



## The Root Cause of Disease is Never Another Symptom

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By Iva Lloyd, BScH, RPP, RHN, ND

Identifying the root cause of disease has always been one of the key principles of naturopathic medicine. The importance of this principle is becoming increasingly important in this age of chronic illness, information overload, and due to the onslaught of environmental and external factors, coupled with the deterioration and destruction of the food, air and water supply.

Health and disease are logical, they happen for a reason. Recognizing and acknowledging that health and disease follow certain laws is essential to being able to systematically determine the root causes of disease. The belief that disease is random, and that it can happen to anyone at any time, is a characteristic of the current fear-based conventional medical system. This erroneous belief separates patients from their lifestyle and from their environment; it takes away personal responsibility and environmental responsibility. It puts the emphasis of research on treatment instead of prevention, and the emphasis of treatment on drugs and medical interventions instead of lifestyle education and self-responsibility. This erroneous belief is intensified with the labeling of the cause of disease as their accompanying symptoms. For example, it is common to hear that the cause of cardiovascular disease is hypertension, or hypercholesterolemia. The labeling of the cause of disease as a symptom, takes away practitioner responsibility in looking beyond the physical manifestation of disease to the real causal factors – the lifestyle, environmental, external, or life situations that are actually causing the shift away from health.

### Human Beings as Complex Systems

Human beings are complex systems that are able to adjust to a tremendous amount of internal and external stimuli while still maintaining a homeodynamic state. Symptoms and dis-ease arise when a patient is overwhelmed or exhausted and is no longer able to adapt and compensate to the disrupting factors. Symptoms are a message and provide a road map to the causal factors. 'Wholistic medicine focuses on body, emotions, mind, relationships and spirit. This extends the range of conceptualization of the causes of illnesses and of potential ways for dealing with them.'<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing that health and disease happen for a reason does not put it in the realm of linear causality. You can not always say that one factor alone caused disease. Human beings are complex systems, with multiple levels of complexity and susceptibility. Also thinking is contextual; it is based on the mutual relationship between the variables and the specific nuances and considerations of each specific time and place. The aim, during any assessment process, is to determine the variables that are at play for each patient, and to what degree they are a contributing factor.

The task of uncovering the variables that are impacting a patient's health often is daunting due to the unlimited number of variables and the constant increase in number of factors. One hundred years ago, even fifty years ago, the number of factors that impacted health was different; it was simpler. The introduction of vaccinations, chemicals in personal care products, plastics, fillers and additives in food, substances used in dental procedures, cell phones, computers, pesticides and insecticides, the impact of manufacturing, mining, pollution, surgeries and implants and so on has greatly increased the factors and variables that need to be considered in order to thoroughly assess any



symptom or disease state.

Although the overall number of variables is unlimited, it is limited for each patient. The purpose of an intake is to determine the breadth of factors that need to be considered. The family and lifestyle history, and the pattern of onset of symptoms, in itself, assists in focusing the assessment in a specific direction. For example, smoking is a factor, but only if a patient smokes or if they are around people who smoke. Each disease and symptom has a number of variables that are known to be considerations. It is possible, and often valuable, to work backwards based on a patient's presenting symptoms to expand the assessment variables.

## Naturopathic Assessment Model

The following is an assessment model that is designed to structure the assessment process and to aid practitioners in identifying the root cause of disease. This model is based on the understanding that the psychological, functional, and structural aspects of a person are never the cause of disease, they simply mirror and manifest the imbalances in the body. It also recognizes the vitalistic aspect of individuals and the presence of a vital or personal essence. This model is based on the understanding that human beings are complex, dynamic systems; every aspect of the individual is interrelated, and human beings are a part of, and affected by, their environment.

For each causal factor a specific aspect of the body will be primarily affected, and the impact will always show up in all three aspects to varying degrees. For example, a fall would primarily affect the structural body, but due to misalignment of the body there will be functional changes and the impact of the fall will have a psychological impact; a stressful situation will primarily affect the psychological aspect of the body, but there are also functional changes such as muscle tension, increased heart rate, changes in breathing and structural changes such as a collapsed frame or a more rigid structure depending on the situation. No aspect of the body ever shifts in isolation and that the assessment of any symptom or disease involves the assessment of the psychological, functional and structural changes. For example, a 58 year old female patient with a history of a TIA and moderate hypertension presents with pain in the chest which is worse on exertion. Key historic information reveals that the patient has been weaning off her blood pressure medication over the last four months, has recently started on a vegetarian diet, currently has mild stress, and has been active at work helping with a reorganization and move. On physical exam it is revealed that the patient's blood pressure is 132/74. Historically the increase in blood pressure had been primarily associated with dietary factors and unexpressed emotions when stressed. The patient has been instructed to take their blood pressure three times a week and reports that during times of chest pain the blood pressure was not elevated. Assessment of the patient's spine reveals fixation of the left mid-thoracic vertebrae. After adjustment of the vertebrae the patient no longer experienced chest pain when sedentary or with exertion. It may have been natural to assume that the chest pain was an indication of increased blood pressure and to look for dietary (lifestyle) factors or signs of stress, but the root cause was identified as improper twisting while lifting heavy boxes.

## Causal Factors

The strength of the naturopathic assessment is the depth and breadth of the intake and the practitioner's attention to the patient's subjective experiences. The symptoms and disease will tell a practitioner what is going on, but only the patient can tell you why. It is the why that uncovers the root cause of disease. During an intake, patients reveal two things, the first being their story, the second being the manifestation and nature of their symptoms. A practitioner's role is to correlate the two, and to understand what information is missing or misleading. 'Good clinical skills convert subjective symptoms into objective signs. A physical examination yields more signs. Signs are not simply the product



of observation; they also contain knowledge.’<sup>2</sup>

Determining the causal factors involves a practitioner paying attention to the onset of symptoms, their frequency, and their intensity. It involves a practitioner listening for somatic metaphors, paying attention to situations that cause changes in a patient’s affect, it involves paying attention to how patients link symptoms and how they tell their story. A detailed history taking is essential, but so is the desire and skill to really listen to not only what a patient conveys, but how they convey it.

The initial disruption of health arises due to three main factors:

1. Disharmony between a patient’s life and their personal essence;
2. Disharmony in the building blocks to health
3. Exposure to disrupting external or environmental factors.

## Personal Essence

The personal essence is a descriptive concept of an individual’s vitality or life force. The collective life force, or vital force, is a common pool of subtle energy that connects everyone together and interconnects people to their environment.<sup>3</sup> Personal essence refers to an individual’s life force or vital energy, which comes from the collective life force, but is also individual and is, as such, impacted by personal factors. It recognizes the partial autonomy of the individual in the greater system of life.

The personal essence resides in the inner core and permeates the psychological, the functional, and the structural aspects. The personal essence acts as a guide and a filter on a person’s life. It holds a person’s deep core beliefs and their values. It is a person’s blueprint and it determines what they look like, their susceptibilities and influences, and how they perceive their world and interact within it.

The stronger a patient’s core, the more their life is in tune with their core, the greater the sense of health and stronger the healing potential of the body. Imbalance, lack of harmony or coherence in the personal essence is a precursor (even an actual cause) to subsequent disease. When there is disharmony or incoherence with the personal essence, a patient might have periods of being ‘okay’, but a pattern or sense of un-fulfillment will continue to creep into their consciousness. There often is an unrelenting sense of being unsettled or dissatisfied and there tends to be chaos and disruption in getting things accomplished; for example, a patient finds that they are no longer satisfied with their life, work, or relationships. Situations that they were okay with in the past now bother them and they don’t have the same sense of fulfillment. Ultimately it indicates that their ‘measuring stick’, that is their core, is not in line with their life. Sometimes disharmony at this level is addressed by changing expectations and beliefs, other times it involves making life changes, often drastic ones.

## The Building Blocks to Health

The building blocks represent those lifestyle factors – nutrition, water, sleep, exercise – and behaviours – breathing, posture, fresh air, mental attitude - that provide a patient with the nutrients and qualities that it requires to sustain life. Both the quality and the quantity of the building blocks are important to health. The significance of any one is unique and depends on a patient’s constitution. The building blocks are the foundation of disease prevention and health promotion. Many diseases, especially chronic diseases, are due to the wear-and-tear of having to cope with the constant lifestyle excesses and deficiencies. For example, a history of eating poorly, not drinking sufficient water,



being too sedentary, poor posture, ineffective breathing, not enough fresh air or sleep and relaxation, or holding onto thoughts and emotions that are unhealthy. 'We are medicating the effect of living disharmoniously. We are trying to treat the effects of disharmony rather than treating the cause of disharmony.'<sup>4</sup>

From a naturopathic perspective, assessing the building blocks to health and determining the role that they are playing in maintaining health or contributing to disease is an essential aspect of every assessment. 'The average westerner has an unhealthy, disease-promoting lifestyle, but the tools that a typical medical doctor has (i.e. drugs and surgery) never address this underlying factor. Although effective when appropriately applied (such as surgery for appendicitis), drugs and surgery often have too many side effects to be used in the treatment of many early, common and/or recurring problems people have.'<sup>5</sup>

A healthy lifestyle also involves living a life that is in tune with the rhythms of nature. There is a rhythm to the seasons, to sunrise and sunset, the lunar cycle, birth and death. This rhythm is mirrored in the ebb and flow of the body and provides a guide for behaviour and lifestyle. For example, it is important to eat according to the seasons<sup>6</sup>, melatonin is the principle hormone responsible for synchronization of sleep and it follows a circadian cycle.<sup>7</sup> When a patient is living a lifestyle that is more in tune with the natural rhythms, health is more easily maintained and achieved.

When the building blocks to health are the cause of a patient's health concerns, the impact is usually gradual. The body has internal reserves and when they become depleted or exhausted, a patient's strength and resilience decline. Addressing these building blocks is part of every treatment plan. In many situations, especially when the healing potential of a patient is high, the most efficient way to restore a homeodynamic state might be to simply address the building blocks.

## Environmental and External Factors

The number of external factors and the degree of their impact is increasing all the time. The more awareness that an individual has about the health impact of the external factors they encounter, the more options that they have to lessen their impact. Environmental and external factors need to be included as part of every assessment. The following is a list of common external factors grouped according to five main categories: life events, social factors, environmental factors, external factors and medical factors.

*Life events* refers to the experiences that we have throughout our life. It refers to any accidents or injuries that we have had, the subsequent treatment, and result of those treatment(s). As a patient recalls the significant events in their life what you, as the practitioner, are listening for is injuries that don't seem to have been resolved or situations where the patient is still emotionally 'triggered'. Any situation that still has a negative impact on a patient is detrimental to health.

Sometimes there is a direct correlation between a situation and the onset of symptoms, for example in times of crisis, when there is an accident, or when we hear bad news. When a patient reports that their health has been worse ever since a specific date or period of time then it is likely that a specific event was the catalyst or it was due to a patient's response to an event. 'Man does not simply perceive things, but also perceives the meaning of things. Meaning precedes perception. That which does not mean anything is not, as a rule, perceived. Perception and retention are vital adaptive functions. They are not aimed at meaningless events.'<sup>8</sup>

The degree of impact is mirrored in the degree of shift away from health. How a patient handles a life event



determines the ongoing impact that it will have on their healing potential and susceptibility to becoming overwhelmed in the future. If a patient becomes stuck in the situation – either due to not addressing the initiating factor, or choosing treatments that palliate and suppress versus cure - and the symptoms don't resolve, then it creates or intensifies an area of susceptibility and increases the likelihood of recurring symptoms. For example, when a patient becomes “trapped” in grief, they are likely to be triggered to a greater degree when other situations of grief arise. If the patient remains angry because of an accident that was caused by a careless driver, they are more likely to be overly cautious or nervous when they drive, and they are more likely to become angry in other situations that display a similar pattern, for example a situation where someone is careless or steps in front of them because they are distracted as they are talking on their cell phone.

*Social factors* refer to the people in our lives that affect us. It relates to our family, community, and work environment. For others it represents a cultural, age, or specific religious group. Community is our wider support network. Usually there is a common belief system, a common focus or interest. Research shows a correlation with increased health, the feeling of being part of a community and the creation of health promoting settings.<sup>9</sup>

Social factors can have a beneficial or adverse impact on a person's health; it all depends on the history and dynamics. For many people, their primary support comes from their social network; also the ability to love someone and feel loved is important to health.

*External and Environment* are increasing all the time. Many of today's diseases and health problems are linked to an over-burden of toxins in the body. Toxins and harmful chemicals are everywhere: car exhaust fumes, factory smoke, cigarette smoke, the chemical in personal care products, hair dyes, household and kitchen products, cleaning products, products for our lawns and homes, and products and chemicals used in manufacturing and industry. The body is constantly being bombarded with 'foreign' and toxic chemicals and substances that enter the body through the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and what we put on our skins. In normal internal functioning, the body will 'take-in' substances, keep what it needs and excrete the rest. The body is unfamiliar with many of these chemicals and unable to naturally excrete them. Foreign chemicals often result in modifications of body functions, such as the hormone disrupting impact of plastics (phenols), or they accumulate in tissues and organs disrupting the normal functioning of these body signals.<sup>10, 11</sup> 'It is also known that many toxins undergo bioaccumulation through the food chain and that synergistic effects can occur whereby combinations of toxins can be more potent than the sum of patient toxins.'<sup>12</sup> Nutritional status impacts susceptibility to chemical exposure and the presence of toxic chemicals is intensified by chronic dehydration and diets and lifestyles that are not conducive to aiding excretion, resulting in negative changes to health.<sup>13</sup>

Health hazards caused by heavy metals have become a great concern to the population. Lead, mercury, arsenic, and cadmium are the most important current global environmental toxicants. These heavy metals affect the functioning systems, including the central nervous system, circulatory, reproductive and urinary systems producing serious disorders.<sup>14, 15</sup> Screening for heavy metal accumulation is becoming a necessary part of treatment, especially for chronic diseases. Decreasing the concentration of heavy metals in the body therapeutic effects on certain diseases.<sup>16</sup>

Other environmental influences that are impacting health are the abuse and over-use of computers, television, cell-phones, and other EMF producing devices. Spending hours in front of a computer or television often is correlated with being more sedentary, obesity, vision problems, and neck and low back pain.<sup>17, 18</sup> The use of computer games has been associated with hyperactivity disorders.<sup>19</sup> Cell phones and EMF (electromagnetic fields) devices are correlated with headaches, brain cancer and other health concerns.<sup>20, 21</sup>



*Medical factors* include all forms of treatment that a patient has undergone, such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, reconstructive surgery, and any drugs and supplements that a patient takes. Some medical interventions, such as surgery, are necessary to sustain life or to address serious or life-threatening disease states. From a naturopathic perspective, what is important is the intention and reasoning for the treatment, whether the root cause for the illness was ever addressed, and how the innate healing ability of the body has been impacted. Adverse-effects of medications are treated with additional drugs, which in turn often cause additional problems. When the symptoms are suppressed, versus the root causes addressed, the dis-ease is forced deeper into the body. The deeper within the body the dis-ease is, the greater the impact on health. The assessment of medical interventions, even naturopathic interventions involves addressing the implications of drugs and nutrients, the impact of all treatments and procedures.

It is important to recognize the difference between supporting the healing ability of the body and overriding the wisdom of the body. Drugs and supplements often are prescribed without the root cause being addressed. Often they are prescribed based on symptomology and are only addressing the symptoms, instead of addressing the cause, or addressing the pattern of disharmony. The short-term and linear thinking of prescribing is dangerous to health and contributes to the progression of disease.

There are many unintended reactions to medications. As part of any assessment it is important to investigate the medications that patients are taking, their adverse effects and interactions, their contraindications, and their routes of elimination. Understanding the current health status of a patient, while on medications, involves addressing the impact of the medications on health and recognizing that the normal innate reactions and self-regulatory functions of the body do not operate the same when a patient is medicated.

Putting the logic and reason back into the process of health and disease is a much needed and valued skill that naturopathic practitioners are able to bring to patients. I believe it is the search for and the curiosity of the root causes of diseases that will help to establish naturopathic doctors as the doctors of the future.



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