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Total Health: Dr Heather L. Herington On How We Can Optimize Our Mental, Physical, Emotional, & Spiritual Wellbeing

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> Pausing: It’s so easy to keep moving forward when what we really need is to slow down, take a breath and reflect. One way to help this is place your tongue between your upper palate and teeth and focus on the nostrils and the air coming through them, and drop your jaw. This can have a profound effect on your heart rate and blood pressure. I am always moving too fast, doing too many things at once and just stopping, following my breath for 30 seconds can be a big deal.

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Often when we refer to wellness, we assume that we are talking about physical wellbeing. But one can be physically very healthy but still be unwell, emotionally or mentally. What are the steps we can take to cultivate optimal wellness in all areas of our life; to develop Mental, Physical, Emotional, & Spiritual Wellbeing?

As a part of our series about “How We Can Do To Cultivate Our Mental, Physical, Emotional, & Spiritual Wellbeing”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Heather L Herington.

Dr. Heather L Herington NMD is a licensed naturopathic medical doctor, having graduated from Bastyr University in 1987 after earning her *undergraduate degree in Biology at Dalhousie University. Her podcast, Dr. Heather Uncensored, is based on her two nonfiction books, Surviving a Viral Pandemic through the lens of a naturopathic medical doctor and the upcoming Transforming Trauma, a drugless and creative path to healing PTS. She interviews both top doctors and scientists and laypeople that share facts and experiences to optimize healing. An engaging speaker and astute workshop leader, she also writes essays, novels, librettos, and creates radio plays based on challenging health conditions that demand a true body-mind investigation.*

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Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?

I was born in Toronto and raised in Montreal in a privileged, Anglo household. Early on I developed a love of accents and languages, having attended French nursery school. After that it got complicated.

Both of my parents had post-traumatic stress, or PTS, though from veritably opposite class backgrounds. My mother was an orphan from Scotland who moved to Pittsburgh to live with an aunt she hated. My father was a naval officer in World War 2; his ship was torpedoed in the South Pacific, splitting in half. He was a shy man, more at home with 200 in the audience (i.e. Kiwanis) than one to one. I adored him.

Whilst a caring and musically oriented family, my mother was easily angered, volatile often sharing stories of grief from her childhood — the day before she was born, her eldest sister fell down the basement stairs and died, leaving her mother so grief-stricken her father became the primary care giver. This sheds some light on my mother's life-long preference for males, and the driving force behind my early onset feminism. In fairness to my mom she gave birth to three boys, the first two of whom died within a week while the surviving child, my brother, had terrible allergies, which often required a journey to the nearest hospital in the middle of the night.

My own brush with death came at three years old as I was eating cake at a birthday party. My appendix burst leading to peritonitis, coloring me a distinct shade of green and the prediction I would be dead within a week. (My poor mother!) Years later, hypnosis made me aware of how much her unconscious wrath had terrified me growing up. Perhaps it was out of guilt that she had raised me on "rich" food to which I would become allergic later on. On the positive side, I was rewarded with an early glimpse into the body-mind connection.

I was raped at the tender age of 16. According to friends, my personality changed overnight, from fun and easy going to high anxiety and depression. I became extremely sensitive to those around me and hated my life. After first turning to entheogens (LSD and mescaline) I scoured Eastern texts, hoping to determine the meaning of life and somehow ameliorate my emotional pain. I made sure to do yoga and meditate and would finally be chosen to go to India with WUSC (World University Service of Canada). Dance and playing classical guitar provided some comfort, but my ever-present anxiety and depression clouded my horizons for years after the rape, most likely because I kept it to myself, not trusting anyone.

Let me finish this backstory on a positive note. One Halloween my mother dressed up as Hazel — remember that show played by Shirley Baxter? One kid ran home, yelling, "Hazel works for the Heringtons!" That's a great memory and reminds me she passed on her love of comedy and musicals, proudly sharing stories of her Uncle Tommy, a singer, dancer, actor, back in Glasgow.

What or who inspired you to pursue your career? We'd love to hear the story.

I fled my hometown at 17 to put as much distance between civilization and myself as possible, and regroup. In time, I homesteaded on Cape Breton Island, built an 8-sided log house after a Navajo design and had my daughter. There I deepened my love of plants and nature, and when I left my husband, went back to university to get my BSc in Biology (with a minor in Dance Theatre). During summers I worked at the seaside Camp Discovery with psychiatrists and psychologists. The director, writer, psychologist and sexologist, Eleanor Hamilton (Ranger) had been friends with Wilhelm Reich, the psychiatrist who initially coined the term "the body-mind connection" and who would die in prison for his outspoken beliefs. Ranger ran the Hamilton School, (in Maine, like Summerhill in England I believe), and her influence, using imagery to discover the physical and mental/emotional links of illness to connect the mind and body, along with my love for medicinal plants, led me to naturopathic rather than conventional medicine.

None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Was there a particular person who you feel gave you the most help or encouragement to be who you are today? Can you share a story about that?

Yes, Georgie Sears, mother of 12, whom I acknowledged in my first non-fiction book, Surviving A Viral Pandemic Through The Lens Of A Naturopathic Doctor. While attending Mount Allison University I lived on a backwoods road down from her farm abutting the Tantramarre Marsh; she became my second mother as we drew on nature together. She would lie down by a cranberry bog, and under the din of ducks, proudly exclaim, “Who would want to smoke marijuana when they can have this?” Georgie was unconditional love. One of her eight daughters called us spirit sisters. I loved that. There was another woman, Nicole Rolland, who also gave me unconditional love, and between the two of them, I stopped hating myself, letting go of the deeply instilled belief that, on some level, I was to blame for having been violated. Tapping into their kindness and joie de vivre, I slowly pulled myself out of my underlying depression.

Can you share the funniest or most interesting mistake that occurred to you in the course of your career? What lesson or take away did you learn from that?

There were, in fact, two, as I was an extremely earnest, young doctor and single mother, hoping to change the world. This slowly broke down as I saw the irony of various situations. In my naturopathic medical clinic in Vancouver, BC, I had a colon therapist who was head of AA (Alcoholic Anonymous) for BC/Yukon and a strict vegetarian. One day, our new receptionist bought a bottle of milk on her lunch break, leaving it exposed on her desk. The colon therapist walked by, asking snappily: “You drink milk?” to which the startled receptionist responded without missing a beat: “Yes, and I also drink beer.” She didn’t return the next day.

Another time, I walked into my chiropractic friend’s office up the block. There was an old couple at the reception deck literally begging for an appointment yet to no avail. Suddenly someone — she turned out to be the doctor’s girlfriend — was heard shouting from the back of the clinic before running past us out the front door. The old man looked at the receptionist and timidly asked: “Might that be a cancellation?”

I learned early on that a sense of humor can play an essential role in healing.

I should mention that not long ago a psychotherapist and friend criticized me for using comic characters in my health-oriented podcast based on my two non-fiction books. I have to ask: how can we heal completely if at some point we don’t turn to humor to lighten the load? Humor can put terrible situations in a new light to my mind, and can provide a significant pathway to empower us to move forward. Obviously not at the onset of a traumatic event but upon reflection so we aren’t sucked dry.

But if you are looking for a mistake, last year I used Zoom in a first-time consultation, something I hadn’t done before. I learned a few things including that unless I’m with a previous client, telemedicine isn’t for me: I need to be sitting face to face with a new patient to pick up the nuances of body language and facial expression. For the kind of work I have done over the last three decades the requisite proximity also allows me to use imagery to track symptoms and I find it very difficult to do this over a computer. I am sure some people are good at this but I’m not.

Is there a particular book that made a significant impact on you? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?

Toxic Psychiatry by Dr. Peter Breggin. Due to the earlier influences of Camp Discovery, my practice essentially focused on mental and emotional imbalance so when the Archdiocese of Vancouver sent me a woman who had been sexually abused by a priest and subsequently refused medication, thereby stipulating a drugless approach, I felt I knew what to do. After this initial experience, I started to see so many survivors (referred by psychologists, MDs, NDs and so on) that I started a group retreat — Moving the Pelvis to Healing (later shortened to Moving to Healing when people’s brow would furrow ☺) –on Galiano Island, a short ferry ride from Vancouver. Breggin’s book confirmed and cemented my belief in the various ways my patients could gain mental and emotional balance without the use of psychoactive chemicals. This led to my two-pronged approach — balance the biochemistry naturally and tell or revise the story behind the traumatic event. Naturopathic medicine and the expressive arts are a very powerful duo for trauma recovery.

Can you share your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Why does that resonate with you so much?

I think Socrates nailed it in “Know Thyself” which can be expanded to “Own

Your Trauma." In transforming trauma, it's paramount to recognize and understand any triggers that are at play in order to let them go and move forward. When I was a teenager a big takeaway from Eastern texts was to observe yourself. When you can do that without judgment, keeping an open mind with respect to yourself and others, while allowing the space and love needed for transformation, you can find the peace and joy that can define liberation. No matter what happens, who you are in relationship with, whether personally or at work, you are tapping into a depth of resolve and truth that is difficult to uproot. When you couple that with creative expression it seems there is nothing a person can't do.

What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now? How do you think that might help people?

I recently published and am now doing PR for my book, Surviving a Viral Pandemic through the lens of a naturopathic medical doctor. I am finishing up Transforming Trauma, a drugless and creative path to healing PTS and continuing my podcast, Dr. Heather Uncensored. I also have a second novel to finish, The Sting Of Absence, that includes yellow fever and smallpox while spanning three hundred years of one family's pursuit of closure. I believe that it's super important to understand our selves in the context of history. My creative work always seems to have something to do with health and healing. (My first novel, Flawed, is about a mentally ill artist.) My husband is a composer, we have written three musicals and will be soon starting a fourth. COVID hit so The Old Show and Meshugeneh, the Musical are on the backburner but I hope to promote our children's musical, the Calling Hour that has been performed in several schools in Los Angeles. Its aim is to help traumatized and/or nature-deprived children connect with nature. It has been one of the highlights in my life to watch underserved children who probably have never entered a forest in their lives sing songs so excitedly and with such understanding of how nature can not just teach life lessons but can comfort in a time of distress. With the fact children are experiencing a lot of mental and emotional problems due to isolation and masks now, I hope to get it to a wider audience sooner than later.

I am expanding my one-woman show of what happened that changed my life's course and ended my dream at that time of performing. I have never let go of that dream and am grateful now to be a member of SAG-AFTRA.

Regarding COVID, I use my podcast to share my concern that there is basically no talk about prevention, eating organically, and actually healing underlying conditions like asthma and diabetes. Once you experience healing without drugs it's such a revelation. I healed myself of Graves Disease without having my thyroid cut out or irradiated so I know personally what can be done without turning to harsher treatments if a person is committed.

OK, thank you for all of that. Let's now shift to the core focus of our interview. In this interview series we'd like to discuss cultivating wellness habits in four areas of our lives, Mental wellness, Physical wellness, Emotional wellness, & Spiritual wellness. Let's dive deeper into these together. Based on your research or experience, can you share with our readers three good habits that can lead to optimum mental wellness? Please share a story or example for each.

(1) As I mentioned earlier, "Know oneself." Take time to center every day through meditation, walking in nature, doing breath-work and so on. I can't start my day without it. When you give yourself time to pause, to center, the mind becomes not only much quieter but it offers ideas and avenues to explore to go deeper, no matter what you are doing. I could never have had the kind of practice I did– all day listening to stories of abuse — without taking the time to center and tap into the deeper mystery.

(2) Tap into your creativity. This is every person's birthright. My thyroid is doing well after having Graves partly due to singing every day. There is a Russian doctor who believes this too. I was told as a child I couldn't sing but I freed myself and last year recorded my first song, "Shout Me Too," from my solo show, "Hidden." (On Spotify) It's known now that music increases neuron production in the brain, particularly the hippocampus.

(3) Learn something new to increase brainpower. I have been making an effort during this lockdown to become fluent in Spanish and French through Duolingo, a fun language app. I love it. It connects me to my roots in Quebec, and although far from fluent, learning more Spanish allows me to speak more easily with Spanish speakers where I live in LA. Instant community!

Do you have a specific type of meditation practice or Yoga practice that you have found helpful? We'd love to hear about it.

I have meditated and practiced yoga since I was a fifteen-year-old screwed up teenager. I knew there had to be a way out of my emotional pain.

My practice is an amalgam of many traditions and started with my initiation into Transcendental Meditation (a funny story) when I had to take a bus on a Sunday to downtown Montreal. By the time I reached my destination my flowers had naturally wilted, and I was told, not so kindly, to find a flower store and buy fresh ones. As I mentioned it was Sunday and at that point in Quebec history, the church took precedence so everything was closed down for fear some inebriated, wayward citizens might enjoy themselves too much or even start a revolution. To make matters even more daunting, I had never been allowed to wander into that section of town alone before… I'll always remember that because I realized how protected I had been up to that point. Thank goodness for a Depanneur (French corner store) blocks away. The TM people accepted my flowers and the $15 I had borrowed from my father and I was given a mantra I was never supposed to say out loud or tell anyone. I have meditated almost every day since.

In India I was drawn to Tibetan Buddhist refugees and once home initiated into White and Green Tara. In Tibet years later with a group of friends, different types of doctors, I experienced the magic of visualization and chanting, a big part of their tradition, up close, as well as just sitting in silence, breath in, breath out.

Thank you for that. Can you share three good habits that can lead to optimum physical wellness? Please share a story or example for each.

Three Good Habits:

(1) Read labels on everything and eat only organic. Learn your particular allergies. Omit all foods with added sugar and refined products and stay away from additives with toxic substances whether it's something you eat, swallow, or inject. There's nothing we can do about air pollution, but we do have control over what we ingest. When I was at school as a single-mother I made sure to feed my daughter organic food even when I felt I couldn't afford it.

(2) Pausing: It's so easy to keep moving forward when what we really need is to slow down, take a breath and reflect. One way to help this is place your tongue between your upper palate and teeth and focus on the nostrils and the air coming through them, and drop your jaw. This can have a profound effect on your heart rate and blood pressure. I am always moving too fast, doing too many things at once and just stopping, following my breath for 30 seconds can be a big deal.

(3) Do a daily detox. This is essential in our toxic-filled world where there are 80,000 man made chemicals. Being toxic may be the primary factor so many people are succumbing to COVID. Our cells are constipated, stuck, stuffed to the limit with heavy metals, glyphosate or worse. Have a daily or at least weekly plan depending on where you live and what you consume. I couldn't get through a day without jumping on a trampoline to get my lymph system (the body's garbage disposal) going, drinking alkaline water for optimal hydration, detoxing in an infrared sauna. And now I have added five minutes of cold-water immersion in a 57-degree pool. Did you know there was a Water Cure movement in the 1800s?

Do you have any particular thoughts about healthy eating? We all know that it's important to eat more vegetables, eat less sugar, etc. But while we know it intellectually, it's often difficult to put it into practice and make it a part of our daily habits. In your opinion what are the main blockages that prevent us from taking the information that we all know, and integrating it into our lives?

(1) I think you have to experience what good food can do before you are committed to it. This lack of understanding of how much good food can influence wellness confounds me, and occupies a good portion of my survival book: a good diet and carefully enacted nutrition program is really the first medicine.

(2) Psychological Trauma: it's hard to be disciplined when negative emotions are gnawing at your brain. Your amygdala is crying out for something to soothe the agitation and resurrect the balance it had enjoyed with your prefrontal cortex. Comfort foods that include sugar or allergies just make it worse but instant gratification can put a spell on you.

Can you share three good habits that can lead to optimum emotional wellness? Please share a story or example for each.

(1) Engage your passion(s). What do you LOVE to do? Find a way to incorporate it into your life even briefly. This is your source of joy, of feeling connected to life. I love to sing and act and I also love to ride my bicycle and swim. I like talking to people and hearing their stories whether it's at a checkout stand or with someone who pays me to listen. You don't have to be talented to enjoy something; you just need to show up and enjoy.

(2)Know your triggers; a lot of grief can be stemmed by pinpointing the pathways to eliminate the dreaded cell danger response or CDR that includes adverse psychological as well as physiological reactions. My mother criticized, even ridiculed, me a lot. I used to get my back up or go into a shell if I felt criticized even when I was no longer living with her. Now I know I was unfairly criticized and getting upset (whether angry or withdrawing) was a protective mechanism. Because I have done my work around this, I can more easily step back in a stressful situation and provide a rational and honest response: either take responsibility for my own actions without humiliation or shame, or, two, realize that someone's criticism has nothing to do with me. This helps a lot in a marriage and friendships.

(3) Love that little kid inside and listen to what their needs are. I'll never forget a patient when the idea of an inner child was first popular who looked at me and said, "It's not one inner child, it's a whole damn nursery." "Tracking" is a technique I learned from Vern Woolf PhD to understand the source of thoughts and feelings that includes intergenerational trauma. Incorporating that into my naturopathic practice was a huge boon with survivors to understand the mind-body connection. If we can pinpoint when and how that little kid got muzzled we are able to free up a lot of emotional suffering.

Do you have any particular thoughts about the power of smiling to improve emotional wellness? We'd love to hear it.

I'm definitely a "smiler." I was just telling someone that being unable to demonstrate a full smile is one of the major problems connected with wearing a mask. One of my favorite things in life is speaking with people, even with strangers, and feeling part of a community. Not being able to see smiles, when everyone is wearing a mask, is really hard right now. For all of us. You have to learn how to smile with your eyes, a habit not so easily adopted.

Finally, can you share three good habits that can lead to optimum spiritual wellness? Please share a story or example for each.

To optimize spiritual wellness:

1. Sing with children and adults with disabilities; these hearts are wide open. It is such a beautiful thing to share without being armored or masked (not a reference to COVID.)
2. Connect with nature — tap into that deeper mystery that connects you to a feeling of magic, a dimension that will foster wellness on all levels.
3. Do something for someone else. Feel the joy of giving freely to someone else, watch them smile.

Do you have any particular thoughts about how being "in nature" can help us to cultivate spiritual wellness?

Nature is a mystery. It is the eternal in every moment. We can be aware of it on so many levels — its beauty in flowers, animals, anything growing, along with its destructive aspects like we see with storms, hurricanes, flooding. It gives you a way to understand boundaries and how to work in harmony, personal relationships included. It helps us delve into a more profound realm while offering a source of comfort. This is why I asked my husband when we first met to write a musical based on the natural realm for children with anxiety.

I will never forget the five years homesteading in the wilderness in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, seven miles from the ocean as the crow flies. It was hard work but it was magic to be so immersed in natural rhythms.

Ok, we are nearly done. You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

My movement would be about bringing out the best in each other and the planet with the underlying adage, "Vis Medicatrix Naturae," the healing power of nature in which I include our inherent creativity. It would start with ensuring clean air, water and soil, access to organic food and natural medicine. It would lean on the effort to learn about taking care of the body and mind both naturally and through self-expression — bring back music and the arts to all schools! — along with access to optimal communication skills a la psychologist, Marshall Rosenberg, who wrote the book, Nonviolent Communication.

People would be encouraged to accomplish some type of creative expression — writing, music, drawing and so on — and use these to heal our differences through games, performances or just having fun. The self-esteem and creative satisfaction generated would significantly reduce boredom and agitation and therefore violent and hateful confrontation. The underlying motive would be for every person on the planet and Gaia herself to feel respected and empowered. This would heal trauma and the planet's scars and allow more freedom and fun in anything we do. It would incorporate humor at every turn.

*Rosenberg was influenced by Thomas Szasz's book, The Myth of Mental Illness, as I was. I address this in my upcoming book, Transforming Trauma.

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)

So many to choose from (Jim Carrey, Russell Brand, Sarah Silverman, RFK Jr…) but I think I would choose Bill Maher. He has such a great mind and is so aware of what's going on. He knows how to get his point across through humor, i.e. without preaching. His essays at the end of the show are especially brilliant. He's never afraid to say what he thinks. He is the only person in the media who talks about how a good diet can be the best way to ward off an underlying condition and fight a pathogenic virus.

Oh, if I may add someone else, an agent/ manager for our books and musicals especially our latest, The Old Show, that takes place at a seniors' residence. COVID stopped that and I'm biting at the bit to get it up. Once all these works have a home, then I will be looking for a voice over and acting agent. I want to go into my old biddy years laughing.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

My podcast is Dr. Heather Uncensored. I have two websites, drheatherherington.com — this one has the one-act radio plays I created for health issues including one on Graves Disease — and heatherherington.com, my performer website with my books, our musicals and my voices. My Instagram account is rebelhealth0428. I can be reached at drheatherh@icloud.com.

Thank you for these really excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent with this. We wish you continued success.

Thank you so much! Those were great questions, Yitzi! I can see I came to treat PTS all these years rather honestly. ☺

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