

EDITOR'S NOTE

The National Institutes of Health describes whole-person health as looking at the whole person “not just separate organs or body systems — and considering multiple factors that promote either health or disease.” It says such holistic caring involves aiding individuals, families, communities and populations to improve their health in interconnected biological, behavioral, social and environmental areas. “Instead of just treating a specific disease, whole-person health focuses on restoring health, promoting resilience and preventing diseases across a lifespan.”¹



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The organization's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health goes on to explain that health and disease “are not separate, disconnected states but instead occur on a path that can move in two different directions, either toward health or toward disease.

“On this path, many factors, including one's biological

makeup; some unhealthy behaviors, such as poor diet, sedentary lifestyle, chronic stress and poor sleep; as well as social aspects of life — the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age — can lead to chronic diseases of more than one organ system. On the other hand, self-care, lifestyle and behavioral interventions may help with the return to health.”

I'm not trying to write a master of the obvious Editor's Note, but — here we go — change is hard. Being proactive rather than reactive takes forethought. Change to systems to encourage more healthy behaviors and environments rather than solely episodic care for the sick is not easy.

But, as we looked into what health care systems are doing, we found inspiring approaches. For starters, important work is being done in lifestyle medicine, including talking to people about what matters to them, where they feel they can improve their health, and providing education and support to help them along the way.

Care providers better recognize the effects of trauma on children and adults and how safe and supportive relationships can make a difference. There's more thinking about screening, access to

care and care navigation to better integrate mental health services into systems as a whole.

There are also new approaches to spiritual care in health care settings, including assessments and interventions designed to promote spiritual wholeness, rather than screening for distress. As authors from CHRISTUS Trinity Mother Frances Hospital note, attention to spiritual care is a hallmark of Catholic health care. “We have many caring and empathic individuals across disciplines tending to physical, emotional and spiritual

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needs. But we know that, as a ministry, we need our efforts also to be a distinguishing feature of our identity.”

It leads me to think about harmony — not always a word we hear in health care. Nobody gets it right all the time. Snack food sometimes holds more appeal than carrots, right? And we get sick despite our efforts. But in caring for the whole person, striving for harmony — a congruity in what we know and do to protect our health — seems like one way to work toward it. And all the while, we seek improved systems to better support us in the work.

NOTE

1. “Whole Person Health: What You Need to Know,” National Institutes of Health, May 2021, <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/whole-person-health-what-you-need-to-know>.

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