounds right and is pretty much the same for everything: coping during the pandemic, delaying dementia, avoiding the slings and arrows of becoming old, getting the most out of life in a troubled world, etc.

For example, in its article on coping with chronic pain, the Cleveland Clinic notes, “Four major lifestyle factors can affect your chronic pain and help minimize it.” Four “pillars,” they call them. They are—try to contain your surprise—reduce stress, exercise, eat well, and sleep well.

AARP adds two “pillars” to promote what they call “brain health” as you age: “be social” and “keep your mind active.”

Good advice, for sure. But give me a break! As if, being told this, your eyes would be opened and you would calm down, make friends, challenge your mind, go to the gym, and give up the foods that make you happy. Just like that, you’d close your eyes in a room without a TV at night and sleep peacefully, except for getting up to pee.

This good advice is as hard to take as it is easy to give.

Make more friends? People who are alone and lonely are generally not people who find it easy to meet new people and to begin new relationships. They could go to new groups, of course, but lots of people just don’t do well in groups. Telling them they should is not very helpful.

Challenge your mind? Lots of people living with stress don’t want mental challenges. They want Hallmark movies that provide sentimental reassurance that there will be happy endings. They want baseball games that excite them and distract them from the realities they face

day-to-day. They want sermons that promise God's love.

Reduce stress? OK, maybe a stressed out person could do meditation or practice “mindfulness,” whatever that is. But for many, stress has been their lifestyle forever; and the older you get the harder it is to adopt a new lifestyle. Keep in mind that for lots of people, being stressed out is not a personal characteristic, it is a reaction to real adversity. Making a living, coping with pain and chronic illness, dealing with the loss of people you care about—it's not easy to manage this stress.

Exercise? Off the couch Mr. Potato! Hell, not all of us who don't get enough exercise are on the couch. We're busy with things we do sitting down: reading, watching films, keeping up with friends and with the world flashing by at a computer. Not to mention the fact that **most people just don't have the discipline to exercise**, and telling us that we should doesn't help. A little more guilt, some additional self-loathing.

Eating well? Come on, this is the most obese nation in the world. Besieged by advertising for delicious fast foods filled with calories and God knows what else that's bad for you. Not to mention that foods and drinks that make us happy and help us cope with stress, like ice cream and martinis, are not what we should be eating and drinking except in great moderation. Personally, I happen to like vegetables, and I've mostly given up alcohol because it contributes to gout—a very painful condition from which I suffer from time-to-time. But I also like a nice thick bacon cheese burger. And champagne, I love a good champagne. It's hard enough managing tough lives. To deprive ourselves of great food and drink—that's asking a lot.

Sleeping well? Judging from advertising on TV, at least half the people of America are searching for something to help them sleep. But—snap of the fingers—we're supposed to change our sleeping habits. No more naps. No more TV while lying in bed. Use the bed only for sex and sleep. “Sleep hygiene,” as it's known. And no more rumination while lying sleepless in the darkness of my bedroom! Right!

OK, OK. It's all good advice.

It is undoubtedly worthwhile to work at making friends, challenging your mind, managing stress, taking care of your body, and practicing sleep hygiene.

But, give me a break, this is not easy. And I wish the tip givers understood better than they seem to that good advice is easy to give but hard to take.