

An Ounce of CAM

*By Alan E. Smith, author of **UnBreak Your Health-
The Complete Guide to Complementary & Alternative Therapies***

It's easier to stick with the comfort of the old and familiar, change is always difficult. This attitude can prevent us from taking advantage of many wonderful therapies when it comes to health care. We've always gone to the doctor to take care of any illness or accident so we want to go to the doctor even after he's told us there's nothing more he can do. For most people being told to "just learn to live with it" is the turning point towards complementary and alternative therapies. There are very few who choose to open their eyes to new possibilities when they're healthy and take advantage of the old saying about "an ounce of prevention" being better than a pound of cure.

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has much to offer us. One of the newest trends in medicine today is Integrative Medicine which combines the best of both worlds, traditional medicine and CAM, to better meet the needs of patients. This open-minded perspective sees each person as a whole being of mind, body and spirit or energy and looks for the best method to treat the source of the health problem.

Traditional or mainstream medicine focuses on treating acute medical problems. In a recent study on the treatment of children published in the New England Journal of Medicine it found they received the correct medical treatment 68% of the time for acute problems. When the children in the study were dealing with a chronic medical situation they received the correct medical treatment 53% of the time but when it was a preventative medical situation they received the proper treatment only 41% of the time. This is one of the results from a system heavy with specialists and light on general practitioners.

The principles of most complementary and alternative therapies reveal almost the exact opposite priorities because they're the mirror image of the current medical system. Most of these therapies focus on preventing health problems or at least in catching them as early as possible. Their goal is the highest functioning in all facets of their patients to enable the balance and harmony of health. In China many years ago doctors were paid monthly to keep you healthy but you stopped paying whenever there was an illness. This is a stark contrast to our current sick-care system and illustrates the difference in perspectives between CAM and Western medicine.

One example from personal experience illustrates the differences between mainstream medicine and CAM. For years I'd gone from one medical specialist to another searching for relief from the relentless pain in my knees that made it nearly impossible to walk for more than a few hundred yards at a time. I'd gone to orthopedic specialists with no success. I tried neurology specialists, bouncing from one medical specialty to the next. I even tried a podiatrist who managed to sell me an expensive set of custom orthopedic insoles that helped a little, but the problem remained. It wasn't until I hurt my back doing yard work that I tried Rolf Structural Integration therapy, a type of CAM.

Over time our bodies change. Weight gain and loss, injuries large and small, there are many reasons that our bodies adjust and compensate. The problem is they never return to their original condition, there is always a little residual modification so the body can get a jump start on the next change. Over the years all of these little changes can add up to big problems in how our bodies move and function. Rolfing is a therapy that looks at the whole person and brings their body back into its normal condition.

The first thing the Rolf therapist had me do is walk back and forth to see how my whole body moved together. After a few minutes the first comment from her was “You must have terrible pain in your knees.” I admitted that I did but was curious how she knew it. She explained that the dynamics of my body’s motion, the kinetic energy, was focusing everything into my knees in the worst possible way which had to be causing pain. She waved her hand to dismiss my concerns about this decades-old problem and told me not to worry. True to her word, after the third session of the Initial Ten sequence I took the insoles out of my shoes and haven’t worn them since. Today I pound a treadmill several times a week because I don’t have any more excuses! In hindsight if I’d been more open to the benefits of complementary and alternative medicine I could’ve tried Rolfing when I was healthy to prevent the problem. Being close-minded meant I suffered for years unnecessarily and lost decades of the health benefits from exercise. I’m not alone however, most people take better preventative care of their cars than they do of their own health.

Each one of us must take control of our own health because we are the only ones responsible for our lives. We may have to move out of our comfort zone and open our eyes to the world of possibilities called CAM because it can help prevent little problems from becoming life-changing crisis. We need to cultivate a culture of health, not just the absence of disease, and that frequently requires expanding our horizons beyond Western medicine.

This is not a new challenge for human beings. In ancient China a wise old Master was approached by a young apprentice and asked “We meditate for hours each day to find inner peace. We spend hours each day doing martial arts exercises to strengthen our bodies. We spend hours every day toiling in the fields to grow healthy food. Why must we do this?”

With a sly smile the Master simply replied “If you don’t take care of your house, where are you going to live?”