

Call the Divine Physician: Cultivating Well-Being for Body, Mind and Soul

Jackie Mulligan, founder of REFORM Wellness, offers a Catholic perspective on functional medicine and a holistic approach to health that walks with Jesus and learns from the saints.



Jackie Mulligan prepares for and gives one of her many teaching seminars. REFORM is based in New York, but employees for REFORM work virtually from all over the country. (photo: Courtesy photos / REFORM Wellness)

How are your new year's resolutions going? A frequent new year's resolution is committing to a healthier lifestyle; but for Catholics, the pursuit of health may sometimes seem fraught. Ascetic traditions within Catholicism discourage excessive attention to the body. Fasting may be a time-honored form of penance, but dieting seems by comparison to be mere vanity. *Corruptio optima pessimal est!*

Yet a sound spirituality is coherent with and indeed demands appropriate care for the body. In fact, the Church teaches that a proper concern for one's own body is necessary in order to fulfill the Fifth Commandment. A complete understanding of the Judeo-Christian anthropology behind "Thou shalt not kill" suggests that while Catholic morality "rejects a neo-pagan notion that tends to promote the cult of the body, [and] to sacrifice everything for its sake," nonetheless "[l]ife and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God," and so "[w]e must take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2289, 2288).

Clearly, Catholic "self-health care" involves more than just healing the sick; it entails maintenance of the body, in accord with its union to the soul. For a look at one such approach to treating health and faith holistically, the Register spoke to **Jackie Mulligan**. Mulligan, a longtime practitioner of functional medicine, founded REFORM Wellness as the fruit of her own growth in understanding how to better integrate her faith with all aspects of her life. The organization helps individuals achieve better physical, mental and spiritual health and has a Catholic priest chaplain on staff.

Since REFORM Wellness is not intended to replace traditional medicine, they expect patients to maintain relationships with their primary-care doctors and other traditional doctors. Any prescriptions of typical medicines or standard medical treatments are therefore provided outside of the context of REFORM activities.

REFORM is based in New York, but employees for REFORM work virtually from all over the country, and, at least for the time being, their events, such as retreats, are virtual.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

For people who are only familiar with mainstream medicine, phrases like "holistic wellness" and "functional medicine" are unfamiliar. What do those phrases mean?

Functional medicine is a biology-based approach that focuses on identifying and addressing the root causes of disease. So we use symptoms as clues to identify the root cause [and] treat the root. The holistic approach [to wellness] is providing support that looks at not just one part — mental, emotional, spiritual or physical — but the whole person. So we're looking at all those elements to help us address the person's well-being.

What would that look like for someone who called, or walked in, to see one of you?

If somebody came to us, and they had, let's say, some anxiety or depression, if they had gut discomfort, indigestion, frequent headaches, bloating or fatigue — these are all common symptoms — we would help them with lifestyle choices to figure out what the root cause was. So we would look at the symptoms, but we wouldn't just say, "Okay, do this to get rid of your headache" or "Do this to help curb your fatigue." We have nine wellness pillars that we use to offset different root causes and also symptoms. [So] we would say, "That sounds like something that is actually rooted in the gut, so we're going to help change your nutrition so that we will reduce stress in the gut, [and] we're going to help with stress management." And we would recommend taking some lab tests. And so then we would get those results; and through our other pillars, like sleep and personal growth and faith — which is what everything is centered on at REFORM — we would help build a protocol that is specific to that person.

I think sometimes people hear a phrase like "functional medicine" and think of things like yoga, where there are some elements that are potentially adversarial to the faith. But you are working in conjunction with the faith.

Very much so. It's very common that part of [a patient's] protocol will be to start their day off with 30 minutes of prayer, or to go to the sacrament of confession, because a lot of things that take root in our bodies as disease are because of past traumas, [or] because of holding on to resentment or a lack of forgiveness. We understand that everything is connected and that Our Lord is the Divine Physician; and so we allow him to be the Physician by opening up space in our healing to invite him in.

Do you work with non-Catholics, as well?

We do; we work with people from all walks of life. We get to choose — do we want to be formed in the Lord or deformed by the world? "Formation" is a way to live with Christ as the center of our lives, and we really make our day, our meaning, our purpose, our healing all rooted in him. It gives us an order to live by. But people will come to us who are non-Catholic, who are even atheist, and who desire to live our nine pillars.

Would you say that functional medicine, or a holistic method of wellness, is something that we can see in the saints, or in Catholics of previous generations? Is there a history of this in Catholicism?

We actually learn so much from the saints! Many of them fasted and prayed, and that's one of the oldest and most powerful ways of healing the body, the mind and the soul: silence, prayer and fasting. [We also learn from] their obedience to formation: They had rhythm in their lives, in the sense that they prayed every day, that they took care of their body. St. Augustine said, "Take care of your body as if you were going to live forever and your soul as if you would die tomorrow."

How did you come to start REFORM Wellness?

The Lord invited me to reform my own life and to bring him into the center of my life. He wanted all of me, just as I had been given all of him. He wanted to be at the center of my faith; he wanted to be at the center of my nutrition, and my sleep, and all my stress, and my closet, and my relationships, and all the parts of my life. So I started to overhaul my life, little by little, with microchanges and invite Jesus into all of those areas. I was already practicing functional medicine and holistic health; and I knew that in order to be well, people also needed to invite Jesus into the center of their lives. And so that is why REFORM has faith as the center of our well-being.

Why don't we see more appeals to functional medicine or holistic methods from mainstream scientists?

I think that more and more doctors, Eastern and Western, are becoming more united; I think that there is room for both [traditional and functional medicine]. Sometimes we do need to take antibiotics or different medications, depending on the situation. And if we are treating the individual, I hope we would understand that there are individual needs.

Based on what you just said, are there particular situations that would call more for functional medicine or more for traditional medicine?

I don't want to be too simplistic here. That would be an order for a specific diagnosis or case. But again, we really do look at the entire person, so we are looking at your health history, your background, your childhood, your faith life. And so with a particular major trauma, there might be a need for a short-term medication — to help get through the shock of a sudden death or loss of a loved one, to help a person sleep through the night. But again, if that person has a health history of addiction or doesn't do well with certain medications, then we would then opt to treat them naturally and not conventionally. So it really is very individual. I think that's the point here: that we are looking at all elements and what's going on in the whole person.

So you're asking how a patient can retrace the steps that have led them to ill health.

Yes, and also [trying] to collect data, to help them take the next step. Sick people don't just want a quick fix, but they want a plan. I think that's the thing that maybe has people a little bit hesitant about functional medicine: It takes work. It really requires that you dig deep, but when you do dig deep, you get to the root cause, and you heal once and for all. That's the invitation here: to do the work so the Lord can be the Divine Physician. Our health is very much like a tree: There's no separation between its roots and its branches, and there's no separation between our root causes and our symptoms. There are opportunities for healing and a new life.

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more, visit ReformWellness.co; find more content, support, tools and best practices on REFORM's Instagram page, handle [@reform_wellness](https://www.instagram.com/reform_wellness). REFORM is offering a 12-week online class this Lent.

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