

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a book published in America in 1883. The writer aims to educate young women about their health.

Hygiene for Girls

Introduction

Health is not a thing of chance, but is governed by certain fixed laws. These laws are but imperfectly understood, and our knowledge of them is continually progressing. In the present state of medical science a comprehensive study of them is the labor of a life, and should therefore be undertaken only by those who are able and willing to devote their lives to the subject. Necessarily, such individuals constitute but a small portion of mankind. It is to them
5 that all others must look for special instruction as to the preservation of health, and the most probable means of regaining it when it has been lost.

Yet, while the intricacies of the science of health must be left to those who make that science their province, some of the plainer and simpler laws relating thereto may be understood by
10 any person of ordinary intelligence, at a very small expense of time. It is plainly the duty of every one who can, to acquire this elementary knowledge, as, if acted upon, it will certainly save a great deal of suffering, not only to the individual, but to those with whom the individual comes in contact, and will also greatly augment* the power for work and enjoyment.

15 Especially it is desirable that girls should have this knowledge, since their future relations in life will associate them more nearly with the physical welfare of others, and their own present and future are attended with more danger from the deplorable effects of ignorance than in the case of their brothers. Many a woman whose childhood was bright with promise endures an after-life of misery because, through a false delicacy, she remained ignorant of her
20 physical nature and requirements, although on all other subjects she may be well-informed; and so at length she goes to her grave mourning the hard fate that has made existence a burden, and perhaps wondering to what end she was born, when a little knowledge at the proper time would have shown her how to easily avoid those evils that have made her life a wretched failure.

25 Most of the suffering in this world arises directly from ignorance, and much of it from ignorance that is criminal because unnecessary.

from Chapter 1: Nerves and Nervousness

As the nerves spring either from the brain or the spinal cord, and as the spinal cord itself comes directly from the brain, every part of the body is under the influence of the brain,
30 through the means of the nerves. The nervous system has been aptly compared to the electric telegraph*, with the brain for central office, the subtle* nerve-force for the invisible current, and the nerves themselves for the conducting wires. But, as in a telegraph system

there are many offices, each one having its own battery and connecting link whereby the operator is enabled either to put himself in connection with the entire line, or to send his own
35 messages independently of the central office, so in the nervous system there are many stations or “nerve-centers,” as they are called, each of which is capable of communicating impulses received from the brain, or of originating its own impulses and causing acts with which the mind has nothing to do.

[...]

The terms “nerves” and “nervousness” are often misused and much misunderstood. It is not
40 uncommon to hear people assert of certain others, or of themselves, that they “have no nerves,” and many even become indignant at the suggestion that they are in any degree nervous. The idea of such would seem to be that nerves are a hindrance to the cool command of one’s faculties, and that to be nervous is to be weak, fanciful, and silly. Yet we
45 know that without nerves one would have no faculties to command, and that some kind and degree of nervous influence enters into every act of our lives. Indeed, we often hear a man of great coolness and self-command spoken of as “a man of nerve,” and one who displays a quick and eager energy in all things is frequently described as a nervous person. It is unfortunate that so much confusion exists in regard to these terms

Glossary

* augment – increase, make something bigger by adding to it

* electric telegraph – new technology which allowed the sending of telegrams via Morse code messages as electric signals transmitted long-distance through wires and cables

* subtile – alternative spelling of ‘subtle’, meaning delicate, difficult to perceive, barely noticeable

This extract is from Irenaeus P. Davis, *Hygiene for Girls* (1883) and the full text can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/61410710R.nlm.nih.gov/page/n13>

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