



White Paper #4: Leisure's Relationship to Health

Recreation and leisure activities may be one of our best methods for curbing our rising medical costs. They may be one of our best investments in health and a satisfying lifestyle. In an era in which medical costs continue to escalate and our ability to provide medical care for all segments of the population has lessened, money spent on maintaining good health pays dividends.

According to the U.S. Health Care Financing Administration, the projected health care cost of \$5,500 per citizen could be reduced significantly if more attention were placed on health and healthy living than on the treatment of illness. The Health Research Institute of Walnut Creek, California, says that costs can be reduced as much as 22% through effective wellness and fitness programs. Researchers in Australia and Canada estimate that modest levels of active recreation for adults may reduce their national health insurance costs by 10%.

The significance of recreation, physical activity and leisure to one's wellbeing was first observed by scholars in ancient Egypt and Greece. The Egyptians believed recreation was essential to one's recovery from illness and trauma. The Greeks viewed it as critical to learning and good health in their ideal: "sound mind, sound body."

The value of recreation and physical activity to health and welfare for the young helped bring the playground movement to fruition in the earlier years of this century. The fresh air camps of the early 1900s were promoted by the New York press. Scores of organizations solicited funds to send children to areas where they could exercise and enjoy the benefits of being out-of-doors. Today's needs are no less.

Perhaps we have been expecting too much from the medical professions, seeing them as the basic health care providers when, in reality, they tend to be concerned mostly with treating illness, not with developing and maintaining good health. That is the view of social researchers Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich, who argued that most of our gains in healthy living and longevity have resulted from better sanitation, cleaner water, better nutrition, safer food supplies, less hazardous workplaces, etc., not the activities of medical specialists. They believe that life expectancy is more affected by good nutrition, exercise and illness prevention than through the treatment of disease. Good health results from living in healthy environments and having good health habits, one of which is to enjoy leisure - to recreate.

There are data which suggest that regular participation in active forms of recreation is one of the best guarantees to fitness and health, that physically fit people are better able to enjoy life to its fullest, are less prone to injury and have lower rates of heart disease. A 30-minute workout every other day lowers one's blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Regular exercise also aids in the prevention and management of osteoporosis and reduces depression.

According to industrial experts, based upon studies in Cincinnati, Los Angeles and Canada, fitness and wellness programs increase productivity (7%) while decreasing absenteeism (20%). Recreation and exercise are positive forces in managing stress which reduce the need for medication, doctor's office visits and psychiatric counseling. It is no wonder that industries which have wellness and fitness programs for their employees are able to reduce the cost of their medical care insurance.

For those who dislike regimented programs of exercise, there is much to be said for recreation, for doing things for their own sake. This was the view of Dr. Paul Dudley White, the noted cardiologist who treated President Dwight Eisenhower after his heart attack. He encouraged Eisenhower to play golf for his health but not as a prescribed activity. He wanted him to do it because the President enjoyed it. White felt that some of the physiological benefits of the activity might be diminished if Eisenhower felt compelled to play the game, since the obligatory element might set in motion the same body chemistry processes associated with stress. Contemporary research has validated his observations. No living organism can exist in a stressed or flexed state indefinitely. Periods of

relaxation are necessary and the recreative experience often provides that relaxation. It is one of the best means of breaking out of routines.

Leisure and successful aging are also interrelated. Researchers tell us that senior citizens live longer, remain in their homes longer and participate more fully in community life when they have satisfying hobbies, various recreation pursuits and a positive leisure ethic. The economic benefits of these conditions are obvious; they reduce health costs as they increase the vitality and the independence of the individual.

When communities invest in parks and recreation, they invest in the health of their citizens. Parks are more than esthetic environments; they are places for relaxing, socializing and escaping the confinements of tenement houses and high-rise apartments. Industries and the military have embraced the concepts of recreation and exercise as critical elements in keeping fit, as a means of maintaining morale and increasing productivity. Recreation activities enable us to be in control of something which provides us with meaning and satisfaction. They enhance self-esteem and reinforce self confidence.

Some environments are more conducive to the recreative experience than others. Parks happen to be one of those settings in which the more positive feelings of elation and satisfaction occur, where the restorative processes associated with leisure are enhanced. Roger Ulrich, Ulf Dinberg and B.L. Driver reported that after four to six minutes of exposure to natural environments, compared to the urban experience, significantly greater recuperation was evident on all physiological measures. They argue that even short leisure contact with nature is important to many urbanites in their ability to cope with annoyances and daily responsibilities. These experiences also seem to restore their physical energy.

A similar finding was reported by Michael Blazey and Geoffrey Godbey. In observing and interviewing over 700 urban park users 55 years of age and older in 25 major parks in 5 major cities, they found that the mood or state of mind of the older resident was positively changed as a result of their park visits. Since these older citizens tended to walk to and from their homes to the park, there were also exercise benefits.

The bottom line, then, is that recreation, leisure and health are interrelated. Investments in parks, recreation and leisure services pay handsome health dividends. They contribute to our wellbeing while reducing our need for medical care and treatment. The state of our health is largely determined by how we live each day. Incorporating recreation as a part of one's daily routines not only adds pleasure to life but also helps ensure it.

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