

# Long Live You!



## Promoting healthy lifestyle through positive health decisions

Excerpted with permission from *Long Live You! Your Step-by-Step Plan to Look and Feel Better Than Before* (Spry Publishing, 2015; \$16.95), by Jane Wilkens Michael. Copyright Spry Publishing 2015. Available for purchase everywhere books are sold.

### Here's to Your (Emotional) Health

**"Emotional Well Being—it's a choice. And when you bring awareness to any aspect of your life, you will reap benefits, because awareness tells you how you are doing. It's an infallible kind of radar, if you turn it on. The most important thing is knowing what you want."**

—Deepak Chopra, M.D.

With Dr. Chopra's words in mind, whenever I give a lecture on how to be Better Than Before, at some point I survey the room of (mostly) women and ask them what they want most out of life. The answer is almost always a resounding "We want to be happy!" Not to have more money, not to have more bags and shoes—although those are things that might make some people (ahem!) happier—but to feel happiness itself. To that end, I am often posed two questions: "Is it really possible to become happier?" And, "Can I do it overnight?"

The response to the first is a resounding "Yes!" As for the second, there are no instant fixes. In order to

overcome life's emotional challenges, you must first take responsibility for your own life. Above all, you have to understand that your emotional lifestyle has consequences on your physical health, as well as your mental well-being. In other words, if you feel better about how you live, you will live better!

As we discussed in Rung 1, there is a direct link between emotional health and heart health. In fact, researchers at the Barbra Streisand Women's Heart Center at the Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute have found that emotional stressors may trigger changes that can cause such health issues as coronary artery dysfunction, headaches, digestive problems, insomnia, and even cancer.

Stress is both inevitable and

ubiquitous in most of our lives; yet we seem at a loss for ways to modulate it for ourselves. We all have so many responsibilities that we rarely allow ourselves a moment to think, to experience—to dream. And unless we get a handle on our lives, emotional angst can have serious consequences. But, what can we realistically incorporate into our daily lives to help get us through the difficult days? This rung is devoted to finding those ways and means.

### The Kaizen Secret

The whole concept of being Better Than Before implies change—and the best place to start is in your mindset. Granted, it's not possible to become the pure, innocent five-year-old you,

who (hopefully) never experienced an emotional crisis. But you can constantly try to be better than a day ago, an hour ago, or even a minute ago. The secret is to take small steps, what the Japanese call Kaizen (from the ancient Chinese words meaning “change to make good or better”). It is all about making an effort to continually improve each day in very small increments. You can begin by gradually replacing the negative self-talk that keeps you from becoming the person you truly want to be.

### You Are Not Alone

We all suffer from something, be it as simple as cuticle biting, jaw clenching, or smoking; to more complex issues such as chronic stress, fears, low self-esteem, neuroses, and phobias. In response to these universal complaints, everywhere you look there’s something either written or broadcast about stress management. What not to eat, what not to drink, what not to think. The fact that you know you shouldn’t be stressed—and you are—can cause even more stress. Take The Lawyer, for example, and his Orwellian theory on ice cream: “Forcing myself to resist my natural urges to eat it will cause more harmful stress than the physical LDL damage of eating it. So therefore, it will be even worse for my arteries to not eat ice cream!” (Huh?)

Chances are you are one of the millions of people who are overwhelmed in every aspect of their lives—at work, at home, in relationships, financially, and even by the little yet annoying things such as traffic jams and people with too many food items in the express checkout line. Unfortunately, the stress epidemic sweeping our country is not only widespread; it’s also on the rise. Perhaps that’s because the sources of stress are also multiplying.

### Stress Comes in Many Forms

The major personal stressors are well-known: Illness, dating and marriage, breakup and divorce, and the death of a friend or loved one. Then we all have career and financial worries. And for the more emotionally fragile, almost any change from their normal pattern can set emotional anguish in motion. Additionally, there are environmental stressors, such as smog and noise pollution. In today’s digital world, stress may also come from a constant bombardment of e-mails, texts, and voice messages that gives us the feeling of being on-call 24/7.

However, the most difficult stress to deal with may stem from within—low self-esteem. It is most often

triggered by trying to live up to the expectations of others—or what we assume others think of us. There will always be those who are more beautiful, wealthier, or more successful. You are who you are. And if you are doing the best that you can, there is no reason to feel “less than.”

We must also address the fears that turn into phobias and anxiety, that horrific sense of being out of control. It can be associated with a specific issue, such as flying, public speaking, driving on freeways, or even visiting the doctor. (Being that I am a hypochondriac, the very sight of a white coat, even on a butcher, causes my blood pressure to soar to stroke levels.) Anxiety can also manifest in that general sense of dread that comes out of nowhere, sometimes for no particular reason, but frightens the heck out of you.

That brings us to perhaps the greatest source of stress of all—motherhood, the veritable mother lode of emotional stress. No matter how good a parent we may be, we all feel (undoubtedly correctly) that we have made mistakes along the way. We fear, for example, that our kids will always remember the time(s) we sent them to school when they felt sick to their stomach, believing that it was only because we had other things to do—and the school nurse promptly sent them back home (secretly, I feared, thinking I was an unfit mother).

While we all make sacrifices for our children, every mother feels guilty about something. If we work, we wish we stayed home. If we choose to stay home, even for the first year or so, we think we should be doing more important things with our lives than discussing the relative merits of Pampers versus Huggies.

Sometimes we erroneously assume that we have the best of both worlds. When Elise, my youngest, was born, I began to write a few days a week from my home office. Granted, it was nice to secretly wear sweats and bunny slippers when I was doing important phone interviews. But unfailingly, every time I made a call, the children began to loudly attack one another in one made-up game or another. I would sigh and assert to my sympathetic interviewee that an inconsiderate coworker had brought his or her disorderly kids into the office.

For all you new moms, I do have good news—it does get easier with each child, I swear. For example, when Alex was a newborn, I used to rush him to the pediatrician whenever his temperature reached 98.7. With Philip, four years later as a more experienced mom, it was only when

it got over 100. By the time Elise came along six years after that, I wasn’t even upset when her temperature hit 102. Knowing by then that a healthy child tends to fever high to naturally fight infection, I merely gave her a dose of liquid Tylenol and kept a close vigil. Suffice it to say, she’s still alive and thriving.

Yes, dads suffer stress, too! But as women, we tend to have even more responsibilities. We are nurturers by nature; so, for the most part, child care is in a mother’s domain. It’s exhausting just thinking that it could be possible to have it all—if we do it all. And we can’t. It’s both physically and mentally impossible.

And trust me on this one, ladies, it is okay to not be Wonder Woman. She’s the one who gets up at 5 am, sprints to the gym, then showers, answers all e-mails, fixes her family a breakfast of flaxseed banana waffles with organic maple syrup, and is ready to go to the office as soon as she drives her 2.4 equally perfect children to school. Her male counterpart is just as accomplished. Not only does he hold down a high-powered day job, but he is a nationally ranked squash player and on weekends writes poetry when not competing in an Ironman Triathlon. In a pinch, he can re-shingle his roof. But unless they actually hail from the planet Krypton, inside they’re a hot mess!

And I know this in part from my brief foray into Superparenthood. It was one winter, many moons ago; I had really felt sorry for my husband as he somehow managed to always get sick at the exact same time as the children. Needless to say, he did not get a whole lot of sympathy. So when everyone was well, I decided to make it up to him. “Tomorrow, dear,” I announced, “I will prepare you a special breakfast, lay out your clothes, and drive you to work.”

So I spent more time fussing over his meal than I did taking care of the children that morning. They had cold cereal; he had steel-cut oats with walnuts. I carefully chose his suit and tie, and even made sure that he wasn’t wearing one brown shoe and one black, as sometimes happens when he dresses himself. And as soon as I rushed my older sons off to the bus and took my little girl to nursery school, as promised, I hopped in the car and gave him door-to-door service to his office.

An hour later, all missions accomplished, I, über-wife, returned to my office and started to write my column with still plenty of time left to meet my deadline. I sat back in the chair and let out a large self-satisfied sigh, thinking to myself, “Who said you can’t have it—and, most

important, do it—all?” Just then the phone rang.

“Mrs. Michael,” stated the voice on the other end, “this is Mrs. Butters at the nursery school.”

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Butters,” I chirped. “Did the class enjoy those organic oatmeal raisin cookies I sent in the other day for their recess snack?”

“Those were great.” She paused, then continued. “But the reason I’m calling is that you seem to have sent your daughter to school today in her pajamas.” Bam!

### And the Answer Is ...

So no matter our will and good intentions, we can’t eliminate every source of stress. When I first began my research on how to help others feel better than before on an emotional level, what really stuck with me was a conversation that I had with a very spiritual person, a shaman, in fact. I remember asking her the true meaning of life. She said she would consult the Guides and get back to me. Finally, she called.

As I anxiously awaited her response, she replied, “Well, here it is.” She paused. “Stuff happens (okay, stuff was not the exact word she used). Move on!”

“Seriously? That’s the answer to the meaning of life?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes,” she insisted. “Don’t dwell!”

Of course, that is far easier said than done. Ignoring the negative mental chatter that can bedevil us is tough. Setting positive goals is self-affirming, but it’s how you handle the all-too-likely failure to accomplish them fully (or at all) that is the key.

### The Journey

It’s important to remember that it’s the journey, not the final resting point, that matters in self-improvement—finding satisfaction in the tiny victories and incremental improvements along the way. That, in turn, will allow you to live in and enjoy the moment. Too often, we spend so much time worrying about the future that we don’t appreciate what we accomplished that day, or even that minute. By never giving yourself credit for what you have achieved on a day-to-day basis, everything just jumbles together into one big “to-do” list. Life becomes the trip from hell instead of an enjoyable voyage. In the words of Ernest Hemingway: “It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters in the end.”

That is perhaps the real meaning of my shaman’s cryptic message, “Never give up.” All the genius in the world won’t do any good without guts, tenacity, and passion. Estée Lauder



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once told me that when she was first starting out, if cosmetic buyers said no, she would wait outside their offices all day until they changed their minds. Vincent van Gogh sold only one painting during his lifetime; Elvis Presley got a C in music class; Winston Churchill at one point lost three elections in a row; Henry Ford's car manufacturing company went bankrupt—twice—before becoming the Ford Motor Company; Sigmund Freud was booed from the stage when he first presented his revolutionary ideas; and Albert Einstein was expelled from school for being a disruptive student. What would the world be like if any one of them simply gave up and didn't forge ahead?

### How to Begin

As with all our rungs, we must start with general principles and then work down through specific ideas, techniques, and therapies. For overall emotional well-being guidance, my favorite stress adviser is personal empowerment expert and author of the best-selling *The Synthesis Effect: Your Direct Path to Personal Power and Transformation*, Dr. John McGrail.

"Emotional well-being is the central desire (and the right) of every human being, first and foremost, to feel safe, loved, validated, and in control of his/her life," he asserts. "Ironically we are all born that way, in perfect love and energetic harmony, and filled with perfectly formed and vastly abundant self-esteem and emotional well-being. Then life happens and we, at least most of us in modern Western society, get it beaten out of us, at least figuratively."

Here, per Dr. McGrail, are some common steps anyone can take to reclaim that

wonderful childhood state of mind:

1. First, you must acknowledge that you are naturally resistant to change, even when you want it and know it will be a good thing. It is literally in our DNA to cling to the familiar, a condition called homeostasis, from the Latin words meaning the "same state." It is homeostasis, the emotional equivalent of inertia in the physical world, that holds us back and

keeps us stuck.

2. Accept that you are going to feel somewhat uncomfortable during the process of changing your life and consciously decide to allow yourself to feel that way. It won't kill you, and once you cross that emotional bridge, half the battle is over and you are in the process of learning what you need to know to be the new you.

3. Accept that all change—in fact, life itself—is always a process.

Modern technology-driven society is becoming too used to expecting instant results and gratification; when you accept the concept of process, it can help you hasten the happy results.

4. Commit to being "at cause" with your life—most of us live in a state of being "at effect," that is, feeling as if life is happening to us and we are the victims of circumstances beyond our control. Being "at cause" is a

fundamental shift in that thinking. It goes something like this: It is no one else's job to make me happy or safe or loved or confident or financially solvent or healthy, or anything. It is my job alone. Thus, my results will depend on my choices, what I do, think, say, and feel.

5. Choosing to live "at cause" also leads us to another huge requirement—it must come from within. Most of us think that if we just get the stuff we want—our money, career, love and relationships, whatever we think is missing—that all will be well. But it is only when we rediscover our internal balance that we can begin to enjoy what we have.

6. In order to establish true emotional well-being, we must balance and integrate all our energy streams—physical, emotional, and spiritual. And we must acknowledge that we are indeed spiritual beings, something much easier to do with all the new science that is providing the empirical evidence we Westerners require. As such, we are seeing major changes in virtually all our health and wellness disciplines.

7. Finally, to really feel emotionally sound and whole, pay as much attention as possible to making choices that serve the greater good, to be of service to others. It can be as simple as validating other people on a regular basis—say thank you to anyone who provides you with a service. Say hello and smile at someone you pass on the street. As you watch him/her light up just from being acknowledged and validated, you will too.

