



*Being*  
**ALIVE**

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***A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Survival Kit***

*To my wife and loving family, friends and all those that helped to  
make this book become a reality, thank you!*

## Being Alive

### **Introduction**

Arterial disease has been described as a disease of Western lifestyle. But what is it about our lifestyle that leads to arterial disease? How does arterial disease emerge out of the things we do each day?

We are told we must make lifestyle changes. But if we don't understand what it is about our lifestyle that leads to disease, how do we make the right changes? What is it that constitutes a healthy human life?

Despite all the research, money and medical information available, arterial disease continues to dominate our landscape. It continues to be the biggest killer in our society and we probably all know someone who has had either a heart attack or stroke.

Considering that arterial disease is so prevalent and so dangerous we'd probably have to admit we haven't been doing such a great job at controlling or treating it. In fact, we're probably doing pretty poorly.

To make effective lifestyle changes we need to properly understand the link between lifestyle and disease, learn to recognise the characteristics of a healthy human life and appreciate the devastating implications of arterial disease for our lives in order to develop the impetus for change.

Part of the difficulty in determining how to go about change is that there is so much conflicting advice. Even within the medical profession there is disagreement. Much of the debate is confused by loose terminology or outdated nomenclature (naming system). So often the advice is preachy or offers simplistic solutions.

This book relies on some of the more recent research in the area of lifestyle and arterial disease, and attempts to present the information within an objective, logical framework. The purpose is to inform and empower the reader. No judgement is made about how the information should be used as each individual must make their own choices. What is offered is an understanding of the link between the way we live our lives and the development of arterial disease. The characteristics of healthy living are presented in order that the reader may make his or her own choices.

*'And in this place, can you reassure me  
With a touch, a smile – while the cradles burning  
All the while the world is turning to noise  
The more that it's surrounding us, the more that it  
destroys  
Turn up the signal, wipe out the noise.'* **Peter Gabriel**

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## **Chapter 1.**

## **Survival**

Your health is your best asset, yet far too much time is spent frittering it away. Keeping healthy is the best investment you can make and like all other assets it needs protecting. All too often its value is only really appreciated after it's been lost.

Most of the things that can add value to your health are there at your finger tips, but you may not be aware of how to make full use of them. This book is a survival-kit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teaching you how to add value to your health and increase your chances of living a long and healthy life.

Throughout history average human life expectancy has rarely risen above 40, but over the last 100 years in developed countries life expectancy has almost doubled! Today in Australia the average life expectancy is 75 for males and 81 for females, but only about 1 in 5 will reach this age in good health (1). Increasing your chance of remaining in good health will require some planning, dedication and a great deal of common sense. Just like an athlete preparing for the Olympics, you must prepare for old age if you are to enjoy your autumn years.

Our body continually replaces and replenishes itself automatically. The entire skeleton is replaced every few weeks in order that bones remain strong and healthy.

Genes program the body so vital systems are maintained in good shape to the end of our natural life expectancy – that is to around 40 years of age! After that your auto-regulation systems (termed ‘homeostasis’) will start to break down and repair processes fail, leading to most of the diseases we now commonly recognise in the Western World.

Most Australians today are living way beyond what was historically our *natural* age limits. For example, the menopause is an end of life event in all mammalian species. Only in the human has it become synonymous with middle-age, because our social and health successes over the last 100 years have virtually doubled human life expectancy. We live in a technological age, but our genes still program us for the Stone Age. Evolutionary change is an extremely slow process measured in thousands of years. No doubt in another 1000 years or so, the human menopause would have reached 80 years of age; in the meantime mid-life hot flushes are a fact of life!

Because we all have so much of our genetic information in common, not surprisingly we tend to experience the same diseases in later life. In fact, 60% of all Australians will suffer overtly from cardiovascular disease (either a heart attack or stroke), but virtually 100% will develop arterial disease to some extent in later life, many without even knowing it (2). This will lead to fatigue, intellectual and physical decline, infirmity and loss of potency.

As a GP, I have seen so many people work so hard to save for their retirement, only to find when it comes to

their health they haven't put anything away. The coffers are empty and they will never see the fruits of their labours. For some, the health chips run out way before retirement so they'll never see that son get married, daughter graduate or meet the grandkids. It's not only a tragedy for the individual, but it's also a devastating blow for the remaining family. Then there are those who survive to retirement only to find misery and suffering awaits them. Debilitated by stroke or heart attack, all their dreams disappear in smoke, their lifelong savings then to be depleted by mounting medical bills.

As grim as this may sound the situation can get worse, because for many the retirement years from 65 may be as long as our working years. Some may not be able to live off retirement savings for the full duration of retirement. They could find themselves forced to work to generate income well into their 70's or even 80's as Government support dwindles along with their health. For those limited by heart disease, arthritis or obesity this may be impossible. Gradually many will slip into poverty as a direct consequence of failing health.

Now if this all terribly depressing then this is the book for you! Because this book will give you real answers to real health problems you're likely to face. Whether you realise it or not, these are the real issues that challenge us as we age, and most of these problems that are about to beset us will pretty much be the same for you, me and most other Australians!

Just as we all have arms and legs, so too we share the same genes, the same diseases, the same causes for illness and for death – and this is the really good news!! Because if most of us share the same diseases, then the diseases we get should be predictable. And if they're predictable, they should also be largely preventable. And this indeed is what we find, that most of us are succumbing to illnesses that we didn't know we had and if we'd taken the right steps to prevent them, we might never have got sick in the first place. The problem is most of us never know we're unwell until it's too late and if you don't know you're unwell, you can't really do anything to correct it.

What I'm about to show you is that you may be a lot sicker than you realise and once you understand this, then the cure is within your grasp! What's more, it will cost you very little other than time, commitment and vigilance and herein lies the rub.

Health is so often neglected and it's not really appreciated until it's been lost. The solutions suggested in this book will challenge your beliefs and understanding of health, take you to new territories and demand a change in your priorities and ultimately lifestyle. This is a world where everything your grandmother ever told you is probably going to turn out to be true! And it's not pretty.

This book is about survival, our most basic instinct. We are living in a toxic world and the most toxic thing you will encounter is **YOU**. Didn't granny always say, "You're your own worse enemy"? Well she was spot on - you are

public enemy number one. Through the course of this book you will come to understand this menace and ultimately how to control and neutralise it, in order to minimise the harm you can do to yourself.

You see, we all wake up each day, the birds might be singing, the day dawning and generally we always feel pretty good. We may have the odd bad day now and again, but generally things turn out pretty much okay. And life just goes on like this, day in and day out with no major problems. It's hard to imagine anything different, wake up and I'm okay, we're conditioned into believing it'll be alright. Then one day, after a very, very long time, you wake up and something isn't working! It might be your heart, it might be your mind, the leg won't move – and you think 'where the hell did that come from?' You just didn't see it because it lay below the surface like an iceberg. And the sad part is that nobody, absolutely nobody, will ever be able to put you back together again. Despite all that modern medicine has to offer, no one knows how to repair a heart, a brain or any other organ. You simply become a salvage operation, working out how to make the most of the broken pieces. What this book will teach you is how to navigate your ship and avoid those icebergs.

At the end of the Second World War, when Roosevelt was at Yalta negotiating the peace with Stalin and Churchill, his blood pressure was around 240/140. He had a condition called 'Essential Hypertension', a term which was originally coined because it was believed, erroneously, that the hypertension (high blood pressure)

was essential to perfuse the organs. So bad were Roosevelt's headaches that his physician would order him back to bed by midday. So Roosevelt got a couple of aspirin while Stalin got Eastern Europe. Shortly after Yalta, Roosevelt died from a massive cerebral haemorrhage and it was reported in the New York Times that his physicians didn't see it coming! He had hit a very big iceberg, but in those days the links between blood pressure and disease were less well understood and without the skills to navigate successfully he couldn't avoid what lay below the surface.

Healthy living should not be left to chance. Just as the athlete trains and prepares for competition, then so one should commit to train for survival! Health into old age does not come automatically and can best be obtained through effort and perseverance. There's no such thing as a free lunch, if you want to hear the tune you must pay the piper! It may not be attractive, but the alternative is far worse. There will always be a few that win the lottery ticket and seem to survive well no matter what. But most of us won't be that lucky, and our best hope is to work at it.

Now you might say that we all have to die of something, so why not simply accept fate and enjoy life? This book is not about cheating the grim reaper; it's about making the most of your health while you're alive. It's true that for many with debilitating disease, death will be a release. In youth and middle age we are often oblivious to the sufferings of old age. We might say these are the twilight years, what do you expect? It's simply old age. But these

'twilight years' might last for 20 or 30 years. Imagine living 20 years without the use of your limbs, dependant on others for your most basic needs, so breathless and fearful you can't even step outside the front door.

The simple truth is that healthy living makes for happiness. Healthy living elevates levels of important neurotransmitters such as serotonin and endorphins, improves sleep patterns and metabolism and provides a general feeling of vitality. Poor living leads to disease and infirmity, loss of function and potency, unhappiness and depression. A sense of happiness is programmed into us, to a much greater extent than is generally appreciated. Our ability to make choices about routes to happiness is to some extent illusory. So much of our happiness is a product of biochemical signalling in the brain, of which we have limited direct control or awareness. Of course we can make short-term decisions that bring immediate gratification and reward, but over-time there are more powerful forces at work.

Most of today's elderly have lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War; they're a sanguine lot and will accept their fate generously. Those of us born after the War, in the boom years, have no experience of hardship. We have benefited enormously from the prosperity of the post-war years and have lived relatively well thanks to advantages brought about through technology. Many have never experienced suffering, some have only been troubled by pleasure-seeking decisions and are ill equipped to accept the restrictions that ill health can deliver. Depression is one of

the most common complications after a heart attack and can significantly affect prognosis. Similarly the development of Alzheimer's disease is often complicated by depression and anger in the early stages, as the individual begins to recognise his or her loss of potency.

This book is not about anti-aging, it's about protecting your health, that invaluable asset, which will only ever be appreciated after its disappearance. Groucho Marx once said 'I would never be a member of a club that would have me as a member.' Sadly we are so often cynical of the good things we possess and spend our time dreaming about things that would quickly become another object for cynicism should they ever come into our possession. Yet the most valuable asset - health, is completely taken for granted and nothing done to protect it until we're no longer a member of the healthy club.

Because most of the diseases we are likely to experience are predictable, they are in fact largely preventable. 90% of cardiovascular deaths are preventable and 90% of deaths under the age of 65 are preventable (3). So the question is why are so many succumbing to these diseases? The reasons can be listed as follows;

1. Most people are unaware of disease prevention strategies.
2. Delivery of disease prevention has been haphazard.
3. Some information is relatively new.
4. Many people are ignoring some of the messages.

Today we are bombarded with an oversupply of information and misinformation. Identifying and filtering information that is genuine and useful is an onerous task. Much of what is presented to us is attractive and appealing to our sensibilities, but does not necessarily give us the hard information we really need to know. It's much easier to sell information to the public that's warm and fuzzy, but that doesn't make it useful or accurate.

This book is a frank and honest presentation of information you need to know to navigate murky waters and enhance your chances of survival and longevity. Some of the information may even seem a little brutal and there is no attempt to present any spiritual meaning. There is however one very simple Darwinian message that comes out of the information; the individual that is true to his or her nature and that can best adapt to his or her environment has the greatest chance of happiness and survival.

In order to survive and enjoy what life has to offer you must understand how your body works and how to make the necessary changes in your life that will encourage good health and happiness. You will need to understand why things go wrong, to learn how to 'track' your performance and what measures are effective when things do go wrong. It is essential to understand how your brain monitors and controls all that is happening in your body, sensing changes in your environment and reacting

through a series of neurochemical influences to affect the way you behave and adapt.

Your brain acts like an enormous supercomputer, receiving information from all parts of your body and regulating processes accordingly. Most of this occurs spontaneously without your conscious awareness. In addition, it's estimated that at least 70% of the communication between individuals is non-verbal and that most of it occurs at a subliminal level that we do not consciously process.

The amount of information that the brain processes that enters our consciousness is relatively small. For most tasks we function on automatic pilot. We are only consciously aware of a small number of the tasks the brain performs, most of the processing is done in our subconscious. Yet it's what goes on without our knowledge, this subconscious activity, which turns out to be most important for our survival. For that we function on autopilot.