

# STRATEGIES TOWARDS PROMOTING HEALTHY LIFESTYLES AMONG STUDENTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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## **Abstract**

Students in tertiary institutions are faced with breath-taking challenges of education. In most cases the experiences gathered and academic excellence attained by the student form the foundations of future life of the individuals. Many of these students however, come fresh from their homes where parents fed them and took decisions on their behalf. However, students interact with their peers and counterparts, take decisions about their attitude towards academic pursuit, exercise, drink, work etc. They play around according to the options of time, personality, peer group influence, types of hostels and environment, lecturers influence, financial and other material resources laid before them in tertiary institutions. The sum of these life styles exhibited by the students in tertiary institutions can be grouped into healthy and unhealthy lifestyles. In this work, efforts are made towards suggesting good strategies that will enhance the development of the healthy lifestyle among students in tertiary institutions.

Health is a state of feeling well in body, mind and spirit, together with a sense of reserved power. Health is based on normal functioning of the tissues and organs of the body and a practical understanding of the principles of healthful living and harmonious adjustment to the physical and psychological environment and in itself, but a means to a richer life as measured in constructive service to humanity (Charles, 1993). However, environment changes and fluctuates, health then implies an ongoing continuous process of adapting oneself to the environment. This agrees with Hoyman (1995) description of health as “a moving target extending from zero health to optimal health”. In reality, the word health is derived from an Anglo-saxon word meaning “the conditions of being safe and sound”.

According to Allan Margor, Hinda and Meyers (1994) lifestyle is taken to mean a general way of living based on the interplay between living condition in the wide sense and individual pattern of behavior as determined by socio-cultural factors and personal characteristics. However, if health is to be improved, action must be directed at both the individual and environmental factors affecting lifestyle. However lifestyle is based on the idea that people generally exhibit a recognizable pattern of behavior in their everyday lives (eg regular routines of work, leisure and social life).

According to Uton (1999), lifestyle is generally considered a personal issue. However, lifestyles are social practice and ways of living adopted by individuals that reflect personal, group and socio-economic identities. Although lifestyles reflect individual identity, they are primarily a reflection of the norms and values of the group to which the individual belongs. Unfortunately, there is very little public awareness of the link between health and our own lifestyles. Many are unaware that a change in lifestyle is an important reason for the emergence of terminal diseases as causes of increased morbidity and mortality. In recent times, the term “Western Lifestyles” or “Modern Lifestyles” have become popular. These refer to forms of consumerism, involving particular choices in dress and appearance, food, housing, automobiles, work habits, forms of leisure and other types of status-oriented behavior. Shehu (2005) considered lifestyles as the behavior of choice, which affects individual fitness and healthy status. The range of choices available to the individual is a function of education, relationships, socialization, personality disposition, physical and mental ability, situational factors and goals, financial and other material resources Oygard and Anderson (1998).

Healthy lifestyle is defined as the interaction between choice and habit of individuals with different social location, susceptibilities and exposure to risks (Shehu, Onasanya, Ursula and Kinta et

al 2010). A healthy lifestyle can help prevent weight gain, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, stress and early mortality. On the other hand, the cumulative effects of unhealthy lifestyle produce noticeable differences in health of persons who are physically inactive and of heavy smokers and consumers of alcohol.

### **Types of Lifestyles**

Lifestyle can be healthy or unhealthy. Healthy lifestyles are behaviours and social practices conducive to good health that are adopted by individuals but reflect the values and identities of the groups and societies in which they live. Hornby (2001) opined that the lifestyles which are essential for increasing quality and years of healthy life are the healthy ones, for example managing stress, eating balance diet, engaging in regular exercise, avoiding destructive habits (drug abuse, alcohol abuse) adopting good personal health behavior, practicing sex abstinence, adopting good safety habits, getting immunized, getting plenty of rest and sleep, developing good stress and time management skills, knowing where to go for health – related assistance, being informed about common health issues etc.

On the other hand unhealthy lifestyle are those activities that do not bring promotion in the life of an individual rather it contributes to early death and disability; Examples are, not participating in regular physical exercise, improper nutrition, improper management of stress, use and abuse of drugs, promiscuity, poor safety habits, poor personal health behavior, lack of medical advise, unskilled consumption, and not protecting environment.

### **Strategies Towards Promoting Healthy Lifestyle Among Students of Tertiary Institution**

Healthy lifestyles can be promoted in tertiary institutions through the following: adequate/balance diet; moderate regular exercise; mental and spiritual factors; regular medical check-ups; positive lifestyle and effective management of stress.

The trend towards a healthy lifestyle calls for healthy eating and exercise. Healthy eating means eating moderately, that is moderate amount of feeding and adequate amount of the six classes of food. Healthy eating allows the body to reach its maximum genetic potentials. However healthy eating helps to prevent diseases. Excessive cholesterol should be minimized to avert the risk of arteriosclerosis.

Moderate exercise is also important to the body. One should engage in a routine exercise on daily basis that is not strenuous to the body. Exercise helps to ward off or reduce the risk of heart diseases, high blood pressure, cancer, stroke and diabetes. Activities of moderate intensity like swimming, brisk walking, riding a bicycle, washing car etc should be engaged in by people in order to keep fit and healthy.

Positive mental and spiritual factors also play important roles in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. To maintain a healthy mental outlook, entertainment on television, video, magazine etc should be chosen wisely. Our eyes should be averted from that which is “good for nothing”. Entertainment that incites us to do what is bad should be avoided. In addition, our thinking ability should be fortified through a study of God’s word and by seeking divine love, joy, peace and fulfillment.

Having regular check-ups so that any disease that develops can be detected and treated early is very important in maintaining healthy lifestyles. Individuals should expose themselves to varieties of tests and medical examinations as may be directed by the doctor. One can stay healthier throughout life by making positive lifestyle changes. Giving up smoking is one of the most important preventive health measures an individual can take. Gradual withdrawal process has been found effective in breaking smoking habit by smokers who genuinely intend stopping smoking. There is need for individuals to engage in safe sex, promiscuity and unhealthy lifestyle should be avoided. The members of the public should be educated on the dangers of promiscuity and prostitution. Meaningful

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engagement of oneself during leisure times serves useful purposes and makes for healthier lifestyle than engaging in illicit sexual acts.

Effective management of stress can be carried out through the following; music therapy, communication therapy, ecclesiastical therapy, Psychological treatment, Pharmaco-therapy etc. Music therapy involves a mechanism that relieves stress through the agency of music, (Agulanna 1994). Music facilitates ones work, lifts up the individual above the impacts of daily trials and tribulations.

Communication therapy is described by Agulanna (1994) as a process of emotional decomposition. The important fact is not whether the problem expressed to another person receives a solution or not but that the stressed individual through communication is able to talk to, perhaps a sympathetic listening, understanding and appreciative person. This reduce the strengthened weight of the problem and produces a relaxing effect.

The Psychological treatment involves the use of defence mechanisms. Ogwudire (1997) outlined ego defence mechanism to include; rationalism, repression, compensation, regression and displacement. Stress attempts to break up or weight down the ego. The ego inturn strives to keep itself in shape by making use of defence mechanisms. Individual's mild use of defence mechanism will go a long way in reducing stressful conditions.

Ecclesiastical therapy (Prayer). Prayer is an effective means of communicating with God. It could be verbal, non verbal, meditative or contemplative form. One can equally pray by singing songs. Prayer has been found to be important form of solace, tranquilizer, anti-stress and anti-depressant for many people. (Agulanna, 1994, Ogwudire, 1997) Useful Bible Passages in time of stress are Psalm 55:22, 50:15, 34:16, 54:17.

Again, Pharmaco-therapy, which is the drug treatment that involves the use of sedatives and tranquilizers, helps in managing stress.

At the individual level, life skill education should be stressed, especially in schools. Decision making, problem solving, creative and critical thinking building a positive self-image, expressing empathy and coping with peer pressure are of critical importance.

In the immediate environment such as the family, schools, peer group and community, it is important to provide a range of alternative positive behavioural choices for individuals to select from and to support the individual with positive reinforcement.

The population approach and the high-risk group approach should be combined. Healthy lifestyles should be promoted, addressing the whole population and also focusing on high-risk groups.

Finally at the national level, it is critical to advocate the development of strong policies and clear strategies on national health programmes. These should include measures by the government to provide socio-economic, cultures and legal environments that favour positive support for the adoption of healthy lifestyles by individuals. For example, under the Tobacco Free Initiative (TFI), some member countries have increased the tax on tobacco, banned the advertisement of tobacco products on the electronic media and smoking at public places and established tobacco-free schools

#### **Benefits of Healthy Lifestyle**

1. The importance of a healthy lifestyles has to be measured by the incredible sense of well-being and joy that comes from feeling energetic, joyful etc.
2. A healthy lifestyle is a valuable resource for reducing the incidence and impact of health problems, for recovery, for coping with life stressors and for improving quality of life.

3. Doing regular cardiovascular exercises and workouts not only keep you fit but also helps relieve stress and tensions. It helps you fight fatigue, burns fat and loses weight and prevents clogged arteries.
4. Eating healthy and consuming the right amount prevents the risk of heart attacks, stroke and other manifestations of cardiovascular diseases. Poor and improper eating habits can cause illness and other discomforts. Eating nutritious food provides you with the energy and improves you physical, mental and emotional well-being, and as well save on your health care cost.
1. Practicing physical and mental disciplines like Yoga, meditation and breathing exercises, reduces your stress level and helps you relax your mind and body. Yoga for example helps you calm your mind, tone your glands and improves flexibility.
2. There are altogether 599 additives in cigarettes and more than 4,000 chemical compounds created by burning a cigarette. Avoiding bad habits like cigarette smoking lowers your risk of getting emphysema, lung cancer and many other health problems.
3. Maintaining proper sanitary practices and a hygienic way of life is part of living healthy. A clean living and working condition prevents diseases and helps your mind relax. The habit of ensuring cleanliness and a hygienic lifestyle will save you from future health care cost.
4. Allocating time for rest and recreation is necessary to have a balanced and healthy lifestyle. There are many ways to relax and unwind from the stresses of life. Setting aside time to do things or being with your spouse and children will improve your relationship.

### **Conclusion**

As lifestyle reflect both individual choice and the norms and values of a particular group or community, promotion of healthy lifestyles should be directed to both the individual, schools and communities. The focus should be more on the school/community to provide a favourable structural and social environment, which offers healthy alternatives generally. The adoption of unhealthy lifestyles such as smoking, reckless driving, wrong usage of mobile phones, poor dieting, lack of exercise, alcohol and drug abuse and sedentary life styles by a large percentage of students in tertiary institutions, require the attention of all stakeholders of education which include, Federal and State Governments, Ministry of Education, Commissioners for education, parents, students, securities, permanent secretaries, supervisors, school authorities and lecturers.

Collaborative efforts should therefore be put in place to guide the students towards adoption of healthy lifestyles.

### **Recommendations**

Sequel to the findings, the following recommendations are made;

1. The students should be enlightened by the health professionals on healthy lifestyles and the need to adopt healthy lifestyle in their daily activities.
2. Adequate facilities should be provided to encourage students to participate in physical exercises and relaxation in order to reduce stress, anxiety and boredoms which usually lead to crisis in institutions of higher learning.
3. Counselling centers should be established in tertiary institutions to provide information to students on healthy lifestyles and the need to avoid risk behaviours.

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