

Okinawa – Live Long and Prosper

By Michael Torreiter, Naturopathic Doctor

Okinawa is a series of islands off the coast of Japan. The people there have the longest life expectancy and the longest health expectancy in the world. They also have the largest percentage of centenarians (people over the age of 100) – many of them still healthy, active, and living independently.

The Okinawan elders health profile is truly remarkable. The three leading killers in the West – coronary heart disease, stroke, and cancer – occur in Okinawa with the lowest frequency in the world. Breast cancer is so rare that screening mammography is not needed. Most aging men have never heard of prostate cancer. Human beings have been searching for the elixir of youth throughout recorded time. Have the Okinawans found it?

Reports of this impressive longevity in the 70's, sparked the Okinawan Centenarian Study – a 25 year scientific study of the Okinawan elders – in order to identify the factors that contribute to their outstanding health and long lives. The program wound down in 2001 and the study's leading scientists released soon afterwards a book entitled "The Okinawa Program" compiling this research. For this article, I have picked out some of the key lifestyle and dietary practices of the Okinawan people that we can adapt in our own lives to help ensure longer and healthier lives.

Diet

The Okinawans' diet is quite different from the standard North American diet. It is based on whole grains and vegetables and includes fish, seaweed, and soy products. Complex carbohydrates (such as rice) make up 55% of their total calories, and they have very limited simple sugars, dairy and red meat. All foods are allowed in moderation, but the overall balance is what matters. Observe the table comparing the composition of the average American Diet to the Okinawan Elder's diet.

Food Group	American	Okinawan
Meat/poultry/eggs	29%	3%
Calcium foods (ie dairy)	23%	2%
Fruit	20%	6%
Vegetables	16%	34%
Grains	11%	32%
Flavonoid Foods (i.e, soy)	<1%	12%

Omega-3 foods (e.g., fish)	<1%	11%
----------------------------	-----	-----

An important key to their approach to food is in calorie restriction. Okinawans eat as much as 40 percent fewer calories than we do! Their smaller stature (on average) accounts for part of this difference, however the researchers suggest that it may be one of the most important factors in why they live so long. Eating fewer calories has long been considered protective against cancer and other chronic illnesses and has been identified as a consistent and reproducible method of increasing longevity in animal studies. The reason is this: the more calories you eat, the more calories you burn, and the more free radicals are created. Free radicals are unstable cells that cause damage to cells, which is one of the main causes of aging. Okinawan elders have low levels of free radicals in their blood.

High antioxidant intake is also protective against free radical damage. Antioxidants from vegetables and legumes are in abundance in the Okinawan diet, another important factor.

Exercise

Most older Okinawans are lean and physically fit from a lifetime of activities such as gardening, walking, traditional dance, and martial arts such as karate and Tai Chi. These activities are an important part of the Okinawan culture and help connect the mind with the body. Karate was developed in Okinawa. Karate and other martial arts provide well-rounded fitness combining anaerobic and aerobic activity as well as increasing flexibility.

Seikichisensei is an Okinawan martial arts master close to one hundred years old who still teaches and occasionally competes. In fact, at a match on New Years Eve in 1999, Seikichisensei was pitted against a former World boxing Association Flyweight. The old master ended the match victorious after twenty minutes, with one quick blow. The young boxer was heard leaving the ring muttering, “I can’t believe it...he beat me...he beat me.”

Mental Health

Okinawans have a rich history of spirituality and observing religious rituals. In fact traditional shaman healing prayers and rituals, along with herbs and acupuncture, are integrated into their health system alongside modern medicine. The Shaman is needed to address the spiritual imbalance thought to be at the root cause of illness. Their spirituality is described as a blend of Taoism and its reverence for nature, Confucianism and its respect for others, and native spirituality. It is mostly the Okinawan women who are the spiritual leaders and shamans. Interesting to note, they outlive the men on average by 8 years – a more substantial gap than in most countries. The Okinawan Centenarian Study involved personality testing that showed the elders scored low on feelings of “time urgency” and “tension”. They have a less rushed, more easy-going approach than here in the West.

The elders’ optimistic outlook on life and adaptability have helped them cope with the many stressful life events. The elders scored high in “self-confidence” and “unyieldingness” and tended to have a more dominating personality with a strong will and independent spirit. The positive cultural attitudes in Okinawa towards the elderly may be contributing to their confidence and sense of well being.

Lessons Learned

The Okinawan study certainly makes a compelling argument for living more like the Okinawan elders - eating less red meat and more fish, pursuing a rich spiritual life, and getting a handle on our stress response. These ideas aren't new – it confirms what we already know. In Okinawa however, the social structure supports a healthy lifestyle (everyone's doing it!); whereas here in the West the rat race, fast food culture and consumerism, are the mainstream. Making healthy choices is more of an effort and “goes against the grain”.

But this study shows how seeking out these pursuits are invaluable. Start a meditation group, take Tai Chi, and reach for that carrot and you may just find yourself anticipating the next turn of the century party!