



The healthy aging Corner

Part of Parke County's Healthy Aging and Cancer Preventive Initiative

Reading Your Way to Better Health

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Exercising your reading skills might pack more punch than another trip to the gym

Picture yourself sitting in your favorite chair, reading a gripping novel. The story grips you because it holds just the right amount of details and gaps. When the young lady asks the gentleman what time it is, you fill in the blank as to what his time piece looks like. You do it all the time – this interaction between you and the text. Every text has gaps waiting to be filled. Reading, then, is an act of filling.

Now I know you've been told that a sedentary lifestyle is a sure ticket to losing your good health. That is why pointing to reading as the secret to better health could really jeopardize my credibility. But my point is this. *We don't spend enough time thinking about the quality of our reading – the way we interact with text.* And I have growing concerns that deficiencies in this department can prove health-threatening. Folks are reading every day about "breakthroughs" that are bound to bring them better health. We encounter impressive claims, using phrases like "proven", "guaranteed", "no risk", which make us feel like if we don't act right away, we have somehow failed.

What we need to avoid is failure in our reading. *Failure in reading, wrote Professor Wolfgang Iser, occurs when all the gaps get filled in with your own preconceptions – with what you believed before you picked up the text.* Success is only achieved when you are willing to fill the gaps with new ways of seeing, stimulated by the text.

But here's the problem. When we read a news article about health, most of us consider what we read as truth without questioning its merit. And if the findings fit with our preconceived notions, we accept them immediately. For example, you read a report that says obesity is a major problem associated with an increased risk for diabetes and heart attack. This likely fits the view you held before you picked up the article. Therefore, any gaps between you and the text are obligingly filled in by you with your long-held views. You ask no hard questions. There's no chance for change. But is this notion of obesity as "bad" really universally correct? Could it be that at a certain age, say 70 years, being a little fatter means that when you fall you bounce and roll rather than break a bone? In other words, is there eventually an age at which there's a positive payoff for being chubby?

To understand anything more deeply - even bouncing and rolling - we must ask questions. It's all about the quality of our questions. But what if you are not an expert in medicine or nutrition or the physiology of exercise? When you read an article about these topics, are you really qualified to wisely choose what to believe, what not to believe?

To make better health decisions, you need to work on carefully crafting your beliefs. Fifty years ago, the mathematician and master problem solver George Polya had something to say about this. I call his advice 'Polya's Big 2' and I preach it regularly to my students. First, train your mind to get the most accurate meaning from every experience. That means when you listen to someone's story – written or spoken – make sure you get the story straight. Second, and perhaps less obvious, choose carefully the experiences from which you develop your beliefs. If you get your information from people who muddle facts, you will find your level of understanding hovering just slightly above the scrapheap. You need to get your health advice from sources you can trust. You need to narrow your region of search, developing your own "Golden Rolodex" of health professionals and other sources you turn to for information that makes a difference.

To summarize, I think the right kind of reading can put you on the fast track to better health. Strengthening *the way* you read can really shape up your new and improved perceptions of what it takes to live a healthy life. Reading might not burn many calories, but it's an exercise that gets you more actively engaged in promoting your own health. And that's tough to beat.

Sources: Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1978. Trefil, James. Why Science? New York: Teachers College Press, 2007.

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