



# e-quilibrium

- "electronic briefs on behavior and health"

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## Individual Health

Recently I had the opportunity to hear a lecture by Dr. Jared Diamond on the topic of how societies fail or succeed. His book on the subject, Collapse, is a best-seller. Diamond suggests that the collapse or success of societies is affected by five important factors: human interaction with the environment, climate and climate change, enemies of the society, friends of the society (e.g., trading partners), and how the society responds to its challenges.

After the talk, I found myself thinking about the multiple determinants of individual health and how they compare to Diamond's factors pertaining to societal well-being and longevity. As is the case with societies, some factors affecting individual health are controllable while others are much less so. Following are my musings about corollaries to Diamond's five factors with respect to individual health.

Interaction with the Environment - Access to and management of food, water, and shelter are obvious examples of how our interaction with the environment impacts individual health. Many health behaviors (positive or negative) also reflect the human/environment interface, such as sun exposure, physical activity, the choice of and amount of food eaten, and the extent to which risks are taken (e.g., ignoring weather warnings, driving too fast, swimming/diving in unknown waters, etc.).

Climate - The genetic code with which an individual is born may be compared to the geography and climate in which a

society exists. Genetic influences on individual health are significant. Just as societal responses to its climate affect the impact of those forces, individual responses to genetic susceptibilities can affect their impact. For example, for an individual with a genetic susceptibility to high blood pressure, a healthy lifestyle and taking medications as prescribed can help reduce susceptibility to having a stroke.

The presence of infectious agents in an individual's environment is another example of how the "climate" can affect health. Once again, there are behavioral options (i.e., getting immunizations, frequent handwashing) that can help minimize the impact of infectious agents.

Enemies – In certain situations (e.g. war, crime), a person's enemies may be a direct threat to health and well-being. More common and relevant to all people, extensive conflict in relationships is known to be harmful to health.

Friends – Good relationships are health-enhancing. Social integration and social support are specifically known to be beneficial, especially to persons experiencing significant stress in their lives.

Response to Challenges – Behavioral responses to a variety of different challenges are relevant to individual health and well-being. Examples include the areas of stress management, anger management, health screenings, getting prompt attention to new health problems, and adherence to treatment regimens.

In Diamond's analysis of societies, some choices seem to be obviously "right" with respect to how they affect the life of the society (e.g., taking care of natural resources). The same is true of individual health (e.g., getting regular physical activity). But, in the course of the life of a society or an individual, numerous factors and influences may make it difficult to consistently pursue the healthiest option. A society or an individual can become entrenched in an unhealthy path. Therefore, it can be useful to periodically step back to take a careful look to see what adjustments can be made in the interest of enhancing the quality and quantity of health one experiences.

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