

Personal Case Study

Joe Raphael, DrPH, MBA, MACLP, LMFT, CHES

I was introduced to Lifestyle Medicine as a patient, and I continue to marvel at how Lifestyle as Medicine continues to baffle the unexplainable.

As a young boy, I had chronic asthma, allergies and supraventricular tachycardia. We took the rugs out of my room, painted everything with high gloss paint that and got rid of my best friend Jesse, the German Shepard. My pediatrician's treatment plan included telling my father to move to the beach. The only problem with that plan was the pediatrician never bought my father the beach house nor was it covered under our insurance plan.

By middle school my asthma, allergies and cardiac symptoms worsened. As complications compounded, I lived with the message that I will not live past twenty one years of age. My first Lifestyle Medicine lesson was that I didn't have a choice—I needed to exercise daily and eat a proper diet. When I got home from school, I went for a run, to art class, attended to homework, and thus the journey began of deciphering the definition of a proper diet.

In college I had a full scholarship as a NCAA tennis player. I felt great when I exercised. The problem was that six hours a day wasn't enough for me. I decided to add triathlons for a grand total of eight hours a day. This was possible only because I had tutors to aid with my studies. I never quite knew what the 'proper' diet was despite having registered dietitians, exercise physiologists and personal trainers lecturing me daily. So, maybe I overdid the exercise, as I recognize that I'm a bit obsessive—maybe more than a bit. I certainly had the willpower to beat the odds.

I turned twenty years old, and my medical mystery began. I collapsed and lost consciousness. While unconscious I lost control of my bowels and urinated on my friend who was standing close by. This take the saying, 'This is what friends are for' to a new level!

At age twenty I had my first heart attack. I had six percent body fat. Remember the basketball players collapsing at the free throw lines? Fast-forward six months to my second magical mystery ride. This journey continued the next three years with hospitalizations every six months. In three years of neuro and cardiac workups I was no closer to a cure, or even a diagnosis, than I was at the beginning. The docs blamed it on the cocaine I had never used, on epilepsy, mini strokes, even testicular cancer. I had an ICD implanted, lost my apartment, and moved in with my parents. The weekly neurology, cardiology, psychiatry, and electrophysiology appointments made it nearly impossible to succeed in college. How was I to be the next Dr. Katz or Fuhrman if I didn't have the time or energy to read!

We all know Lifestyle Medicine includes the tenant of stress reduction. The lesson was put on the back burner when my father had been given three days to live. Med school was put on the back burner, and I went home to be with him and support my mother. My father smoked, drank, and easily polished off a pint of ice cream every night. My mother on the other hand, ran five miles a day, had a diet that consisted mainly of GBOMBS (before GBOMBS was published) swam a mile three times per week. While my dad's condition was

a stressful episode, added to what already was considered overload, I witnessed that my mom had it right.

Despite this, I had decided to say goodbye tennis and triathlons. As a grad student I was learning about using food as medicine but didn't practice it. I had acquired the academic skills to use my feet, fingers and forks, but the cognitive message never made it to behavior change. I lost control. I practiced my drinking and overeating. I was so good at these skill sets that I gained seventy pounds. Three years and over 3 million dollars in neuro and cardiac workups later, I was no closer to figuring out the mystery.

Apparently, I had not Disease Proofed my life! I had been exposed to stress management, exercise as medicine and nutrition 101, but I simply stopped trying.

Through it all, I was seen as a scientific specimen to be studied and a mystery to be solved. No one asked what I liked to do or took much of an interest in who I was outside of the sterile medical environment.

It is a cliché, but so true: mothers know best. In the midst of it all, my mom suggested I buy a bike. I always loved bikes and she knew it. That was the turning point. Someone believed in me, encouraged self-efficacy and knew I was so much more than a diagnosis. However, now that I knew my mom, and my now wife, believed in me, I was inspired, and I was no longer going to just passively float through life. I began to exercise, started a balanced, plant-based diet, and cut back on alcohol. Not only did the weight come off, I was fit enough to do my first mini-triathlon only eight months after the ICD was removed. But, it wasn't smooth sailing.

I now battle with Systemic Mastocytosis. The monthly labs, weekly IVS and frequent bone marrow biopsies are challenging, but I have a great collection of white t-shirts I sweat through with those damn bone marrow biopsies! We all know life continues to present trials, but Lifestyle as Medicine never leaves, and the truths are foundational.

I have learned how to listen. This is a message I pay forward. I educate on responsive versus reactive behaviors. Apparently I never got the memo that I was supposed to die at twenty one—a life lesson that has enabled me to never have reactive behaviors out of fear or anger.

The great scholar Patch Adams had it right when he said “You treat a disease, you win, and you lose. You treat a person, and I guarantee you'll win, no matter what the outcome.”

Adams' quote epitomizes Lifestyle Medicine. We are all here on the same mission. Let us not forget our journey and the story our patients teach us daily. It is because of these experiences and the very important lesson my mother and wife taught me that I have dedicated my life to the field of Lifestyle Medicine.