

BY DALE FLETCHER, M.S.

Faith and HEALTH Connection

Physical and Spiritual Care for Your Heart

What's the first thing you think of when someone says that you should exercise to keep your heart healthy? I bet you think of the importance of physical activity... of walking or jogging or lifting weights or of regularly performing some other form of physical activity. Would you need to be prompted to think about spiritual exercises to maintain a healthy heart? Let's take a look at both areas—the physical and the spiritual dimensions of heart care.

What the Research Says: Most experts would agree that to take care of your heart these behaviors would be near the top of the list: exercise regularly, eat well, don't smoke and manage stress. In 2007 the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association updated their joint guidelines on physical activity. The American Institute of Stress provides recommendations on how to effectively manage stress. The American Heart Association provides tools to stop smoking. The US Department of Agriculture gives us great tools on healthy eating and physical activity at www.mypyramid.gov.

The medical literature is full of material that indicates the importance of spiritual care for one's heart. Psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote in *The Human Mind*, "Love is the basic need of human nature, for without it, life is disrupted emotionally, mentally, spiritually and physically." He once gave a lecture on mental health and was answering questions from the audience. One of the people in the audience asked, "What would you advise a person to do if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on? Consult a psychiatrist?" He replied, "Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something to help that person."

When we use the talents and gifts that God has given us to serve others, our health is affected in a positive way. "You can serve friends or strangers. You can serve visibly or anonymously. You can serve in small projects or grand proposals. You can serve in your home or on the other side of the world. But if you want to be healthy, serve." This was written by Richard A. Swanson, M.D., in his book *A Minute of Margin*. Letting go of past hurts and forgiving others has also been shown to be important for health. In *The Healing Connection*, Harold Koenig, M.D., writes "The research indicates those who can't get past these hurt and angry feelings of spiritual discontent may soon be in big trouble in terms of their emotional and physical health."

What the Bible Says: God provides us lots of guidance on the value of various spiritual exercises that affect our heart. A few are as follows:

"Spend your time and energy in training yourself for spiritual fitness. Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important for it promises a reward in both this life and the next."
1 Timothy 4:7-8

"Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life."
Proverbs 4:23

"And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."
Mark 12: 30-31

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."
Ephesians 4:31-32

"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony."
Colossians 3:14

What You Can Do: Do your best to follow the guidelines by the organizations listed above to care for your heart in the physical realm.

Be physically active

Eat well

Manage your stress effectively

Don't smoke

I encourage you to make a commitment to address the spiritual dimension of caring for your heart as well. Take a few minutes and examine what you do on a regular basis that might be impacting in a positive way on your spiritual heart or your inner self. Consider making these four spiritual practices a regular part of your "exercise" routine.

Receive God's Love

Love God

Love and Serve Others

Forgive

God loves you and He wants you to receive this love deep in your heart. One of the best ways you can learn to receive His love is to know Him better through reading the Bible. The more you get to know God and receive and experience His love, the more you'll want to love Him. Just as another person experiences your love when you give them your time God loves it when you spend one-on-one time with Him. You can do this in quiet prayer, by spending time reading the Bible and by meditating on His nature. Love and serve others. Are you regularly using the special gifts that God has given you to serve others and to make a difference in their lives? Identify a need someone has and make it a point to help meet that need. Do you know someone who is struggling in an aspect of their life? Reach out to them. Finally, search your heart to determine if you're harboring any bitterness toward someone, God or yourself? You're really hurting yourself when you choose not to forgive. Try your best to release any bitterness you have and forgive.

There are many behaviors in addition to physical exercise that you can engage in to care for your heart. Some are physical and others are spiritual. As Paul writes in the book of 1st Timothy, I would agree that the spiritual exercises are more important than the physical. When we understand how God loves us and allow Him to fill us with that love it becomes easier to love, serve and forgive others. These exercises are all part of giving your heart a total workout.

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Dale Fletcher is a speaker and wellness coach who lives in Charlotte, NC.

He writes and conducts workshops on the link between faith and health.

Connect with him at www.faithandhealthconnection.org

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