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The Third Thing That Ages You: Your WORLD (which will grind you down if you let it)

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Living in the United States in 2006, you're constantly surrounded by things that can rob you of your health. Think about it: all those ads for fatty foods and sugary snacks, all the smog and noise, all the chemicals in the soil and water, even just the go-go pace of modern life. Right now, for the first time in history, it's cheaper to eat rich, oily food than wholesome, healthy food. It used to be that only the wealthy could afford meat and white bread. Now the tables have turned: It can cost more to buy a loaf of good whole wheat than a couple of Big Macs, and being fit is almost a symbol of affluence. All of this means that if you want to maximize your own health, you'll need to pay as much attention to what you keep out of your body as what you put in. You'll also need to be conscious of how modern living can steal your sleep, negate your ability to burn calories, and even harm your personal relationships in ways that are detrimental to your well-being. Here are five environmental health factors that can affect both the length and quality of your life—and what you can do to counteract them.

1. Let's start with lunch. You need to start thinking about your lunch hour in a whole new way. Basically, going to a restaurant and spending an hour sitting there and then waddling back to the office is a mistake. Sounds crazy, but it's true. Instead, take a walk. Or run errands. Or, better yet, go to the gym. Grab your lunch on the way back and eat it slowly over the course of the afternoon. You'll get the energy you need from the food, but you'll get it slowly, as you need it, and you'll avoid that 3:00 P.M. urge to close your door and take a nap.

2. The air we breathe has never been more harmful. And we're not just talking gas fumes or exhaust or secondhand smoke. There's a kind of modern pollution that's everywhere: PM-10. You can't see it, smell it, or feel it. It's particulate matter less than ten microns in diameter—just a few ten thousandths of an inch—and what makes it bad is that your body can't filter it out before it gets deep into your lungs. When it gets in, it can lodge there and induce an immune response similar to the one you get if you inhale asbestos. The body tries to kill it as though it were bacteria, but of course you can't kill dust, so the body keeps on attacking it for years. Over time, the lining of your lungs builds up scar tissue and can eventually induce nearby lung cells to become cancerous. There's PM-10 in every breath you take, but it concentrates in certain environments: in homes, especially in winter when the windows are closed; in the workplace, where it's often impossible to open the windows at all; and in cars, taxis, and buses, which don't have particularly good filters in their ventilation systems.

So what can you do? Whenever possible, give your home a good airing out. Do the same with your car—and always open the windows for a few minutes if the car has been sitting in the sun for a while. The heat causes the plastics inside to re-lease chemicals into the air, and they'll stay there until you ventilate the vehicle. You may also want to invest in a certified HEPA air filter for your home. They start at about \$200 and remove as much as 85 percent of the ambient PM-10; imagine how much less of the stuff you'll breathe in over the course of a year.

3. Anyone who's ever cleaned a bathroom with a strong chemical knows that the fumes can make you feel strange for a little while. But now folks who clean homes and offices for a living are reporting long-term health effects like blurred vision and respiratory

problems, which they blame on the increasing number of surface-specific cleaners they have to use. Nowadays we've got glass cleaner, vinyl cleaner, stainless-steel cleaner, cleaners for carpet, for wood floors, for tile. Sure, they work great, but who can say what they do to the human body? The simple stuff our moms used—soap and water, baking soda, vinegar for the windows—worked just fine and is known to be safe. And there are a ton of new cleaners based on natural solvents like citrus oil that work as well or better than artificial products. It can't hurt to switch over to them. Check out ImusRanchFoods.com or Seventhgeneration.com.

4. Lack of sleep is a remarkable ager. And many Americans—including the majority of Americans over sixty-five—cannot sleep through the night. There are many reasons for this, aside from simply being too busy to get enough rest. One is that you're overweight and you can't breathe well because fat has built up around your throat. If your neck size is greater than seventeen inches, you have a greater chance of developing sleep apnea. Other people have difficulties with certain chemicals released by the brain during sleep. And a third source of sleep problems comes from GERD, gastroesophageal reflux, aka acid-reflux disease: You eat late at night, and then you have acid reflux. This is the most common and, fortunately, the most treatable reason. First, elevate your head a little bit in bed—that will help keep the acid down in the stomach, where it belongs. Also, don't eat for at least three hours before you go to bed. (If you really can't resist, go for a cup of noncaffeinated tea or a piece of fruit. Those things are gentle on the stomach but still fulfill the desire to eat something.) By the way, television before bedtime is absolutely psychotic, because it gets your mind racing and decreases the chance of sex (which of course would lead to better-quality sleep). Couples who don't have a TV in their bedroom have more than twice as much sex as those who do.

5. The last environmental factor to look at is relationships—not just with your spouse or significant other but with your friends and family. And it's sort of harsh to ask people, but we need to get at the point: Who's gonna be unhappy if something bad happens to you? If the answer is no one, that's a problem. We are social creatures, and we need to be part of a pack. If we don't achieve that—and we can get it many different ways, through religion or through mambo classes, it doesn't matter—then we're not being fully human.

That's part of the issue with sex. Why the hell do you have sex—besides having to procreate? First of all, sex is a survival tool. Sure, we're all busy, but there are compelling health reasons to do it, and do it often: Men who have sex 116 times a year live 1.6 years longer than those who hit the national average of 58 times a year. (Guys who do it 350 times per annum—admittedly a heroic accomplishment—should live an average of *eight* years longer.) But there's also the fact that, for most of us, orgasm is the closest we get to God. It's our Zen experience. Everything disappears, and it's all bliss. That's why meaningful sexual relationships are so critical.

But other relationships are just as important. There have been a series of studies lately on communities where people tend to live an especially long time, where the average life span is way above average. And one of the things that's common to these communities is the close ties between generations of family and between friends. Here in America, you see your parents on holidays. They see your kids—their grandkids—once or twice a year. If you're like a lot of parents, you don't even see your own kids much during the workweek. But in those communities with long life spans, all the generations gather around the dinner table every night. And friends see one another regularly, too. Now, obviously, we can't all do that. But we can do things to approximate it. Schedule time to just hang out with your old pal. Make dinner family time. Call your folks more often. Because here's the real truth: Your heart has to have a reason to keep beating.

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