

The Search for Well-Being

Treating the whole person
in the new health care era

A Primer on Integrative Medicine

From *Humankind* public radio

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The Basics of Integrative Medicine

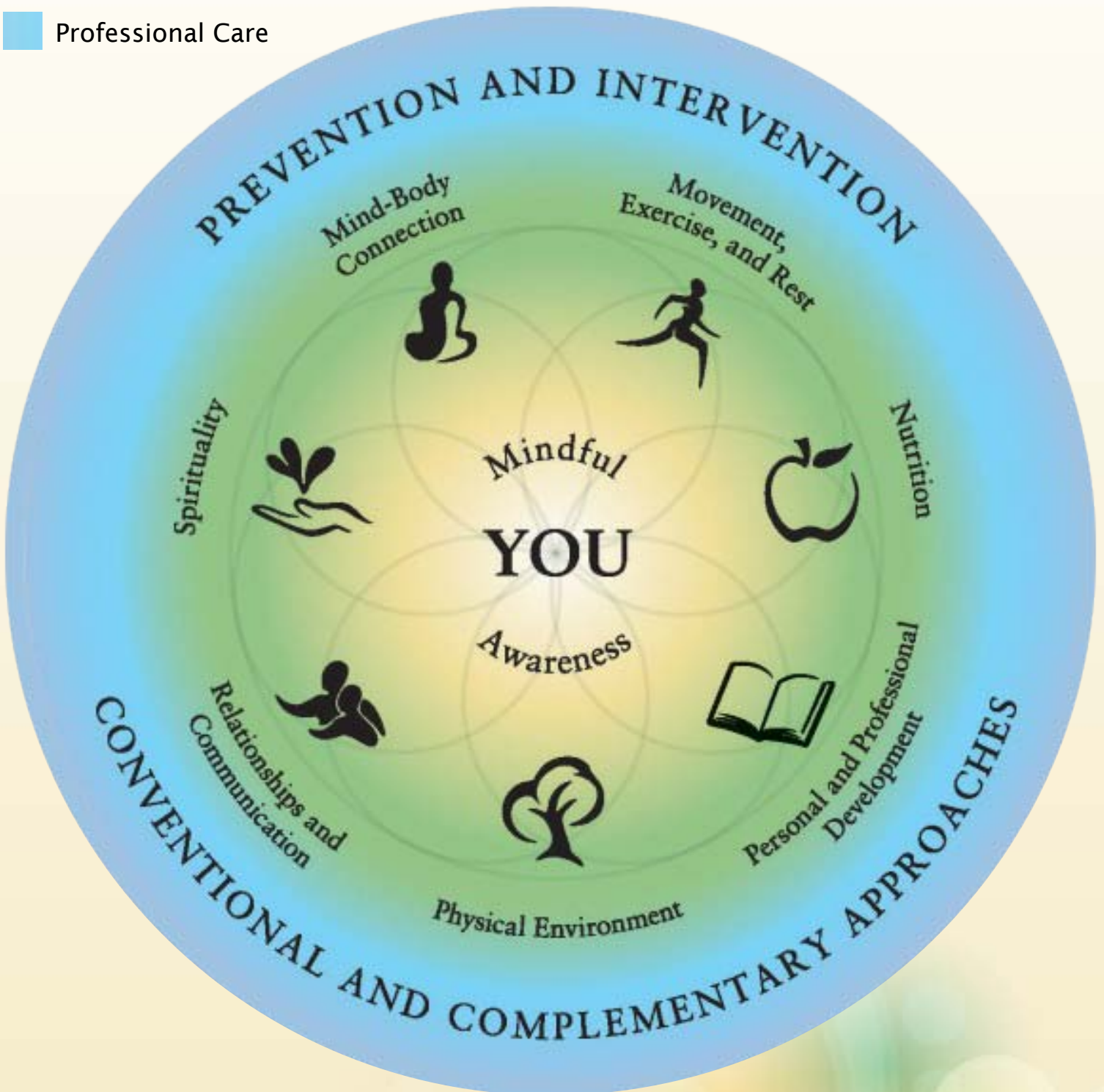
WHAT WOULD YOU THINK OF A HEALTHCARE system that focuses on helping people become and stay healthy—rather than one that focuses more narrowly on “managing” diseases? How about a system of care that is aimed first at optimizing conditions in which the body can use its remarkable powers of self-healing and regeneration, before it resorts to invasive interventions and powerful drugs that carry added cost and complications?

These are just a few of the themes that form the framework of an integrative approach to care – or simply, **integrative medicine**. Many leading hospitals now operate integrative health clinics.



Integrative Health

- Self-Care
- Professional Care



“80% of how healthy people are has nothing to do with doctors, hospitals, drugs. It’s their lifestyle. That is a huge mental shift... to really step back and say, I’m responsible.”

— Prof. Mary Jo Kreitzer
Univ. of Minnesota
School of Nursing

What Is Integrative Medicine?

This approach to health care blends conventional medicine (including use of drugs and high-tech techniques, when appropriate) with evidence-based, natural, less invasive therapies (e.g. dietary change, meditation, acupuncture, yoga, herbal medicine and therapeutic massage).

It highlights a patient-practitioner relationship that offers personalized, participatory care. And it emphasizes healing of the whole person – mind, body, and spirit – in the context of our relationships and social environment.¹ In addition:

- Integrative care offers treatment for ailments, but is also very attentive to the broader concepts of health promotion (e.g. lifestyle counseling and dietary guidance) and the prevention of illness (i.e. eliminating ailment causes or increasing resistance to disease) is fundamental.
- Patients understand the importance of self-care techniques that may require lifestyle changes, rather than relying entirely on the health care system to “fix” the patient.

Over the course of a year, up to a third of the active duty military and about half of U.S. veterans use a complementary or alternative medicine product or practice.

(Samueli Institute)

Is Integrative Medicine a Valid Approach to Health Care?

Integrative medicine combines the most scientifically validated and least harmful therapies from both high-tech and holistic medical practices.² Major hospitals across the country and the Veterans Administration (America's largest health care system) now include some integrative care. The majority of U.S. medical schools have now introduced some integrative content into the curriculum.

And much of this is driven by patient demand, even if their doctor is not involved. Some form of integrative health is now practiced by four in ten Americans, according to the latest study by the National Institutes of Health.



How Does Conventional Medicine Compare with Integrative Medicine?

What Conventional Medicine Does

Manages disease

Treats symptoms

Finds the problem and fixes it

Uses hi-tech, biomedical interventions

Reacts to existing health issues

What Integrative Medicine Does

Optimizes health

Treats the whole person

Identifies the risk and minimizes it

Uses hi-touch, whole person approaches

Anticipates possible health issues and promotes prevention

How Conventional Medicine Works

Intervenes as needed

Relies on the patient to achieve health goals

Directed by the physician

How Integrative Medicine Works

Plans across the life span

Supports the patient to achieve health goals

Guided by a partnership among patient, physician and a team of clinical experts

What Conditions Can Integrative Medicine Treat?

Integrative medicine can help patients relieve symptoms of a wide range of conditions. Specifically, a 2012 survey reported that integrative medicine centers were most successfully treating: chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, depression/anxiety, cancer, and stress. Beyond that, centers reported clinical success in treating: sleep disorders, fibromyalgia, headache, obesity, allergies, diabetes, immune disorders, heart disease, and more.³

What Are Some Common Practices?

There are many valid techniques of integrative health. Here are some of the most effective:

Mind-Body Connection

Description: Therapies that take advantage of the subtle interactions between a person's state of mind and basic physiological functions in their body. Mind-body medicine uses relaxation techniques and the power of thoughts and emotions to improve physical health.

What form it takes: Some of the most commonly used techniques include meditation, guided imagery, breathing exercises, and cognitive reframing to alter how we perceive life events.

How it works: These methods train the mind to focus without distraction. This can help a person reduce their levels of stress-related hormones. It can strengthen the immune system and can activate the body's remarkable capacities for self-healing.

Benefits: Mind-body medicine can have a profoundly positive impact on an individual's well-being because it encourages relaxation, reduces tension and pain, and lessens the need for drugs. These techniques can thus treat an array of conditions, including cancer, high blood pressure, asthma, insomnia, and mental health issues.⁴





Dietary Choices

Description: Aligning what we eat not only with the body's need for fuel, but also with disease-preventing properties naturally found in certain foods. And avoiding foods that increase the risk of some diseases.

What form it takes: For most Americans, this means enjoying more fruits, vegetables, grains and beans, reducing or eliminating intake of animal products and generally eating less.

How it works: The human body is a biochemical environment, and everything put into it makes a difference—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Thus, eating habits play a major role in the development of certain chronic diseases. For example—lowering “bad” fat and cholesterol intake, and upping whole grain consumption can prevent plaque build up in the arteries; this reduces risk of heart disease.

Benefits: Eating properly can significantly reduce risk of chronic illnesses, including heart disease, obesity, diabetes and some cancers. This can result in an improved immune system, an increase in energy, a healthy weight, and a boosted natural healing capacity.⁵





Activity

Description: Various forms of movement and exercise. Lifelong physical activity is key to optimum health and it keeps the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—strong, flexible, and balanced.

What form it takes: Two of the most popular forms of activity highlighted in integrative health are walking and yoga. But many other types of movement can be very beneficial, too—swimming, hiking, dancing, jumping, and so forth. Even activities like gardening and housework can be aerobic.

Benefits: The human body is built for movement. Moderate exercise optimizes health and healing capacities, and it discourages a sedentary lifestyle. Underuse of the body is a factor in many common illnesses.⁶

What can it do: Moderate-intensity physical activity has been shown to aid in weight control; reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some cancers; and improve mental health and mood, while the body releases stress.





Spirituality

Description: A means of connection and/or self-reflection through which one finds comfort, purpose and inner peace.

What form it takes: Human spirituality is not necessarily religious. It is found both in organized traditions and on a uniquely personal basis. An essential component is connection, whether to others or a higher power, expressed through such qualities as compassion, humility, generosity and simplicity. Spirituality can be practiced in communal gatherings or through private meditation or prayer and can range from contemplative practices like journaling to acts of service.

How it works: Spiritual practices inherently improve coping skills, strengthen social support networks, promote healthy behaviors, and reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and loneliness.

Benefits: Spirituality can improve ability to cope with life problems and can provide a sense of deep meaning. The effects on health and well being can include benefits to immune, hormonal, cardiovascular, and nervous systems.⁷

Half of American adults had prayed to cope with health concerns in the previous 12 months.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007)



Acupuncture

Description: An ancient practice from Traditional Chinese Medicine that involves the (generally painless) insertion of hair-thin needles into the skin at strategic points on the body to produce healing from a wide variety of medical conditions.

What form it takes: Treatment mainly involves needle insertion, needle manipulation, and needle removal. There is also acupressure, which applies similar principles as acupuncture but differs in that practitioners use body parts (fingers, palms, feet) to apply pressure.

How it works: Western medicine describes the mechanism of acupuncture as stimulating nerves, muscles, and connective tissue, which in turn release natural substances that alter the body's perception of pain (e.g. natural painkillers are stimulated and blood flow is increased). Chinese medicine posits that acupuncture manipulates and re-balances the body's energy flow ("Qi"), which ultimately activates one's natural healing capacities.

Benefits: Acupuncture can reduce symptoms of various diseases and conditions, including pain, nausea, vomiting, headaches, menstrual cramps, and osteoarthritis.⁸

Other popular integrative care modalities include: **herbal medicine** (the therapeutic use of plant products), **therapeutic massage**, **reiki** (a healing touch therapy), **reflexology** (the application of pressures to areas on the feet, hands, and ears), **aromatherapy** (the therapeutic use of essential oils extracted from plants), and **music therapy** (the therapeutic practice of using musical experiences and interventions).



Does Insurance Cover Integrative Medicine?

Many leading hospitals now include an integrative clinic alongside more orthodox medical practices, and some of these integrative programs qualify for federal health care reimbursement (including Medicare). That said, a number of health insurance providers do not cover certain integrative medicine therapies, so patients should speak directly with their health insurer to verify coverage.

Does This Fit into the Affordable Care Act?

Some integrative medicine services are newly covered under the Affordable Care Act. But some details are not yet confirmed and may vary by individual state. For details, see [this helpful FAQ](#), prepared by the Integrative Healthcare Policy Consortium.

Where Can I Learn More About Integrative Medicine?

You can find topical links and reading lists over at our [Additional Resources](#).

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Credits

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Footnotes:

¹ “Center for Integrative Health and Wellness.” The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. <http://www.medicalcenter.osu.edu/patientcare/healthcare_services/integrative_medicine/Pages/index.aspx>.

² Lemley, Brad. “What is Integrative Medicine?” DrWeil.com News. <<http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/ART02054/Andrew-Weil-Integrative-Medicine.html>>.

³ Horrigan, Bonnie, Sheldon Lewis, Donald Abrams, and Constance Pechura. “Integrative Medicine in America: How Integrative Medicine Is Being Practiced in Clinical Centers Across the United States.” Bravewell Collaborative. (Feb 2012). <<http://www.bravewell.org/content/Downloads/IMinAm.pdf>>.

⁴ “Mind-Body Medicine.” University of Maryland Medical Center. <<http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/treatment/mindbody-medicine>>.

⁵ “Wheel of Health.” Duke Integrative Medicine. <<http://www.dukeintegrativemedicine.org/about-us/wheel-of-health>>.

⁶ Weil, Andrew. “Why Must We Exercise?.” <<http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/ART02920/Why-Must-We-Exercise.html>>.

⁷ “Spirituality.” University of Maryland Medical Center. <<http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/treatment/spirituality>>.

⁸ “Acupuncture.” Mayo Clinic, 25 Jan 2012. <<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/acupuncture/MY00946>>

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