

**Pleasure:  
Your Innate Guide to Good Health  
By Michael Mannion**

The idea that pleasure can be your innate guide to good health involves no exaggeration or stretch of the imagination. This concept is based on scientific fact and will stand up to the strictest scrutiny. The exhortation to learn what pleasure is and how to incorporate it into our lives is an ebullient call to return to good sense and good health.

A wide range of speakers give workshops and talks instructing people on "how to" improve this or that aspect of their lives. And many self-help books arrive on the scene, make a big media splash, and then vanish as their unrealistic regimens and recommendations fail to help people attain their desired goals, such as changing long-standing psychological attitudes or adopting a healthier lifestyle.

However, following the path of natural pleasure works because it leads people to find pleasure in all aspects of life. The big question is how do you make pleasure the foundation of a happy and healthy life? To accomplish this, you need to know yourself, know your body and understand what are the obstacles in the way to living a pleasurable life.

### **Background**

In our allegedly hedonistic society, far more people are preoccupied with pain than with pleasure. Of course, pain relief and pain control are important subjects, especially for the aging population in the United States. Americans spend billions and billions of dollars annually on over-the-counter pain products. Despite the prevalence and seriousness of the problem, the medical establishment does a woefully inadequate job of treating severe and chronic pain. This requires additional billions to be spent on more powerful prescription drugs and visits to pain clinics.

There are over 2,000 books available today on the topic of pain, a clear indication of the extent of the problem. A search for available books about pleasure initially discovered approximately 1000 titles. However, a closer look revealed that over 90% were books that simply contained the word "pleasure" in their titles. The books were actually about many subjects other than pleasure itself-cooking, a wide range of hobbies, medical or moralistic approaches to sexuality, and pornography. Only a handful of titles looked at the phenomenon of pleasure and the role of pleasure in life.

An Internet search under the keyword "pleasure" brought up hordes of pornographic sites. The confusion between natural pleasure and secondary desires such as pornography is widespread. Yet, people long for pleasure in life as they long for nothing else.

Among the available titles written for the general reader are *The Pleasure Zone* by Stella Resnick (1998); *The Pleasure Prescription* (1996) and *Write Your Own Pleasure*

Prescription (1997) by Paul Pearsall; Pleasure: A Creative Approach to Life (1994) by Alexander Lowen, MD; Restoring the Pleasure (1994) by Clifford L. Renner, PhD; The Pleasure Principle (1991) by Chris Steele-Perkins; and Healthy Pleasures by David Sobel and Robert Ornstein (1988). Each of these titles offers something valuable to the reader but the authors do not provide a practical way to make pleasure the foundation of a healthy life.

To date, no one has written a book for the general public based on the scientifically-proven premise that pleasure promotes health. But the most up-to-date information that has appeared in highly reputable, peer-reviewed medical and scientific journals backs up such an approach. The public is aware of the importance of pleasure in life, though in an unclear way. In discussions about the application of the "pleasure principle" to a healthy lifestyle, a deep chord is struck in many. However, in general, people have lost their "first sense" for living and cannot seem to find their way to a gratifying life.

### **Pleasure as a Guide**

Life seeks out pleasure. Pleasure involves reaching out to the world. Pleasurable activities are smooth, easy, and joyful. A pleasurable life is robust, challenging, happy, flowing and healthy. Our own biology will lead us to health-promoting pleasurable activities if we pay attention to what our senses are telling us. The healthiest people are pleasure-loving, pleasure-seeking and, most importantly, pleasure-creating people.

Unfortunately, our society is characterized by a denial and fear of pleasure. And many of our so-called pleasures-smoking, excessive drinking, and over-indulgence in foods and desserts-are not really pleasures at all. They are, in fact, pseudo-pleasures, that is, substitutes for the true pleasures in life: making love, intimacy and sharing, creating, moving, learning, laughing-in other words, living. And because pseudo-pleasures do not satisfy truly, they are over-indulged in.

When all the senses are in play, we can fully relish everything that Life offers us. Pleasure as a guide to healthy living does not imply a "one size fits all" prescription or approach to life. Healthy, pleasure-creating people don't follow fads, formulas or other people's prescriptions for living. They create their own lives. For such people, pleasure is a guide to rediscovering that unbridled enthusiasm within and using it to create a rich, rewarding life at home, at work, at play, in school and in intimate relationships.

### **Pseudo-Pleasures**

Excess and self-destructive behavior are not synonymous with pleasure. Too many people are confused about this-including many medical and scientific researchers. There is an enormous body of so-called scientific data "proving" that the pursuit of pleasure leads to ruin. These researchers mistake pseudo-pleasures for true pleasure. In the mass media, there is a scarcity of information on the health-promoting impact of pleasure. Instead, TV

news shows, popular magazine articles and health books are filled with scary information that some call medical terrorism. The needless worry caused by the avalanche of partially correct and misleading medical stories in the press is itself damaging to health.

We are built for pleasure. Pleasure boosts the immune system, strengthens the heart, helps ward off depression and anxiety, and provides many more benefits to physical and mental health. In a society in which most of us do not receive even our “Minimum Daily Requirement” of pleasure, is it any surprise that we don't get the megadoses of pleasure we need to live a happy and healthy life?

When pleasure is the guide, the whole person is taken into account. There is as much emphasis placed on how a person feels about what he or she is doing as on what the person is doing. Basically, any health program must be pleasurable to achieve maximum effect.

### **Common Health Myths**

Every day, Americans are assaulted by an confusing barrage of information about healthy living: fiber fights colon cancer, fiber doesn't work against colon cancer; drink alcohol, don't drink alcohol; eat less fat, eat more fat; don't use butter, use butter; get a mammogram, don't get mammograms; take estrogens, don't take estrogens. This cacophony of conflicting opinions is not just confusing; it can be harmful to an individual's well-being. False advertising and erroneous messages do great harm.

Let's look at eating as one example of a vital activity that is innately pleasurable but that has become distorted in our society. Recently, evidence has been mounting that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's “food pyramid” is actually a guide to unhealthy eating that leads to obesity. Overfed Americans are intensely focused today on food.

In most societies, preparing foods and eating meals are part of a pleasurable and emotional group activity with family and friends. In the U.S., too many people skip breakfast altogether as they rush off to work and dine alone at lunch on junk food eaten on the run. Or they have their meals at “power breakfasts” or business lunches and dinners where commerce is king, not pleasure. Few regularly sit down to a relaxing, enjoyable dinner with loved ones or friends.

After regularly eating unhealthy foods in an unhealthy manner, many people then try to lose weight with a dizzying array of diets. For too many people, “healthy” living involves deprivation. The diets they follow for awhile are rigorous, rigid and relentless. Every meal then becomes an ordeal. Who would not dread a life-long regimen of denial? It is no wonder people cannot stick with these well-meaning, but poorly conceived, programs. What a mess! A life guided by pleasure would not resemble this in any way, shape or form.

When guided by pleasure, a positive approach is taken. Rather than focusing on abstinence and deprivation, people emphasize satisfaction and fulfillment. In many health programs, every activity requires a great effort. With a “pleasure program,” every activity is an

opportunity to experience joy and delight. And pleasure pays off. Enjoyable meals are also healthier meals. People digest their foods more easily and absorb vitamins, minerals and nutrients more effectively when food is eaten in a pleasing environment.

## **The Pleasure Lifestyle**

What is “The Pleasure Lifestyle?” What would it look like and how would it work?

The latest research into joy shows that simple pleasures have a profound positive impact on our health. Loving, touching, massage and gratifying sex help prevent illness and speed recovery from illness in people of all ages. In addition, pleasure has a positive effect on the aging process. The chemical messengers of good feelings-endorphins, serotonin, and neurotransmitters-are stimulated by the activities that are essential elements of the pleasure lifestyle. Learning how to create peak joyful experiences will bring great health benefits.

Pleasure has always played a critical role in human life-in love, sex, work and play. Unfortunately, America was shaped in its infancy by the anti-pleasure philosophy of the Puritans. This hostility to pleasure was reinforced with the rise of the Protestant work ethic and the mercenary spirit of capitalism. However, over the past 30 years, there has been increasing appreciation among many people of the critical role pleasure plays in physical and emotional health, creativity, happiness in life, vitality and longevity.

Sadly, most of us harbor within a “hidden saboteur” that resists pleasure in life. This behavior is usually unconscious and difficult to overcome. In many ways, we are all subtly influenced, and sometimes even consciously trained, to resist pleasure. This is done by parents, medical professionals, educators, religious leaders and other authority figures. Over time, a large number of people become unable even to feel pleasure. It is a great challenge, but not a complete impossibility, to unlearn the anti-pleasure messages we have all received.

## **The Chemistry of Pleasure**

A variety of activities produce biochemical changes in our bodies that are integral aspects of pleasure. There is a great deal of investigation into the chemicals of pleasure. Endorphins are the most widely known “pleasure chemicals.” These pleasurable activities set off a cascade of chemicals of pleasure. Unpleasurable activities also create an entirely different chemistry of their own. The body's chemistry is intimately involved with improving health and preventing disease. But biochemistry is not the be-all-and-end-all when it comes to understanding pleasure, though at present our medical science seems to be stuck in this belief. Many other factors are involved in creating a life guided by natural pleasure.

## **The Practice of Pleasure**

There is a continuum of pleasure in life that involves all the senses and all the systems of the body. From the pleasure that results from the relief of pain, through the wide variety of emotional and physical pleasures life offers, to the intense pleasures of sexual love, health entails incorporating the full spectrum of pleasure into one's life. By adding natural pleasures to daily life, each person can fulfill his or her pleasure potential.

But how do we learn to move toward pleasure, rather than only away from pain; to embrace healthy pleasures rather than struggle to control “bad” habits? Ineffective coping mechanisms such as smoking, over-eating or excessive drinking or drug use can be replaced with natural pleasures. The relish for life that natural pleasures engender provides the motivation and vitality needed to live a life informed by joie de vivre.

Those who allow pleasure to be their guide experience excitement, enthusiasm and inspiration. They find that repeated exposure to pleasure softens their hard edges, makes them more resilient, flexible, generous, altruistic and empathetic. Many daily activities enhance pleasure in life.

## **Breathing**

There is no more basic activity than breathing, yet, in most people, natural breathing is impaired. How we breathe profoundly affects the autonomic nervous system and determines whether we experience vigorous biological pleasure impulses and sensations or more muted emotions and perceptions. Breathing plays a pivotal role in whether we feel anxious or gratified, jubilant or despondent, strong or fatigued, sexually turned on or turned off.

Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) and other biomedical investigations have demonstrated that breathing helps control blood pressure; increases bioenergy; enhances sexual pleasure; improves mental functioning and learning; reduces pain and muscle tension; as well as helping to fight stress, fatigue, insomnia, headaches and many other common ailments.

Deep breathing clears the mind and relaxes the body, which is why it is at the core of many forms of meditation. Experts suggest that we all re-learn how to breathe naturally like babies—slowly, fully and easily. Relaxed, regular breathing is also essential to the full perception of pleasure. Breathing plays a critical role in the creation of the body's pleasure chemicals, the endorphins. Full breathing is a way of “breathing for pleasure.” The inhibition of breathing, which begins in early childhood, is one of the most powerful ways in which people block or diminish their emotions and sensations.

## **Moving**

Our bodies were made to move. And this is true whether we are nine months or ninety

years old. For those leading a sedentary lifestyle, it is never too soon-and never too late-to begin to move, to become more active. Walking, hiking, running, biking, swimming and many other activities have great physical and emotional benefits. These activities produce even greater benefits when they are performed with pleasure, and not in a mechanical way out of a sense of duty. Exercising in a gym is usually good for you but climbing to the top of a hill near home and enjoying the sunrise or sunset is better for you emotionally and physically.

Movement-whether through exercise at home or in the gym or hiking in the woods-increases vitality, enhances endurance, strengthens the heart, and produces many other beneficial results. In addition, movement reduces stress, helps fight allergy symptoms, decreases appetite, helps counteract anxiety and depression, controls blood sugar and helps the body in its struggle against many other common ailments and conditions.

Movement helps to increase a person's sense of optimism and hopefulness, self-confidence and self-image. In addition, movement increases the sexual drive and the enjoyment of sex. Many factors play a role here, such as the increased endorphin levels, higher levels of bioenergy, and the great elan and joy in living that come from simply moving freely.

Many familiar ways of moving can help increase pleasure in life, as well as many movement techniques, such as Feldenkrais, Alexander, yoga or Tai Chi. All healthy movement increases vitality and the joy of living.

## **Laughing**

From the Bible to Patch Adams, the healing power of humor has been recognized around the world. Norman Cousins helped to usher in a new era in the appreciation of the power of laughter with his book *Anatomy of an Illness*. The 1998 movie *Patch Adams* became a blockbuster hit-despite bad reviews-based on the wide appeal of the main character, a physician for whom humor was central to healing.

Humor has a powerful impact on pain. Laughter has been demonstrated to relieve pain almost immediately and the pain relief may continue for hours after the laughter has subsided. This has been of great benefit to people who suffer from chronic pain from a wide range of causes. Scientific and clinical data show that laughter also strengthens the immune function, helps relieve tension, fights stress, minimizes panic attacks, defuses anger, counteracts depression and anxiety, and has an overall positive effect on wellness and health.

There are many ways in which humor and laughter increase the pleasure of being alive and how to use laughter to experience a more joyful life. Humor helps bring perspective to a person's life and perspective brings a sense of balance that is essential to good physical and emotional health.

## **Touching**

Touch has a powerful effect on humans, from infancy onward. Initially, we experience most of the world through the sense of touch-our selves, our mothers, the natural world of plants and animals, playmates, friends, and lovers. Touch is critical to the newborn, infants and children. Babies who are held regularly-even if only by a neutral party-grow faster and are healthier than those who are not touched frequently. There is startling evidence from EKGs that even people who are in a coma respond positively to being touched.

Deep emotions are expressed silently through touching. There is great pleasure in certain forms of touching and great solace in others. Touching also helps relieve physical pain and emotional distress. From ancient religious and medical traditions the world over, we have learned of the healing power of touch. Today, Barbara Brennan's "Hands of Light" and Dolores Krieger's "Therapeutic Touch" are but two examples of modern versions of healing hands.

Massage is another form of touch that promotes healing and wellness. It is estimated that there are over one million massage therapists in the U.S. today, practicing many different techniques. Americans are turning to these healers for relief from stress, headaches, chronic pain, emotional worries and other problems of modern living. Healing touch restores the flow of energy in the body and brings on soothing pleasurable sensations.

Touch improves the circulation and lymphatic function; helps fight fatigue; and enhances the body's immune system. A cascade of the body's pleasure chemicals are stimulated by simply touching. In addition to the healing and health-promoting aspects of touch, the pure sensuality of loving touch between partners is essential to a fulfilling life. Loving touch deepens intimacy and heightens sexual gratification profoundly.

## **Loving**

According to the lyrics of the great jazz classic, Nature Boy, "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return." From the New Testament to The Beatles the message is the same-the power and primacy of love. Love is essential to happiness and health. Studies show consistently that loving people are healthier overall, experience less illness in life and live longer. They have stronger immune systems and experience less heart disease, stress, chronic pain and other conditions.

Loving people also experience a more intense sexual life. This is due in part to their better state of health but also because loving people are better able to give and receive pleasure. In general, they are more in touch with their emotions and more aware of the emotions of their partners. Loving people are frequently more physically active and physical activity has been shown to improve one's sex life greatly.

Sex is a crucial part of loving and pleasure in life. But a healthy sex life has additional benefits beyond the pleasure of the moment. A good sex life improves self-confidence,

reduces stress, brings pain relief to those with chronic pain, fights insomnia and promotes an optimistic, hopeful sense of well-being. Studies from the field of PNI amply demonstrate the healing powers of the pleasures and passions of love, from first falling in love, through growing physical delight, to a deepening intimacy between partners.

There is evidence that love increases creativity, sharpens the intellect, enhances intuition and makes life worth living. In a life guided by pleasure, the healing force we call love is the foundation.

## **Savoring**

The dictionary defines the verb to savor as “to appreciate fully, to enjoy and relish.” Breathing, moving, laughing, touching and loving are all integral to a full, vigorous life. Becoming attuned to one's senses-and ordering and shaping one's life to please those senses-is integral to savoring the pleasures of being alive. Colors, textures, sounds, fragrances and flavors all combine to create the world we inhabit. And we can use them to shape a wonderfully aesthetic world that enhances the pleasures of life.

An aesthetic life is not something rarefied or available only to the wealthy or the privileged. It is there for all who have the imagination. A life without aesthetics is truly an anesthetized life, one in which pleasure is muted by a powerful anesthesia. Imagination is a powerful tool that can be used to create opportunities to develop the senses to the fullest. The small pleasures of daily life can add up to great joy.

At the beginning of this article, we looked at the connection between pleasure in life and food. It was noted that our ways of eating have become largely unpleasurable. Yet, in a meal, all aspects of pleasure come into play.

## **Eat, Drink and Be Merry!**

The experience of pleasure usually creates a new way of looking at life, one that can be summed up in the phrase, Abundance, Not Deprivation. Deprivation is an ineffective method of reaching health and happiness. It simply does not work for most people. This is clearly obvious in the failure of the majority of diets. Most diets are presented in the negative: avoid this food, don't eat that food. In these cases, eating becomes a form of punishment. Most people can eat anything they want and still be healthy. Eating becomes a pleasure and reward in and of itself.

It is obvious to all that a meal served with attention to aesthetics and eaten in a pleasing environment is enjoyed more on a subjective level than the same meal served under less appealing circumstances.

But the latest research proves something even more important-the pleasurable environment surrounding a meal has objective benefits as well as subjective ones. For



example, the body absorbs more nutrients when the meal is served in pleasurable surroundings than when the same foods are eaten in a neutral or unpleasant environment. One study done in a hospital setting showed that patients who were served their meals in a pleasurable manner healed more quickly and were discharged from the hospital sooner than patients who received the exact same food in an institutional setting.

Anyone can have fun and learn to create “pleasure recipes” that feature a great variety of different colors, aromas, flavors and textures. The psychology of eating is also a critical element. Foods must be enjoyed to be nutritious. And to be enjoyed, foods must be in harmony with each individual's personal and culturally acquired tastes.

A meal offers a simple example of how to practice The Pleasure Lifestyle because all of the senses come into play. Touch is involved in the selection and preparation of the food. Vision is involved in the preparation of the setting and the presentation of the meal. Candles and lowered lights greatly increase the enjoyment and satisfaction of a meal. A rich visual feast can be created to complement the actual meal. The sense of smell, the most primitive and powerful of the senses, is essential to a full enjoyment of the meal. In fact, the sense of smell contributes to 80% of the power of the related sense of taste. Hearing comes into play in the selection of music that can be used to enhance a meal.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of a life guided by pleasure is always positive and not negative. The emphasis is on “Do” and not on “Don't.” This way of life encourages individuals to say “YES!” exuberantly and not “no” begrudgingly. Experts at respected scientific organizations in the United States and Europe have published peer-reviewed papers, proving that pleasure promotes health. Research into the biology of pleasure in all aspects of life further grounds this suggestion in solid fact.

Pleasure is the key to health and a pleasurable life is achievable by all of us. Exploration, discovery, adventure, variety and excitement are basics in a life guided by pleasure. They are all part of feeling alive and satisfied. Each person needs gratification in life to be healthy. And, when we are gratified, we also tend to be more empathetic, loving and caring. Pleasure opens people to a world of delights and human relationships they may not even yet have dreamed of. Once they experience what this new world has to offer, they will want to keep coming back for more.

So what's the problem? If pleasure is such a valuable guide to living, why are not more people living that way? The answer to that question is difficult to hear and challenging to accept. There is an old Buddhist saying that is applicable here: “Everyone knows the weak overcomes the strong and the soft the hard. But no one knows how to live it.” The second part of this article will look at the obstacles in the way to creating a pleasurable life.

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