

OUTLIERS AND HEALTH

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After reading Malcolm Gladwell's book, "The Tipping Point," I couldn't help but pick up a copy of his new one entitled "Outliers." I reflected that it was somewhat amusing that almost every book or new concept I encounter has some relation to health, nutrition, or methods to accumulate knowledge and discipline for this important aspect of our lives. By definition, an "outlier" is something situated away from a main or related body, usually in the form of influential factors in our lives which don't necessarily always seem to relate to the final product of who we are or want to be, but have a real impact on getting us there. In this book, the author introduces us to multiple influential factors in the lives of individuals or groups which don't seem to be related to the final product. In the first instance, it had to do with a village near Rome named Roseto. During the late 1800's and for many years after that, a large number of people from that village sailed for New York and ended up in a place near Bangor, Pennsylvania where they began establishing a second "Roseto" community in the New World.

By sheer accident, it became known to the medical world that this Italian community enjoyed extremely good health in this country just as they did in Italy. It was rare to find heart disease in anyone under the age of 65. At the time that information was given, one-third of the males in this country died from coronary artery disease, many of them in their 40's and 50's. This, of course, led the interested doctor, Stuart Wolfe, to look for some of the factors which were involved in this extended good health.

They studied cholesterol, exercise, olive oil intake, alcohol intake, job status, and many other factors to try to find out why these Rosetans were so healthy. For example, these people ate sweets, 41% of their calories came from fat, and they ate dough, sausage, ham, and eggs. After studying all of these things and noting that their eating habits were far less stringent than what the medical profession had attempted to impose on this country's population at large and the death rates from heart disease were one-third of that of the neighboring town of Bangor.

In the end, it was obvious that Rosetto was an "outlier" as far as factors of health was concerned, and the real answer to the question of good health happened to be the social structure and sense of community that these people experienced. In other words, it wasn't the individual factors at all, but it was something in the community situation that was accounting for this.

The author also refers to people who have been extremely successful such as Bill Gates or Bill May in the computer world, and noted that there were multiple outlying factors that were critical in building their careers, including a combination of brilliance, insight, and financial success. Sure, these and the other people had discipline, insight, and innate ability. However, they were not on the genius level regarding IQ, but were significantly above average instead.

The real reason that these and other people were successful was the outliers, which were usually not identified by those who studied their success. First of all, being born in the right year put both Gates and May in exposure to the early 70's computer information startups so that they had the opportunity to be exposed to these. By certain quirks of circumstance, they had availability of the first computer system at the North Farmington High School computer center and later at the University of California at Berkeley. At a young age, he was learning enough to be able to rewrite computer language and literally stunned his teachers and colleagues because he was able to put this together based on information which he had acquired by almost accidental exposure to these factors.

Another interesting part of the equation is that if you compare Bill Gates, Bill May, great composers, great musicians, and even basketball players or hockey players, there is evidence that it takes about 10,000 hours to be the "best." For example, in the case of musicians, most of the elite performers had each totaled about 10,000 hours of practice while good musicians who were not elite had totaled about 8,000. Future music teachers had totaled about 4,000 hours.

How do we relate this to health? Well, as I read this I thought about all the "outliers" that shape the pathway of health for most of us as far as our diets, exercise patterns, and exposure to negative health influences, such as smoking or excess drinking. For example, if you were lucky enough to have been born at a time in history and in a country where good food was available, your mother's diet was good, she took no drugs or hormones, and you began your life with breast milk, then you were in a very good position for a head start. Mother's milk has lauric acid (found in coconut oil) which reduces your chance for infections from bacteria and viruses and also contains omega-3 fatty acids which are necessary for brain formation.

Additionally, if you had exposure to good food and nutritious diets in childhood and were rewarded for eating well and disciplined for not eating well, this was another "outlier" influence for you. Reinforcement of a good diet came in the way of better teeth, no dental caries, tasty food, better physical condition, not being sick as much, and learning how to communicate about and appreciate the elements of good diet. In adulthood during the childbearing years, the social forces to stay leaner and the information in magazines, newspapers, and the internet reinforced the information you had already experienced as an infant and learned as a child and young adult. Additionally, your doctor's influence on you to nurture you into a nutritional pathway and suggest certain supplements was also a help. During this adulthood with friends, spending multiple hours discussing food, selecting food choices, and actually eating healthy food together contributes greatly as well.

Now we come to the later adult, middle age, or menopausal years and the tremendous change in metabolism and basal metabolic rate that is seen. With increasing weight gain, the previously learned information about eliminating empty calories and spending more time eating healthier food becomes a real factor. Because one sees their friends in the 50's getting sick or developing cancer, there becomes a huge awareness of the link between good diet, good exercise, and good health. With the maturing awareness that this good life we have "won't last forever," there is a tendency to add exercise, to manage alcohol intake better, to take the right kinds of supplements, and to make other good nutritional choices such as chocolate, acai berry, coffee, spices, fruit, and green vegetables.

Down to the sixth decade, it all comes together and all of the information about good food choices, the right amount of exercise, and the right level of socialization can bring you to the pinnacle of your health. Knowing everything that you do at this point can add 5 to 10 years of actual life and good health as well. If you calculate the amount of time that you have spent learning about good food, exercising, eating good food, and reading about food choices or discussing it with other people, you have your 10,000 hours invested just the same as an athletic superstar or performing musician. Use these outliers to your advantage as you go through life and you will end up with a product which is good and will help you live longer and better.