



USING SUPPLEMENTS

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In my own research and practice I have come across four principles for successful supplement usage. So far these seem to hold true for any number of nutritional products, and apply to diverse physical conditions. I share them here in the hope that supplement users may benefit from a perspective that balances or departs from many popular trends. Please also refer to the *Integral Lifework Baselines* for specific dietary recommendations in the context of integral practice.

PRINCIPLE ONE: EVERYONE IS UNIQUE

This principle is fundamental to *Integral Lifework* approaches in all twelve essential dimensions of nourishment. In essence, there cannot be any one remedy, practice, truism, insight or form of nourishment that applies to everyone uniformly and without exception or variation. We are all unique, and thus we require unique adjustments to any given approach so that it works well for us. There will always be a panacea that does wonders for one person – perhaps even many people – that in turn is detrimental to another individual or group. One size does not fit all.

In diet and supplementing, this principle is particularly important. Our biological diversity, the changes to our body that occur during our lives, other supplements or medications we are taking, our overall diet and exercise level, and the unique environmental factors we have been subjected to over time all contribute to the *inherent variation* of what influences our well-being for good or ill. From my own research and experience, I believe the beneficial claims on nearly every supplement or dietary regimen should be followed by the caveat “be careful, be informed, and pay close attention to what your body tells you, because this could cause you more harm than good.”

Here are a few examples of this principle:

- ★ **Essential Fatty Acids** – There are so many benefits of Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids that when properly balanced they seem like a wonder tonic. I regularly recommend therapeutic intake in the form of fish oil, Evening Primrose oil or certain fish. But are these for everyone? For someone with diabetes, increased intake of essential fatty acids can also increase their blood sugar levels. For men who already have prostate cancer, or who are at risk of developing it, supplements with the fatty acid ALA (such as flax seed oil) should probably be avoided. For anyone with epilepsy or certain psychological disorders, Evening Primrose oil can cause seizures or worsen symptoms. And because of the blood thinning effect of essential fatty acids, anyone anticipating surgery should not take them, and someone who is also taking NSAIDS or aspirin or certain heart medications should be cautious. So even though EFAs are amazingly effective for many people in treating some illnesses and enhancing overall health, for some they can be harmful at any dose.
- ★ **Iron** – Even for those people who discover they have iron deficiency, there is ongoing debate about how much iron supplementation is really effective as a treatment. For those whose biology is particularly efficient at iron absorption, iron supplementation can lead to excess iron

levels and serious health problems – problems that won't become evident until it's too late to reverse them. And even a commonly uttered statement such as “women need more iron than men” is not always accurate. What if a woman has an infection of bacteria or yeast that feeds on any extra iron? What if they are using a type of birth control that moderates menstruation and iron loss? What if they already prefer a diet rich in red meats and dark leafy greens (both rich in iron)? And of course iron requirements for both men and women change with age. With this in mind, iron supplementation still does benefit many people and is critical for many biological functions. But there simply cannot be one fixed approach to iron supplementation that works reliably for everyone.

- ★ **Soluble Fiber** – Soluble fiber can be found in oat bran, nuts, flax seed, and most fiber supplements. For many people, soluble fiber is quite beneficial. It can lower cholesterol, regulate sugar absorption, and bind fatty acids. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? But not all fiber is the same, and not all people respond the same way. For instance, some people develop allergies to certain fiber sources –psyllium husks as one example – and can then experience severe, even anaphylactic reactions. For others, such as people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome, some soluble fibers seem to help their condition, while others tend to make it worse. Then there are folks who might have abnormally low levels of good cholesterol (such as those on a Vegan diet), where additional soluble fiber should be avoided even at doses that are tolerable for others. Add to this that our body's reaction to soluble fiber can vary widely depending on our current diet and the quantity taken, and there it is again: one size does not fit all.

There are countless other examples of what can happen if we assume what works well for someone else will work well for us. The chlorella that relieves one person of their immune system issues causes vertigo in another. The digestive enzymes that cure one person of intestinal troubles cause painfully swollen glands in someone else. The high protein diet that provides boundless energy for one person causes serious heart and kidney problems in the friend they recommended it to. So for any and all supplements and dietary regimens, it is critical that we understand how they function in our personal biology before adopting them. We should cultivate both an informed understanding of how supplements work, and a holistic perception of our own wellness. Like everything else in *Integral Lifework*, the emphasis here is on empowering ourselves to make healthy decisions. And one of the critical roles of any holistic practitioner should be to take as many of these individual variables into account as possible before making any substantive recommendations.

PRINCIPLE TWO: MORE IS NOT BETTER

Sometimes the health benefits of a particular supplement or supplement combination can feel so miraculous as to encourage continued or increased use. However, many supplements are really not intended for ongoing use, and increasing the dose beyond the *minimum beneficial dose* – if we continue taking them at all – frequently does more harm than good.

Some examples:

- ★ **Vitamins** – The popularity of “stress complex” full spectrum B vitamins has increased dramatically in the last few years. Usually this involves mega-dosing many of the Bs. But some B vitamins, particularly B6, can become toxic and cause symptoms that take months or years to

undo. The benefits of vitamin D are well known, but since many different wellness supplements can contain vitamin D in some quantity, an inadvertent excess of vitamin D could be created by well-meaning consumers. Vitamin D toxicity can weaken bones and damage the heart and kidneys. Too much vitamin C can wreak havoc on our digestive system. Vitamin A toxicity can mimic a wide array of serious chronic diseases. And so on. There is also a popular misunderstanding that water soluble vitamins can be taken in any quantity, but the reality is that high doses of almost any vitamin cross the line from nourishment into potent medication, and they should be treated as such.

- ★ **Glandulars** – Homeopathic glandular remedies (i.e. “like cures like”) can be effective for certain illnesses. However, many are designed for short term intervention only. When we continue using these remedies for long term support, the natural ability of our body to heal and produce what was depleted is undermined. This can lead to serious imbalances in our biology and severe physiological stress, especially when we try to ramp down off of these supportive supplements.
- ★ **Minerals** – There are serious risks when we take too much of any one mineral, and this is very easy to do. As with vitamins and other nutrients, inorganic minerals are present in all the food we eat and are important for sustaining health. But how much are we really taking in? Can we know for sure? What we can know for sure is that too much of some minerals – iron, sodium or potassium for example – can be lethal. Supplementing minerals should be done very carefully, especially because mineral quantities are not always listed in supplements that contain them.
- ★ **Whole Foods** – As of this writing whole food supplements have often been promoted as supporting physical health in any quantity. This seems an especially dangerous assertion. After all, complete foods still contain varying levels of vitamins and minerals (once again not always listed in detail), and in a form that our bodies are likely to metabolize more readily than other forms. **So in fact we should exercise more care in using these supplements because they have a higher potency and toxicity potential.** As just one example, consider that many whole food supplements contain iron, which alone can be problematic for some populations and age groups. So microalgae (chlorella, spirulina), superfoods (vegetable “green powder” products) and other whole food concentrates can quickly become overly strong medicine in the same ways that any other supplement can, and should be treated with respect and informed moderation.

Just like overeating or too much exercise or any other excess, more of any good thing is not always better. In fact, we can inadvertently harm ourselves in permanent ways by taking even moderate amounts of some supplements over a long period of time. And claims that any particular supplement can be taken in any quantity are nearly always misleading, more likely to cause harm than support health.

PRINCIPLE THREE: BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT COMBINED SUPPLEMENT PRODUCTS AND COMBINING SUPPLEMENTS IN GENERAL

The initial reasoning here is built upon the first two principles. Very few if any combined supplements are able to avoid the pitfalls of a) being unable to adapt to the *inherent variation* of every person, and b) exceeding the *minimum beneficial dose* of any one ingredient. In my investigations, there are only a

handful of combined supplements that I would recommend taking for more than a week or two, and even then it would be at doses well below what is encouraged on the label. The risk assessment is straightforward: the more components a supplement has, the more risk there will be that one of them will be counterproductive to your health. This includes whole food microalgae and superfoods. There are of course exceptions, the most common of which are daily multivitamins – because they generally offer conservative doses, and because they have begun to specialize dosing and ingredient combinations for different groups. There are daily multivitamins for women, for men, for men over forty and post-menopausal women, for pregnant moms, for children and so forth. And although some manufacturers will add probiotics, antioxidants or some other beneficial additive, the doses for all of these components are usually well below what other combined products assert to be safe or beneficial. Yet even here there are manufacturers who differentiate their brand by adding something unusual, or by mega-dosing a particular vitamin or mineral. So reading the label to see what ingredients and RDAs are present is always prudent.

The other consideration for combining supplements is component interaction and absorption interference. Some components compliment each other and aid in absorption when taken concurrently (Calcium and Magnesium, for example), and some components don't play well together (Calcium and Iron, for example). As another illustration, it is generally recommended that Evening Primrose Oil be taken separately from other EFAs. Many supplements do best when taken with food, and some, such as probiotics, work well when taken between meals. Some supplements amplify the benefits of certain foods, nutrients or even prescription medications – and some interact in antagonistic ways.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE – BUT GENTLY SO

As exemplified by the myriad contradictory advisories on food products, the ongoing discovery of new nutrients essential to the body, the ebb and flow of evidence supporting different dietary regimens, the periodic reorganization of the food pyramid, and manufacturers abruptly discontinuing certain supplements because of new research, our understanding of what the human organism really needs to thrive is constantly evolving. Can we know for sure if the nutritional properties of red wine, coffee or chocolate will ever be holistically understood? Add to this that our bodies change – and that we live in rapidly changing times – and the possible variations of ideal supplementation multiply. What worked for us yesterday may not work for us tomorrow. And as anyone who has maintained a long-term supplement program knows, sometimes it's a good idea to ramp down off of one routine and try new things.

All of this means that we need to keep questioning, learning and evaluating, trusting our bodies to tell us what works and doesn't work for us, and being courageous about making changes that our wellness requires. At the same time, we need to be gentle with ourselves in how quickly we alter our routines or introduce new variables in self-nourishment. With the exception of deliberate short-term fasting (which is beneficial for many people, but not everyone), abrupt elimination of nutrient intake can shock our system in unpleasant and potentially unhealthy ways. There are times when therapeutic intervention for acute conditions is necessary, but even here the initial *intervention dosage* should soon be followed by an incremental ramp down of supplement intake to its *minimum beneficial dose*.

Keep in mind that the benefits of an overall healthy, balanced diet usually far outweigh those of specialized supplements. Receiving all our nutrients from regular self-prepared meals with simple, natural ingredients is much more beneficial than relying upon supplements or food additives for our well-being. However, supplementing can be a useful means of promoting overall health and treating acute or chronic illness. By practicing the four principles discussed here we can hopefully enhance the effectiveness of a constantly evolving supplement strategy, and protect ourselves from possible harm.

