

## Update 46

### A REVIEW OF HOW INDIVIDUALS THINK ABOUT HEALTH

The way lay people think about health and wellness influences their health and wellness-related behaviours. A recent review article<sup>1</sup> set out to integrate and synthesize the research conducted to understand lay health worldviews. The authors identify 18 themes that capture the findings about lay health worldviews (see table below).

#### Health Themes Identified In The Lay Sector

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
1. Health is the absence of illness	If physical symptoms of illness are not evident, then individual is healthy
2. Health is functional ability	If individual is able to perform daily duties, then s/he is healthy
3. Health is equilibrium	Health is the achievement of equilibrium
4. Health is freedom	Health is an enabler
5. Health is constraint	Health commands conformity
6. Health maintained through meditation or prayer	Health can be achieved through meditation or prayer
7. Health is dependent upon mental attitude	The power of positive thinking is the primary means to health
8. Work brings about health	Working, or carrying out daily activities, keeps individuals healthy
9. Health explained through religious and (supernatural causes)	Health is attributed to unexplainable
10. Health is maintained through rituals	Ritualistic practices are important in maintaining health
11. Health is a moral responsibility	It is one's moral obligation to take care of one's health
12. Health is maintained through internal	Health is maintained by regular monitoring the body (by self or physician)
13. 'Self-blame'	Health, or lack of it, is behaviourally caused
14. Health as policy and institutions	Cultural institutions share in the responsibility of its citizens' health
15. Modern way of life	Poor health is a result of modern-day factors (e.g. pollution, stress)
16. Health due to genetics	Health, or lack of it, is internal; determined by genes

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| 17. The value and priority placed on health | Health often not a priority; family responsibilities are                                   |
| 18. Disparity between health beliefs and    | Health beliefs are necessary, but not sufficient behaviours predictors of health behaviour |

The 18 themes fall into four categories:

- definitions of health,
- explanations for health,
- external and/or uncontrollable factors impinging on health, and
- the place health occupies in people's lives.

The four themes characterizing lay definitions of health included two negative views: one, being healthy equals the absence of illness, and two, health is the ability to carry out daily responsibilities. Two positive views characterize healthiness as something to strive for: (1) health is achieving harmony and equilibrium in daily life; and (2), healthiness provides the freedom to live life to its fullest. **Individuals holding positive definitions have higher standards for their health;** their ideas of optimal health surpass mere illness avoidance. **A striking feature of scholarship on 'health' is its emphasis on illness.** The abstracts and titles of many of the studies reviewed by the present authors referred to health beliefs of particular populations (e.g. Koreans, Latinos, homosexuals and blue-collar workers). Yet, much of this research has less to do with health beliefs than on illness beliefs and related behaviors.

Lay beliefs about where good health comes from are based on a variety of information sources:

- professional sector information,
- folk knowledge,
- personal knowledge and experience,
- spiritual beliefs and practices and
- other deeply held values about life and its proper priorities.

The lay themes about health cause and control reflect beliefs that have less to do with professional sector care, but focus more on personal practices and responsibilities. Lay accounts of health include using meditation, prayer or rituals to ward off illness or return to health. 'Living rightly' and maintaining spiritual health also contributes to bodily healthiness. 'Keeping going' and 'not letting down' by focusing on work and responsibilities to others (e.g. family) not only avoids illness but carries moral connotations for many people. Living cleanly and proper keeping of the body also maintains health for some lay people. Internal attribution for control of good health underlies these views.

The strong moral connotations associated with these themes reflect their disassociation from the professional sector's more objective and scientific approach to health and illness.

Three themes captured lay views about external factors affecting health. The **first** theme emphasizes access to health care services, the role of drug companies and media messages on the public's health level. The **second** theme focuses on modern environmental conditions that constrain healthiness (e.g. pollution, work environments, processed foods, and stress). These two views blame external factors, many of which could be changed through government policy, business practice, consumer education and so on. That is, lay people may believe that *someone* has control over societal health. In contrast to this perspective is the **third** fatalistic theme, attributing health to the uncontrollable factor of genetics.

The published studies examining priorities that lay people place on health show that **good health tends to be taken for granted** rather than being a daily goal. Although many lay people profess knowledge of lifestyle behaviors that the professional sector suggests for good health, researchers still find **significant discrepancies between beliefs and actual behaviors among lay people.**

Most of the studies surveyed for this literature review were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, with a few in the 1990s. However, the health care environment has changed significantly more recently. Recent surveys indicate the widespread use of alternative and complementary health strategies (Eisenberg et al., 1993, 1998). Consumers are bombarded with messages flowing from various paradigms philosophically different from traditional western biomedicine (Kleine and Hughner, 1999). Consumers have available a much wider array of health care choices and information sources due to the influx of non-biomedical lines of thought and widespread use of the Internet. This rapidly changing environment calls for new studies on lay health beliefs.

The authors conclude,

“Maintaining healthiness in the well population is an important goal for health practitioners and health policy makers. Lay views on health, what health is, how it is maintained and its place in our daily lives impact actual health behaviors. Content and origins of lay health beliefs and reasoning should be understood thoroughly to influence general societal health. Increasing awareness and use of alternative and complementary health practices means that lay beliefs require continued attention through indepth, as well as broad-based, scholarly investigations of lay health worldviews. Future studies should include lay theories about psychological health, not just physical health. For example, do lay people separate physical and mental illness or do they perceive they originate from the same causes? Future research could expand the scope of the literature reviewed by focusing on specific alternative lines of thought, as well.”

**Reference:**

1.) Hughner RS, Kleine SS. Views of Health in the Lay Sector: A Compilation and Review of How Individuals Think about Health. *Health* (London). 2004;8:395-422.