

What My Mom Taught Me About Health

By Maddy Dychtwald
March 7, 2012

When I got the phone call from my stepdad, I was shaken to my core and honestly thought, “This is it.”

My mother wasn’t doing well, he reported. She was so tired that she couldn’t lift her head off the couch. “This has been going on for a while now, but I thought it would pass,” he confided. Frantic with worry, he was afraid she might be dying and was reaching out for my help.

What had happened? My mom was 82, an independent, strong-minded, optimistic woman who enjoys a game of duplicate bridge and her regular four o’clock shot of Jack Daniels. She hates physical exercise and considers bridge her “competitive sport” of choice – “I’m getting mental flexibility,” she always jokes. “I don’t need to do any of that other stuff.” Consequently, she had put on quite a few pounds in recent years but mostly pooh-pooed it.

She also pooh-pooed doctors. “I don’t trust them,” she’d say. “There’s really nothing wrong with me, so why see a doctor.” And so she didn’t.

This turned out to be one of the reasons for my stepdad’s panic: My mom was so anti-doctor that she didn’t have one. He didn’t know whom to call for help.

When we’re younger, our parents set examples for us to follow and teach us the fundamental lessons that shape how we’ll live our lives. As we get older, they again serve as examples – too often of what not to do. My mom’s recent experience taught me three important lessons about protecting and preserving health and well-being as we age:

Find a doctor you can talk to. It’s so important to find that doctor who will actually have conversations with you, who will regard you as an active partner in your healthcare rather than a malfunctioning cog that gums up his or her medical practice. So-called “bedside manner” becomes a critical skill when a patient needs to be able to ask difficult questions and discuss potential diagnostic tools that the doctor can use to pinpoint and manage your medical issues. A doctor who can listen well and answer your questions and concerns honestly is an essential part of maintaining your health as you age.

I made a bunch of phone calls and turned up a close friend whose mother lives in the same town as my mother, and had a doctor whom she loved. My friend’s mother is also a sharp-minded, strong-willed woman. I immediately scheduled an appointment for my mom, and with the personal referral, the doctor was able to see her within a few days.

Get all the tests. Prevention and early detection are critical to your health. Make yourself aware of the diagnostic tools that are available and ask your doctor to take advantage of them. As you get older, your physical equilibrium is much more sensitive; little imbalances that you could shrug off when you were younger can now knock you for a loop.

My mother had a complete workup done to get a baseline measurement. From x-rays of her lungs to an MRI of her brain, from bone density tests to a full blood analysis, she was surveyed from top to tail. It turned out that she was borderline diabetic, something that can zap your energy when you're 82. Under the supervision of her new doctor, she immediately changed her diet and even began taking daily walks. As a result, she promptly began to regain her energy...and even lost a few pounds.

At the same time, the doctor performed the memory test for dementia, which my mom passed with flying colors. It turned out that she had been petrified of losing her memory. Her own mother had suffered from dementia and this haunted her as it does so many of us. As a result of getting the official reassurance that she was mentally A-okay, she began to feel more confident about herself and her mental acuity. And that confidence really shines through – not just in her bridge game, where she just won a lifetime achievement award -- but in the way she has really taken charge of her life. She's so much more cognitively present - and the more "there" she is, the more I want to make sure she stays that way.

Attitude plays a huge role. This is the most important lesson of all. I could cite studies about the impact of "positive affect" until the cows come home but what it comes down to is this: You've got to be pro-active about your health. Don't just let it ride or, like my mom, deliberately ignore it. You've got to take charge and do so in a positive way. Your life is literally what you make of it – and that's especially true as we get older.

The good news about my mom: Three weeks later, she was on a plane to Hawaii to go to a family wedding. As for me, I made an appointment with my own doctor for my annual physical exam.

Maddy Dychtwald is a highly acclaimed author, public speaker, and co-founder of Age Wave. She has spent more than 25 years deeply involved in exploring and forecasting the profound business, lifestyle and cultural implications of population aging. As a public speaker, she has addressed business, government, and community leaders worldwide. She is the author of three books: "[INFLUENCE: How Women's Rising Economic Power will Transform Our World for the Better](#)," "[Cycles: How We Will Live, Work, and Buy](#)" and an illustrated children's book, "[Gideon's Dream: A Tale of New Beginnings](#)" (co-authored with her husband, Ken, and Dave and Grace Zabolski.) Maddy lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with Ken and her two children.

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