

# Editorial

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## Lifestyle Medicine in the COVID-19 Era

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the world we live in. Despite social distancing, stay at home orders, various safety measures such as mask-wearing, as well as sanitizing surfaces and scrupulous handwashing, this deadly virus continues to spread. It is now estimated that the COVID-19 virus could result in between 130 000 and 200 000 fatalities in the United States this year.



Every night on the news we see tragic examples of people dying alone with family members unable to be there to comfort them due to the virus. We also see inspiring examples of health care workers and others toiling bravely to save lives while putting themselves at risk. These examples have made me proud to be a physician. We have also seen essential workers continuing to stock grocery shelves, drive busses and subways, and perform other tasks so necessary to keep our country moving. These selfless examples have made me proud to be an American.

Despite the devastation caused by the COVID-19 virus, I believe there is a silver lining in its lessons for lifestyle medicine physicians. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to stop and think about how precious life is and take proactive measures to preserve it. Therein lies an important lesson for lifestyle medicine physicians and other health care workers. While the COVID-19 pandemic has rightly caused all of us to focus on acute measures to preserve life, there are other pandemics in the United

States and around the world, which may seem less visible but are at least as deadly or more than the COVID-19 virus.

For example, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) estimates that over 647 000 people in the United States will die of heart disease every year. Diabetes as listed as the cause of death for over 270 000 individuals each year. The NIH (National Institutes of Health) estimates that obesity each year causes over 300 000 deaths. Over 480 000 people in the United States die each year from cigarette

nutrition, controlling weight, and avoiding tobacco products, their actions speak louder than words and these actions are dismal! The recently released Physical Activity Guidelines 2018 Scientific Report presents overwhelming evidence of the multiple benefits of regular physical activity, yet it also warns that less than 25% of adults are participating in the 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each week which they recommend. According to NHANES (National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey) data,

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smoking or passive exposure to cigarette smoke.

These stark numbers represent a national tragedy of preventable, lifestyle-related diseases. It is incumbent upon us as clinicians who understand and utilize the power of lifestyle medicine to sound the alarm that Americans are literally killing themselves from these lifestyle-related diseases that are almost entirely preventable.

While the public generally understands the value of physical activity, sound

less than 15% of American adults consume the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables while the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015 to 2020 reports that we are eating too much salt and sugar and not enough whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. The obesity pandemic continues to grow in both adults and children. Over 30% of adults experience enough stress in their lives to harm their performance at home or at work. Between 30% and 40% of adults and children report inadequate sleep.

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Helping ameliorate these areas is central to the practice of lifestyle medicine. We need to do a better job!

While the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in heart wrenching suffering, it also has demonstrated that people are willing to change behaviors and exhibit enormous discipline when called upon to preserve their health and the health of others. Given these lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time for members of the lifestyle medicine community to speak forcefully and loudly that the pandemic of metabolic diseases currently caused by poor lifestyle choices contributes over 5 times

as many deaths each year than the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to articulate the importance of people adopting healthier practices and habits to preserve their health in all of these areas!

The pain and suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic reminded me of the profound message of Viktor Frankl writing during the madness of the holocaust when he wrote that we do not get to choose our difficulties but we have the freedom to select our responses. Meaning, he argued, comes from 3 things: the work we offer in times of crisis, the love we give, and our ability to display courage in the face of suffering.

While the epidemics of lifestyle-related diseases in the United States are not as traumatic as COVID-19, the consequences are just as real and over 5 times as prevalent! It is time for us in the lifestyle medicine community to offer the hard work, love, and courage to help turn these pandemics of lifestyle-related diseases around! The need is urgent and the time to act is now!

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