

Sustainability for Humans and the Humane

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Our beautiful planet Earth is an unbelievable system of ecological perfection. Nature continues to surprise us with its fantastic ability to recover, for example after natural disasters, and in its way to keep the biological balance when it comes to both plants and animal species.

An important rule of nature is rhythm. Rhythmic changes like the returning of the seasons, the tide and the circadian rhythm.

As one of the species, the human being is part of this rhythmic scenario. Our brain with the pineal gland registers light and darkness and induces us to go in to the important sleep that is needed for our recovery and wellbeing. Other rhythms in our bodies are heartbeat, breathing, pulsative hormone cycles, menstruation cycle, our repetitive need of food etcetera. We need to respect and adapt to our rhythm needs to function and feel well. This was the natural way of living in older times when we lived closer to nature. The best example is our need of rhythmic sleep. When this rhythm is disrupted by lack of sleep and sleep disturbances we will, after some time, not function or feel well. Our daily life is affected in a negative way [1].

The biggest issue today is man's threat to the climate. We have the power to disturb the perfection of the ecological system, which in the long run means destroying for ourselves. The question of sustainability is on top of most industrialized countries to-do-list. Sustainability for architecture, waste sorting, energy use - to mention a few.

Not many mention the ongoing destruction of ourselves by disrespect and neglect of nature within us. All over the world we notice these new problems of our time. The increase of mental health problems is a serious problem. Among children and adolescents we see a rapid increase in mental problems such as anxiety, depression, eating disturbances and self-destructive behavior [2]. Not to mention physical problems such as obesity.

As a pediatrician I meet these children and adolescents almost every day at work. It is a frequent category of patients that I seldom met 20 years ago.

So, what has changed recently in our lives? Talking to my patients I realize that ordinary life has changed enormously with the digitization. Long hours in front of the screen, lack of sleep, too little physical activity and bad eating habits. Especially after the introduction of the smartphone in 2007, we notice the increase in mental problems among the young [3].

These technical products are made by and for us to simplify life and give us joy. And they do in a fantastic way, especially at work for professional adults who mostly can handle the use. It is much harder for the young to cope because of their lack of maturity and their high risk of addiction. They depend on help and guidance from the adults.

Serious side effects are related to overuse of screens [4]. These devices are in no way adapted or considerate to the human brain and its need of rhythm. Children and teens are easily addicted and without adult guidance they end up with long screen time, affecting rhythms like sleep and eating. The sedentary time also results in less physical activity.

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More and more studies imply that long screen time affects us badly. The young brain with screen addiction often gets side-effects, such as introversion, because of lack of social training, problems with concentration, restlessness, depression and anxiety. The PISA results in Sweden from 2015 showed that students with long screen time, in school and at home, perform worse in school [5]. So screens for learning does not seem optimal for the developing brain [6-8] unless the students get strict guidance from teachers, securing limited data without multitasking.

Long screen time makes the child focus on life on the screen more than life IRL (in real life). Since games and social media are addictive the real world becomes grey and boring. The child's own fantasy is put on hold and the child feels empty on creative ideas.

What can we do?

Knowledge and more knowledge is always the answer. Let old wisdom rule. Let us go back and look at the human being as the natural creature we are.

What makes us happy?

1. We are social and spending time together makes us happy. Being loved and to love is a gift that all of us are worth getting the chance to find. *For this we need to protect social training IRL.*
2. We need to use and develop our body; physical self-confidence is something a child can develop with training. *Physical exercise could be on a daily schedule.*
3. We should use and develop our fantasy in interaction with the real world - using all our senses. This can of course include digital work, but the main focus should be IRL, since we are part of nature. *Helping children to keep a healthy balance between digital and real life is crucial.*

Sustainability for our children's development of brain and body must be in focus. We are obliged to take care of these ourselves,

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because the machines will not. The digital world is not designed for our rhythm and does not take human needs into account.

This is a task and challenge for the grown up-world. It takes a village to raise a child. Everyone who has contact with children; parents, teachers, grandparents...should help them handle these new challenges.

The knowledge of a sustainable lifestyle can be spread to children but especially to parents. School is the optimal arena to reach all children, from early age, with special pedagogical programs, including advisory guidelines for parents. Children can get a life guided by responsible adults who give them a healthy lifestyle, in harmony with natural needs.

Society can help spreading this knowledge and support programs for a sustainable life.

The digital era is fantastic but also dangerous. Without regulations, it is a threat for a healthy human development.

Competing Interests

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