



Smile.
Throw it away well
the day the day
by 10
Be Grateful.

FULL PLATE

*Nourishing your family's
whole health in a busy world.*

SARAH KOLMAN RN, MA

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The content of this book is for general instruction only. Each person's physical, emotional, and spiritual condition is unique. The instruction in this book is not intended to replace or interrupt the reader's relationship with a physician or other professional. Please consult your doctor for matters pertaining to your specific health and diet.

Full Plate: Nourishing Your Family's Whole Health in a Busy World
by Sarah Kolman RN, MA.

Interior layout and cover design by Joanne Kophs Design.
Contact Joanne at joanne@joannekophsdesign.com

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:

Jeremy, Cy, Joey, and Sam.

I hope to continue learning about health so that I can best support the happiness and wellness that you experience in your lives. I wish for you to live life with fullness and meaning for as long as you are meant to be here. Thank you for being such wonderful blessings in my life and giving me the gift of deep love and unconditional support. *My plate is full!*

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Foreword

By Dr. Wendy Gebhart ND, MSOM

I've had the pleasure of reading this book in the midst of taking a year "off" from my busy life as a naturopathic medical doctor and mother of two young boys. It is heartening to think of how hard we as parents are working to provide the best life possible for our families and ourselves. As women, we are working outside the home more than we ever have before, yet we also have more activities available for our children, more demands placed on them in school, and more distraction by all things digital. Even if we have the information we need to live a more healthy life, even if we know what we need to do, we often end up prioritizing it below the many competing demands in our busy schedule. This was, in fact, one reason I chose to take a yearlong sabbatical with my family—to reprioritize *health* amidst our busy life.

I chose to make it a priority because every day in my office I see the consequences of prioritizing everything else above one's own health. I see patients, usually in their 50's, who have spent their lives caring for their children, working, buying beautiful things, taking wonderful vacations—and neglecting the very vehicle that makes all these things possible, their bodies. I know firsthand that planning for retirement will mean nothing for my husband and me if our bodies are disabled and diseased when we get there. The very conservative estimate by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that more than 60 percent of the leading causes

of death are preventable. This represents a shift in paradigm for even the generation I was raised in, which was taught that your chances for getting a particular disease are directly linked to your genes. There is now a whole field of science—*epigenetics*—that looks at how diet and lifestyle factors turn on or turn off your genes. The reality is that you do not have a predetermined disease destiny. You actually have the power and the responsibility to educate yourself to understand how you and your choices play a key role in health and healing. As parents, we can also make the greatest impact on the next generation by giving our children the tools and education to make health a top priority.

This is no small undertaking. I know that very few people are able to embark on a yearlong healing sabbatical. However, every person does have the ability to make small changes in her or his life. Small changes will in fact lead to lasting results if you take the time to educate yourself about the importance of and reasons for making these changes. In this book, Sarah provides you with very valuable information to educate yourself about the current understanding of disease and prevention. She also offers you concrete, useful tools that you can incorporate as you strive to improve your own health and the health of your family. Although I would recommend reading this book as a whole to gain a complete picture of the health information presented, each chapter shares many gems that will be valuable even if you can only read *Full Plate* in small bites.

I love Sarah's approach to primary and secondary foods. This perspective of balance between food as nourishment and all the other nourishing elements of our lives is a critical piece of health. I have seen many patients who have a "pristine" diet and are suffering with such stress from a job or relationship that they have as many or more symptoms of disease than the very stress-free couch potato with a loving relationship and fulfilling career. The time of picking apart symptoms and health is over, as we are each a whole interconnected system, and toxic relationships are no more or less damaging to our body and mind than toxic foods. Creating a balance between the food we put into our body and the nourishment we receive from relationships, career, sleep, and movement can help

create an understanding of how valuable all our life choices are in our health.

Having firsthand experience from watching others move through their healing, I cannot emphasize enough: *health is an individual journey*. This reality is highlighted by the new information coming out every year regarding diet. I think we are finally understanding there is not a one-size-fits-all diet—or exercise program, sleep routine, or career path. One person's medicine is another's poison. Sarah highlights this individuality throughout her book, encouraging you to take the information and create a plan that works for you and your family. It is important to note that often when we are significantly "off" of our healing path, we might not even know how to make the healthiest choices for our body. If, for example, we are addicted to sugar or stress, there is a very real physiological process keeping us from making healthy choices. At these points in time, we need to follow the advice of health care professionals who have our healing goals in mind until we are able to connect clearly with the choices that are healthiest for ourselves and our families.

Full Plate is both a reminder to find what feeds you and nourish those things, and a guide to the many reasons that make this nourishment a priority. Sarah told me that her goal in writing this book was, first and foremost, to better understand the health choices she is making every day for her own family, but that she also hoped to share this information with those parents who might find interest or value in understanding a little more about health and healing but who feel their plate is too full to add one more thing. I think she has exceeded her goals by providing you with a household companion that will both educate you about and help you to implement whole health into your day-to-day life while still enjoying the fullness of your plate.

Dr. Wendy Gebhart ND, MSOM is a Naturopathic Doctor with a Master of Science in Oriental Medicine. She is a mother of two and has enjoyed a private medical practice in Lander, Wyoming, for the last eight years.

PART ONE

Introduction

1

Our Full Plate

I am one busy mama! I have three children, ages five and a half, four, and three. My husband travels two to three weeks out of every month, and in addition to parenting, I work part-time and go to school part-time. My days are full of hustling out the door on time, keeping my house and yard maintained, preparing three meals a day for my family, running to and from the kids' activities, school, and play dates, and trying to give my all to work and school. I'm surprised I even remember to feed the dog. In a typical day, I rarely sit down or stop moving. I am on the go! That goes for nighttime too. Just because the lights go out does not mean that my work as a mom is done for the night. My three-year-old has been waking up one to three times a night lately and the two older kids never fail to have a bathroom need or a nightmare—we often look like a three ring circus in the wee hours of the night! I have to make a very concerted effort to put attention towards “whole health” values because my life is set up for chaos, exhaustion, and ultimately an unhealthy lifestyle. I have a full plate.

Like me, the average American parent juggles a seemingly insurmountable number of tasks, activities, obligations, and stressors. Parents are stressed trying to balance work and family life, kids are involved in multiple extracurricular activities, on average we live farther from relatives and friends who traditionally have shared in childcare, and we live in a “connected” world that makes it hard to slip away from email, the telephone, the Internet, and television. Not

to mention, the pressures from social media make it easy to constantly compare ourselves to others. Have you noticed that we live in a very competitive parenting world, where parents often feel pressure to give their children a “leg up?” We try to give our kids an edge by over-scheduling for soccer, swimming, basketball, ski lessons, dance class, etc. Even I feel the pressure to keep up with the Joneses. But there is not enough time in the day to juggle all of these demands. It is no wonder that parents complain about feeling tired, overwhelmed, inadequate, and defeated. We can’t do it all, but we actually expect ourselves to do better than ever. Our plates are overflowing.

There is a hard truth to this reality. As we get busier something has to give. Our busy lives come with a cost. We are so distracted by our “activities” that we commonly sacrifice life balance and our health. It is not uncommon for families in our culture to habitually eat out (or in the car), carry high stressors, sleep poorly, and lack deep connection with each other as well as with our inner selves. Perhaps we are losing sight of the real advantage we can give our children.... health. In the scope of our children’s entire lives, developing health nurturing habits will be a much more important factor for their future success than being a soccer star or the smartest kid in class. The focus that we put on work, activities, and tasks can distract our attention from core components of health. Science shows that our body’s reaction to stress, loneliness, inactivity, poor sleep, and poor eating habits is directly related to illness and poor quality of life. Unfortunately, these are prevalent in our hectic lifestyles, contributing to why scientists have predicted that today’s children will be the first generation in history to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.¹

You have probably heard, or noticed, that Americans are a pretty sick population. Obesity and diabetes are more common than ever and heart disease, dementia, ADD/ADHD, autoimmune diseases, cancer, and infectious diseases continue to rise—despite increased financial investment in healthcare. We try to manage disease through expensive treatments and pharmaceuticals, but we need to recognize that our real power to combat this epidemic lies in our ability to prevent and even cure disease through simple lifestyle changes.

More than ever, families are being called to reevaluate lifestyle priorities and values within their homes. There is no lack of nutrition and health advice available to us. Suggestions and advice are often overwhelming and contradicting. One expert tells you not to eat a particular food because it will make you fat and sick, while another expert tells you that you absolutely need it to flourish. There are quick fixes for weight loss and general health advice everywhere we look (few of which result in a sustainable lifestyle change). When was the last time you walked through a grocery store checkout line without some glamorous, half-naked woman offering you the key to health and a slim waistline? We are left to navigate a maze of conflicting and confusing information about how to live a healthy life. The information overload discourages most people from pursuing a healthy lifestyle, even when they have the desire and intention. As most of us can probably admit, the true path to health is much deeper than a fad diet. What you may not have realized is how widespread the factors are that impact our health. For example, did you know that our personal relationships can have just as much impact on our health as the food we eat? Did you know that how we feel about our work may be just as important as physical activity? Health is multifaceted by nature. I refer to this comprehensive, integrative picture of health as “whole health,” which is further explained and explored in the next chapter and will be the main theme that guides the content in this book. It is essential to look at our family’s health from an interconnected approach.

The objective of addressing the stressors that create our “full plate” is not necessarily to strive for an “empty plate.” Having a full plate is not inherently bad. In fact, I want my plate to be full—but in a meaningful way. My happiness and health come when my plate is full—full of healthy relationships, meaningful work, connection to my spirit, physical activity and rest, and nourishing foods. When my plate is full of experiences that feed my body, mind, and spirit, I feel healthy, happy, and complete. I am energized. On the other hand, when my plate is full of busyness and tasks that pull me away from connection, meaning, movement, and eating well, I feel distracted, disconnected, crabby, defensive, and, in general, lost. Our hectic,

fast-paced lifestyles put us at great risk for the overextended full plate that disconnects and distracts us from what really matters—making us critically sick. The good news is that we have an opportunity to redirect our lifestyle to fill our plate with what fulfills us.

As you learn more about the various components of whole health in this book, you may feel pressured to “do more” or “add one more thing” in order to reach your health goals. I would encourage you to refrain from adding stress to your life by simply incorporating new tasks that you believe will magically make you healthy and happy. You will discover, rather, that when we begin to understand what fills our individual plates with meaning and happiness, we are naturally called to reprioritize tasks and activities. As we rearrange, substitute, and shift priorities, the most meaningful tasks begin to fill up the space in our lives. At the same time we begin to let go of the meaningless and harmful habits that have been consuming our attention and time. These refreshed perspectives and newly established priorities guide us and our families along a path leading to long and high quality lives. I offer this book as a guide to help you reflect on the behaviors and habits that might be depleting you, and to experiment with new practices and habits that will guide you to a nourished full plate.

2

Whole Health Philosophy

Health is more than just eating right and exercising. Throughout my career, one of the greatest truths I have witnessed is that health and happiness result not just from eating right and exercising, and not just from social and spiritual connection. After seeing so many transformations of health—from my time as a hospice nurse and a psychotherapist, as well as in my personal life—it is quite clear to me that health transformation occurs as a result of the integration of these and other factors. True health seems elusive when we focus only on one particular part of the health equation. We must give as much attention to our work, relationships, and spiritual connection as we do to food and exercise to truly optimize health. My studies at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition® have validated the larger truths that I have been experiencing since nursing school and have been integrating into my work as a nurse and counselor.

The primarily medical approach to health that I learned in nursing school focused on medical science, disease processes, physiology, and human anatomy. Although invaluable in establishing a foundation for understanding how the body functions and how disease manifests and progresses, in my early nursing career this medical focus always seemed to lack something fundamental. I enrolled in Naropa University's Masters in Contemplative Psychotherapy program in order to further expand my understanding of the complex mix of factors that affect and lead to health. Through mindfulness meditation

practices, the program focused on psychology, human behavior, and the fundamental goodness within us all. Soon, I began to have “aha” moments about what was missing in my nursing practice. We can’t just nurse someone back to health medically; it is more complex than that. Achieving health is a broad pursuit, and at the same time unique to each person. Joshua Rosenthal, the founder of the Institute for Integrative Nutrition®, has established a structure within which these integrative components of health that I was discovering can be better understood. He breaks the elements of health into two categories: “primary food” and “secondary food.”

Primary foods are fundamental parts of our lives that may even be of more “primary” importance than the food we eat when it comes to our health and wellness. To fully understand this concept, we need to think beyond the literal definition of food. We tend to think of food in a limited manner, as edible products that we ingest. Instead, the concept of primary food pushes us to think of food as substances, experiences, attitudes, and outlooks that nourish our body, mind, and spirit. We are fed by more than food alone. As I have experienced in my own career, a key aspect of health is balance and wellness within the following life arenas that Rosenthal identifies as primary food:

1. *Meaningful Work*
2. *Healthy Relationships*
3. *Regular Physical Activity (and Adequate Sleep)*
4. *Connecting to Your Spirit*



Secondary foods are the physical, actual foods that we eat, the nourishment we put into our bodies. There is no one-size-fits-all food standard for everyone in the world. Indeed, as Rosenthal himself notes, “One person’s medicine may be another person’s poison” when it comes to food. Therefore, developing awareness of what eating strategies help each individual thrive is an important part of the equation. At the same time, despite the lack of any blanket recommendation for all individuals, there are overarching principles that guide us towards healthier eating habits that support

the optimal functioning of our bodies. In later chapters, I will review how the standard American diet has significantly contributed to our current health crisis and how our families might be impacted if we don't follow some basic "real food" principles. Conversely, finding balance in primary and secondary foods in our own unique ways will enable us to live long, healthy, productive, and meaningful lives with our families.¹

As I began to put together pieces of this puzzle in my own career, I slowly became aware of the thread that connected my insights on integrative health. Through attending nursing school, working as a hospice nurse, earning my degree in Contemplative Psychotherapy, and in my career ever since, I have come to believe that medical science and conventional "healthcare" are not currently set up to cultivate and inspire true health. Whole health depends upon the interconnectedness of meaningful work, healthy relationships, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, connecting to spirit, and consuming nourishing foods.

My highly valued nursing education took place at Marquette University, a Jesuit University that placed heavy emphasis on connecting and listening to inner spirit. In addition, community service was a core value at Marquette that taught me the importance of connecting with and serving others—regardless of career. I learned that helping others can be one of the keys to a fulfilled life. Then, while studying Contemplative Psychotherapy at Naropa, a Buddhist-based university with meditation practice at the core of its teachings, I began to see that when we are in alignment with ourselves and "still" inside we know best how to be with others. My Naropa education taught me that connection with myself is what fuels and inspires connection with others. I began to experience what connection did for my sense of well-being and health. Regular meditation was a requirement of the program, which led me to be with and know myself in a way that I had never done before. As I began to learn ways to help others see themselves more clearly in order to improve their relationships, careers, neurotic habits, and psychological ailments, I again discovered the complex nature of health, realizing that psychotherapy alone, as I had discovered with

nursing, is rarely the sole solution. But when a variety of the elements of our life are nurtured and we find connection, discover meaning, know ourselves, eat nourishing foods, rest, and move our bodies, we do find health. In this book, I will share what I have learned in my education as well as through my professional experiences to help expand our understanding of whole health.

I have dedicated the bulk of my career to hospice nursing and have gained immeasurable lessons regarding health from the individuals with whom I have worked (including my own family members). Hospice is a service provided to people who have a prognosis of less than six months to live. It is aimed at helping them die in comfort, with dignity, and in the setting of their choice.

The patients I have worked with in hospice have been some of my greatest teachers about life and health, in two significant ways. First, my experience with hospice has given me insight into the fact that so many modern causes of death are the result of a lifetime of unhealthy habits and behaviors. I have seen how the evolution of the average American diet and lifestyle has led to widespread inflammation and disease. I have seen how miserable and painful cancer and chronic illness can be and see time and again that the majority of the population feels helpless to explain the causes of these illnesses. Most of us don't realize that the choices we make and the habits we develop affect us so greatly in our end. Others feel overwhelmed or powerless to change long ingrained lifestyle habits.

More importantly, however, my hospice patients have taught me inspiring lessons of life and love, and, perhaps ironically, they've taught me about health too. The vast majority of people entering hospice care have just transferred from the medical system, where they typically have spent the previous months or years focusing on aggressive medical treatments, fighting an illness or condition, and trying different strategies to "solve" a health problem. They have been fighting for quantity of life. But as people enter hospice there is a sense of slowing down. Patients are assigned a nurse, chaplain, social worker, doctor, nurse's aide, and volunteer. This team is designed to meet the psychological, spiritual, physical, and social needs of the patient, thus shifting the focus of care towards "primary food" in

many ways. This team begins to ask the big questions, quality of life questions. As patients shift from a focus on quantity of life to a focus on quality of life, they tend to reprioritize what is really important to them. The best part of my job has been witnessing people transform and heal as they make decisions about how to spend their limited last days. Patients tend to focus on relationships, spirituality, and meaning. What has been truly awe-inspiring is to see how many patients actually begin to heal physically as they make these very “in-tune” decisions. The body is declining and the person is dying, but as he focuses on what matters, he experiences happiness, contentment, and, I would be bold enough to say, health. Witnessing these transformations has been revolutionary in the way that I think about health. Hospice is a great example of how tending to whole health improves our quality of life and extends our quantity of life. I have found that many hospice patients, suddenly comfortable for the first time in a long time, actually live longer than their prognosis. Studies have validated this observation, showing that when people receive hospice services early they actually live 25 percent longer than individuals who don’t receive these service at all.² In addition to hospice care extending life, patients report feeling less depressed, less anxious, and more physically comfortable. One of the biggest insight hospice has provided me is that if nurturing our “primary foods” at the end of life can bring about transformational healing, imagine the impact we’d experience if we focused on these “whole health” influences throughout our lives.

My education at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition® is a perfect culmination of the insights that have enlightened my education and work, offering a framework for the truths that I have lived and felt in myself, and experienced with my patients and clients. As I am now fully engulfed in raising a family, I find that these truths from my career and education have parallel applications in family life. This is what I would like to share with you: first and foremost the powerful insights of “whole health” and how you can truly transform the way you experience the world. Additionally, I’d like to help you discover how to translate these realities into the hectic life that is parenting in the twenty-first century.

As we explore whole health it is important to keep in mind that health is a fluid concept. Unfortunately, we don't just reach a state of health and maintain that state perpetually. Health is a moving entity that ebbs and flows over time and is ever changing, as our bodies and lives change. Even our knowledge and understanding of what health means to us will change over time as we learn as individuals and as a society about healthy habits. This book provides many ways for you to integrate whole health concepts into your family's lifestyle if and when the time is appropriate for you and your family.

As you embark on this journey you and your family will likely encounter challenges. This is good and to be expected. Many of us clearly see that we have unhealthy lifestyle habits based on how we feel, look, and act, yet, there is no denying that change is difficult. Modifying lifestyle habits can be overwhelming and paralyzing. When we are used to a certain way of living and doing things it is hard to shift those habits, even if we know there is a better way. We are creatures of habit, are we not? At first modifying habits seems daunting, exhausting, and unattainable. However, once we become inspired by new insights, experience new ways of doing things, form new patterns, and gain tools we become better equipped to make those long-term changes. Fear and anxiety of the unknown are often our biggest hurdles in modifying lifestyle habits. Whether we take little steps toward our health goals or dive in headfirst with big shifts, we will notice that we eventually experience a new normal and our values naturally shift to support our new behaviors. I have a friend who was forced to change her diet significantly for major health reasons, and she was overwhelmed after learning about all the food she had to eliminate from her diet. Despite the challenge, health complications forced her to make the necessary modifications. She slowly incorporated the changes and with time shifted her values. She now makes decisions in her life based on her heightened values of healthy foods and self-care. Now that she has assimilated into her new lifestyle she doesn't feel overwhelmed by the changes. She feels empowered and confident in knowing what nurtures her health. Some people may relate to this dire need to change, while many others may not be driven to change by necessity. Often the greater challenge lies

with the second group. The key to improving health is broadening our understanding of the factors that affect it, and targeting the simple, realistic, yet highly impactful lifestyle modifications that we can make.

The concept of whole health can actually make implementing changes more feasible as we begin to recognize how many options for improvement exist. We tend to focus on one or two items when we try to improve our lifestyle, usually diet and exercise. However, achieving health is much bigger, yet not necessarily more difficult, than just diet and exercise. Increasing our awareness of the array of lifestyle factors affecting health is important to achieve “whole health.” The content in this book is designed to expand your framework of wellness and to encourage reflection and healthy modifications in areas that you identify as being important contributors to a potentially damaging or draining lifestyle. While I know we all strive for perfection, we can’t be perfect when it comes to all of these components. In fact, perfection is discouraged. As important as the concepts are, take them lightly, allow yourself to play with them, and explore the ideas without having to *master* the whole health philosophy. In the end you will find that some or many of the concepts can easily fill your plate with health, without filling your plate with chaos.

LIVE IT. MODEL IT. TEACH IT.

My “Live it. Model it. Teach it.” philosophy is designed to provide you with three ways in which you can integrate whole health concepts into your own life and into your family system in a simple, practical manner. You will find this structure at the end of each chapter, starting in Part Two.

LIVE IT.

When we, as parents, live out a healthy lifestyle we gain the benefits of a healthy and happy life. Despite often feeling impossible, we deserve a high quality of life! Since I have become a mother I find that I often think about the health and happiness of my children

significantly more than I think about my own. I tend to focus on my kids and mostly disregard my needs, especially when my husband is out of town and I am managing alone. Unfortunately putting myself last is not helpful or productive for anyone, including my children. When I am healthy and happy it benefits me, obviously, but my family is impacted positively as well. As parents, we owe it to ourselves and our families to prioritize a healthy and happy lifestyle for ourselves. We need to put attention on our own health for three important reasons:

- 1 To be more engaged and responsive in life, and less moody and reactive. Responsive, content, and energetic parenting is a more enjoyable experience to a family than tired, grumpy, and reactive parenting.
- 2 To have a high quality of life, with as little pain and illness as possible. Unhealthy lifestyle habits are scientifically shown to be the biggest contributor to chronic disease, poor quality of life, and premature death.
- 3 To set our bodies up for a long life of enjoyable experiences, including watching our children grow and evolve for as long as we are able.

MODEL IT.

When we live it, we are best able to model to the rest of our family what a healthy lifestyle looks like. Whole health will improve our relationships, our career satisfaction, our connection to spirit, how active we are, and what type of foods we put into our body. The most powerful teaching opportunity as a parent is to show our children what health looks like in all of these arenas through the way in which we live our lives.

TEACH IT.

Modeling is invaluable. But, passing down wisdom and information about health to our family is also an important piece of the puzzle. Many of us need to understand “why” before we can subscribe to a concept and feel confident in making decisions that are best for us. Surprisingly, our children also respond to the “why” more than many of us would expect. For example, in my family it is not uncommon for dinner conversation to involve a discussion about the magic of chlorophyll or how some nutrients make us strong and healthy and others might set our bodies up for illness and not feeling well. It is helpful to share with kids what we know about the benefits of the foods we eat and the things that we do, as well as the harm that certain foods or habits can have on our health. It is not helpful to put judgment on things that we try to avoid or do not value. For example, shaming others for eating fast food or having unhealthy lunches at school is not helpful. It is best to concentrate on the knowledge that we have and the reasons for which we make our decisions. Our goal is for our children to have information and knowledge in order to make informed decisions for themselves, not to condemn and judge others for their choices.

This book will provide tools and knowledge for you to live a healthy lifestyle, model it to your family, and teach information, insight, and rationale so that your family can be informed and empowered to make their own decisions about their health choices. The “whole health” perspective outlined in this book will enable you to look at many aspects of your life and decide what areas you want to put attention towards in order to enhance your health and happiness. Implementing lifestyle modifications that may at first seem overwhelming and difficult will become easier than you expect.

3

Inflammation Affects All Aspects of Our Health

Cellular inflammation in the body is now thought to be at the root of the most disabling and common illnesses in modern society, and is caused and sustained by many of our habitual lifestyle practices.¹ Understanding the impact of inflammation is an essential link to appreciate the connection between our lifestyle factors and disease and illness, and therefore the link between health and the wide-ranging strategies aimed at decreasing inflammation.

Inflammation is the body's attempt to protect itself. The purpose of inflammation is to remove harmful substances, like damaged cells, irritants, or pathogens, and to initiate the healing process. When something harmful or irritating affects a part of our body, there is a biological response to try to remove it. This process brings about the signs and symptoms of inflammation: local redness, heat, swelling, and pain in the affected area of the body. It is the body's natural healing response. Acute, short-term inflammation is the body's way of healing itself by bringing nourishment and immune activity to a site of injury or infection. Infections, wounds, and tissue damage would not heal without inflammation. Instead, tissue would become more and more damaged. Inflammation is our body's way of dealing with acute, short-term attacks on the body. However, when inflammation is stimulated on a prolonged or chronic basis, when no threat is present, its effects on the body become more complicated. The constant production of immune cells resulting from this effect

no longer serves a specific purpose, and can result in tissue damage and illness. This is called chronic inflammation, and it can be caused by stress, poor diet, exposure to toxins, poor sleep habits, sedentary lifestyle, and loneliness (yes, even loneliness), to name a few.²

Chronic inflammation is more and more becoming recognized as the root cause of many serious illnesses, including heart disease, diabetes, ADD/ADHD, stroke, obesity, migraines, thyroid disease, many cancers, Alzheimer's disease, asthma, allergies, and depression.³ Because inflammation manifests as so many types of chronic and life-threatening illnesses, many experts are now realizing that chronic inflammation is essentially the leading cause of death in the United States.⁴

Dr. Andrew Weil is a medical doctor, naturopath, teacher, and author on holistic health and is well known for establishing the field of integrative medicine. Weil has identified many of the connections between inflammation and disease, and frequently recommends an anti-inflammatory diet (similar to the Mediterranean diet) and lifestyle changes in order to combat them. Weil explains that coronary heart disease begins as inflammation in the arteries and Alzheimer's disease begins as inflammation in the brain (which, from his perspective, is why ibuprofen, an anti-inflammatory, has a preventative affect against Alzheimer's disease). He also notes that India—a country that traditionally uses large amounts of turmeric (one of the most potent natural anti-inflammatory substances) in their cooking—also has one of the lowest rates of Alzheimer's disease in the world. In his opinion, even links between inflammation and cancer are beginning to make sense. For example, anything that is pro-inflammatory causes cells to divide more frequently, which results in an increase in malignant replication—in other words, cancer. Similarly, he claims that aspirin's powerful anticancer affect is due to its anti-inflammatory properties. The good news is that if many chronic diseases have a common root (inflammation), then there may also be a common solution (a hint, it is not popping aspirin on a daily basis). We often want quick fixes and medications in our society in order to make us well. Masking symptoms with medications, such as anti-inflammatory drugs, can cause other illness-related issues from the side effects (some of which

are life-threatening). In addition, masking the symptoms in a way gives us permission to continue living the lifestyle that likely caused the problem in the first place. Instead, we can treat the underlying root cause of the problem by understanding the ways in which we create cellular inflammation in our bodies and consequently reverse that process through lifestyle changes. Anything we can do to keep inflammation at bay (I will share many of them) will help us prevent disease, live longer, and feel healthier.⁵

Unfortunately, chronic inflammation itself typically does not produce noticeable symptoms until actual loss of function occurs somewhere in the body. Chronic inflammation often manifests at imperceptible levels, often silently damaging our tissue over an extended period of time. This process can go on for years without being noticed, until seemingly out of nowhere we are diagnosed with a serious condition or disease. Chronic illnesses occur often after a lifetime of inflammatory damage.⁶ The slow onset of disease is problematic in that people often do not make the connection between their ongoing poor health habits and low grade symptoms or the condition that “appeared out of nowhere.” It is hard to see our bad habits as problematic if we don’t notice detrimental damage until it’s too late. In some ways it’s like maintaining a car. If we let the little problems go unnoticed, the car will eventually develop bigger problems and peter out, not lasting as long as it could have if it had been cared for and maintained. My dad always says, “If you take care of your machines, your machines will take care of you.” Similarly, if we take care of our body, our body will take care of us. By maintaining and fine tuning health our body will run smoothly and lead to a high-mileage life. And one of the most important ways to maintain health is to manage cellular inflammation.

When I was a freshman in college, I regularly suffered from body aches and pains as well as general fatigue. After perplexing many doctors, I was finally diagnosed with Fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is a common diagnosis given to people who have generalized pain of unknown origin. I was put on muscle relaxers to help with the daily discomforts I experienced. The muscle relaxers did a great job of making me want to sleep much of the day and negatively affecting

my engagement in school. I accepted the Fibromyalgia diagnosis and treatment for several years. Later, motivated by a book I read about the harmful effects of sugar and processed foods, I eliminated refined sugars and highly processed foods from my diet. When I made these changes, my daily aches and pains vanished. It turns out that I did not have Fibromyalgia and most definitely did not need muscle relaxers. The aches and pains I was experiencing were the result of the inflammation my body was experiencing from the sugar and processed foods that I was eating every day. To this day when I eat sugar or processed foods, I immediately feel my body ache—an instantaneous reminder of the inflammation that arises when I eat such foods. What I feel as discomfort might be acute inflammation in my body if it is a one time occurrence; however it becomes chronic inflammation when I continue to eat those foods, causing debilitating, constant inflammation in my body. Not everybody feels a direct response to harmful foods, like I do with sugar and processed foods, but that doesn't mean that chronic inflammation isn't silently taking place, at unperceivable levels in the body.

Our diet is an important part of keeping chronic inflammation at bay. It is important to realize that dietary components can either trigger or prevent inflammation from taking root in our bodies.⁶ Certain foods, such as trans-fats and sugars, can be pro-inflammatory, meaning they cause and support inflammation in the body. And excess omega-6 fatty acids increase inflammation, while omega-3 fatty acids decrease inflammation.⁷ Americans typically consume high amounts of omega-6 fatty acids, tipping the scale towards inflammation. We will later discover how these and other foods influence the inflammatory process and that we are able to use food to contain inflammation and reduce long-term risk of disease.

It may be obvious that our diets could impact chronic inflammation, but diet is not the only factor. Unhealthy lifestyle habits outlined in the next four chapters can also contribute to chronic inflammation. We will explore how the lifestyle choices that we make really do impact inflammation in our bodies—and have other related health ramifications, as well. The good news is that there are practical ways we can decrease cellular inflammation and improve our health

through work, relationships, physical activity, rest, and connecting to ourselves in a deep way. We get to use the many opportunities in our busy day to turn negative, draining, disease-causing habits into practices of nourishment, meaning, and connection for ourselves and the whole family.

