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Spa Cure or Vacation? The Therapeutic Relief for Retreat Guests with Medical Conditions

THE PROBLEM: A CASE STUDY...

- >> Imagine a patient diagnosed with arthritis attends different health retreats in different countries with different outcomes....
- >> What is the primary purpose of health retreats – cure or vacation?
- >> We conducted 3 pieces of research to explore the health benefits of retreats and answer this question



1) SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FINDINGS (2022, 2018)

- >> 23 single-centre studies and 2592 participants (+9 studies, 890 participants)
- >> General health issues, mental health, cancer, MS, HIV/AIDS and heart conditions
- >> Retreats located in 7 countries (mainly US, AUS)
- >> Positive changes in DNA/TL, neurological and ECG changes, weight, bp, disease symptoms, QoL, perceived wellbeing

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Open Access



The health impact of residential retreats: a systematic review

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Abstract

Background: Unhealthy lifestyles are a major factor in the development and exacerbation of many chronic diseases. Improving lifestyles through immersive residential experiences that promote healthy behaviours is a focus of the health retreat industry. This systematic review aims to identify and explore published studies on the health, wellbeing and economic impact of retreat experiences.

Methods: MEDLINE, CINAHL and PsychINFO databases were searched for residential retreat studies in English published prior to February 2017. Studies were included if they were written in English, involved an intervention program in a residential setting of one or more nights, and included before-and-after data related to the health of participants. Studies that did not meet the above criteria or contained only descriptive data from interviews or case studies were excluded.

Results: A total of 23 studies including eight randomised controlled trials, six non-randomised controlled trials and nine longitudinal cohort studies met the inclusion criteria. These studies included a total of 2592 participants from diverse geographical and demographic populations and a great heterogeneity of outcome measures, with seven studies examining objective outcomes such as blood pressure or biological markers of disease, and 16 studies examining subjective outcomes that mostly involved self-reported questionnaires on psychological and spiritual measures. All studies reported post-retreat health benefits ranging from immediately after to five-years post-retreat. Study populations varied widely and most studies had small sample sizes, poorly described methodology and little follow-up data, and no studies reported on health economic outcomes or adverse effects, making it difficult to make definite conclusions about specific conditions, safety or return on investment.

Conclusions: Health retreat experiences appear to have health benefits that include benefits for people with chronic diseases such as multiple sclerosis, various cancers, HIV/AIDS, heart conditions and mental health. Future research with larger numbers of subjects and longer follow-up periods are needed to investigate the health impact of different retreat experiences and the clinical populations most likely to benefit. Further studies are also needed to determine the economic benefits of retreat experiences for individuals, as well as for businesses, health insurers and policy makers.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Wellness tourism, Medical tourism, Lifestyle, Retreat experience, Multiple sclerosis, Cancer, Heart disease, Mental health

Background

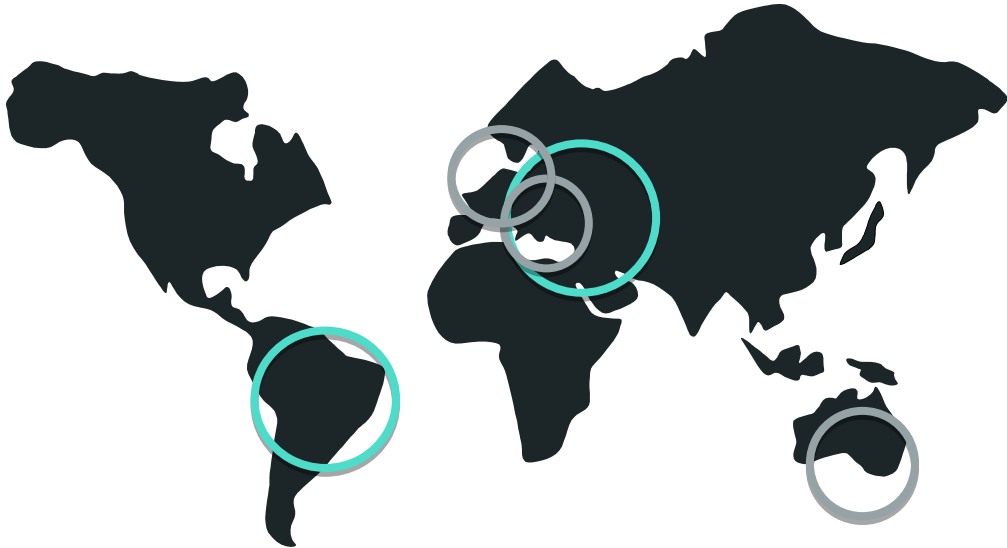
Lifestyle-related chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes and lung disease are a global issue, which the World Health Organisation estimate account for 60% of all deaths [1]. These diseases are characterised by modifiable risk factors such as physical inactivity, unhealthy diet such as diets high in salt, sugar, fat, alcohol and

tobacco, and exposure to environmental toxicants [1]. Unhealthy lifestyles are a major factor in the development of chronic disease and are directly addressed by the health retreat industry, which promises to deliver enhanced health and the reversal of chronic disease and age-related conditions by engaging people directly in healthy lifestyle behaviours and experiences [2–4].

Health retreats have emerged from a history of travel

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2) GLOBAL RETREAT STUDY: A. DEMOGRAPHICS & MOTIVATIONS



Cross sectional study conducted in 9 languages

3718 responses

58 countries (residence), 63 countries (retreats)

Top 5 countries: Hungary, Brazil, Australia, Czech Republic, Slovakia

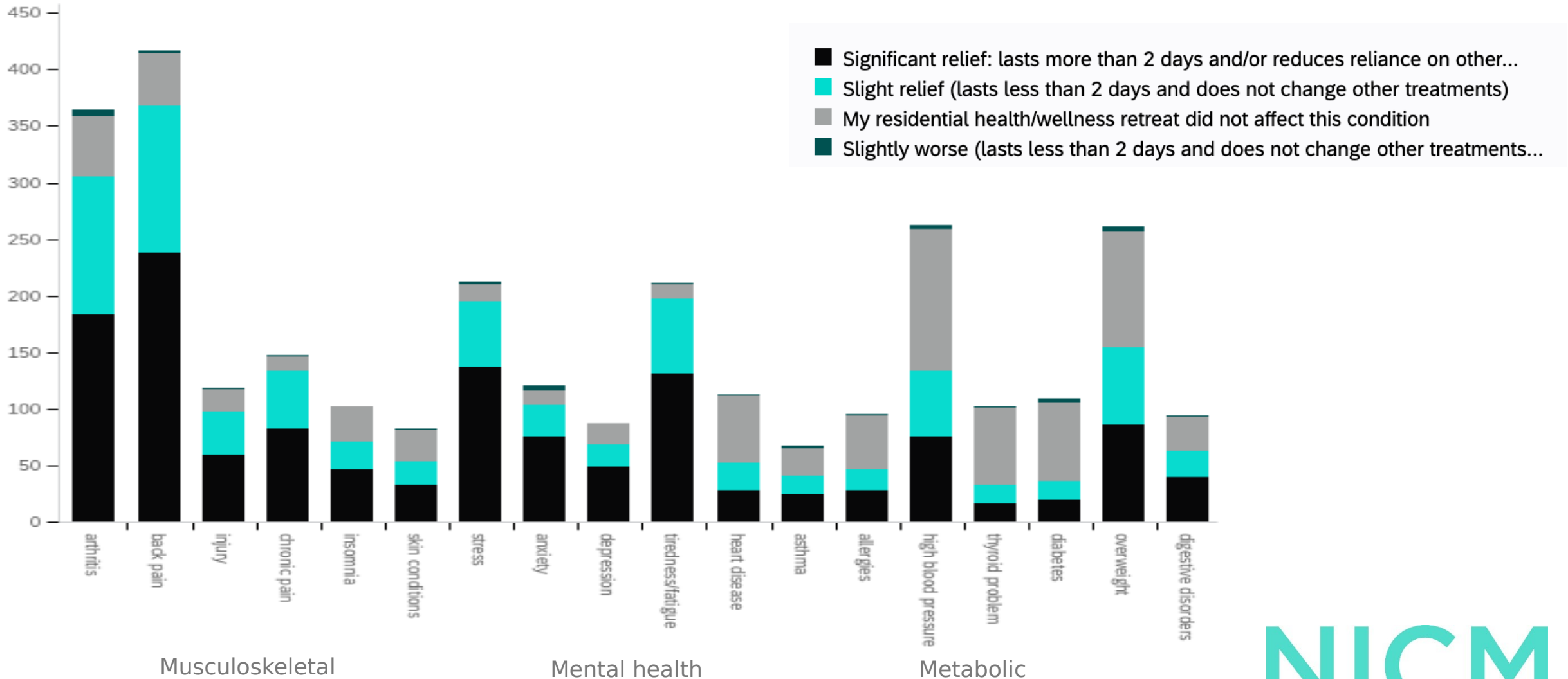
 60% 55 y/o
  40% 60 y/o

Top 3 motivations:

- 1) relaxation/ holiday
- 2) reduce stress/ improve mental health
- 3) improve general health

B. MEDICAL CONDITIONS AND THERAPEUTIC

Effect of the retreat on medical conditions by degree of relief



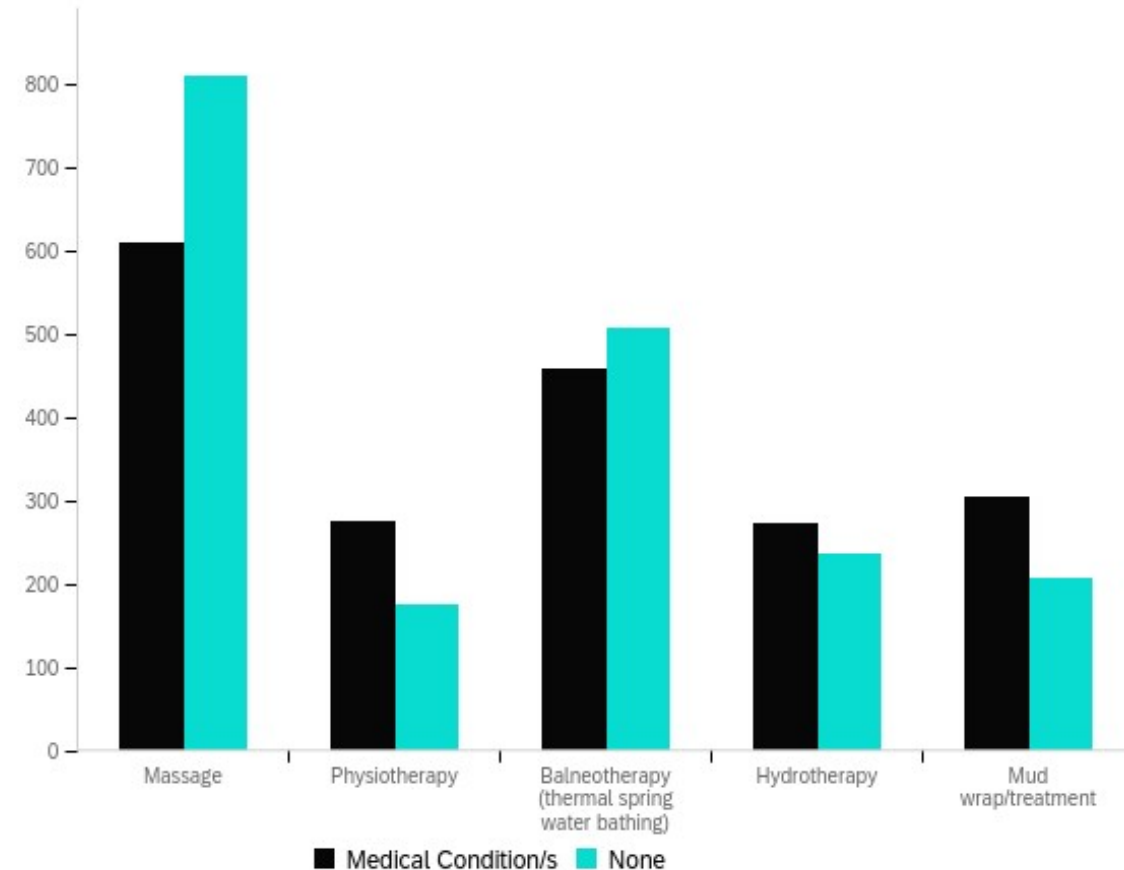
C. MEDICAL CONDITIONS AND THERAPIES

Participants with and without medical conditions reported use of the same therapies (graph to the right).

Considerable relief most reported for Massage (n=110), Balneotherapy (n=64), Hydrotherapy (n=63), Physiotherapy (n=54)

The most reported recreational activities included swimming (n=1284), sauna (n=1060), nature walks (n=1025), hot spring/hot pool (n=1013), gym (n=749), steam room (n=737)

Most reported therapies and medical conditions



D. QUALITATIVE THEMES

- >> Thematically Analysed 132 EN responses
- >> 5 Major themes: Perceived impact on wellbeing, Connection to people and place, Affordability and accessibility, Meaningful experiences, Lifestyle change
- >> “I believe prevention is better than cure and my health fund would be well advised to consider some funding for these programs. They really make a difference” (excerpt 3.7).



3) CLINICAL STUDY

- >> What is the health impact on perceived stress (PSS), resilience (RS) and longevity (TL) before and 4-weeks after a 3-day virtual retreat?
- >> This study was completed online during the COVID-19 pandemic and results are currently being analysed (in partnership with the Telomere Laboratory at UCSF)



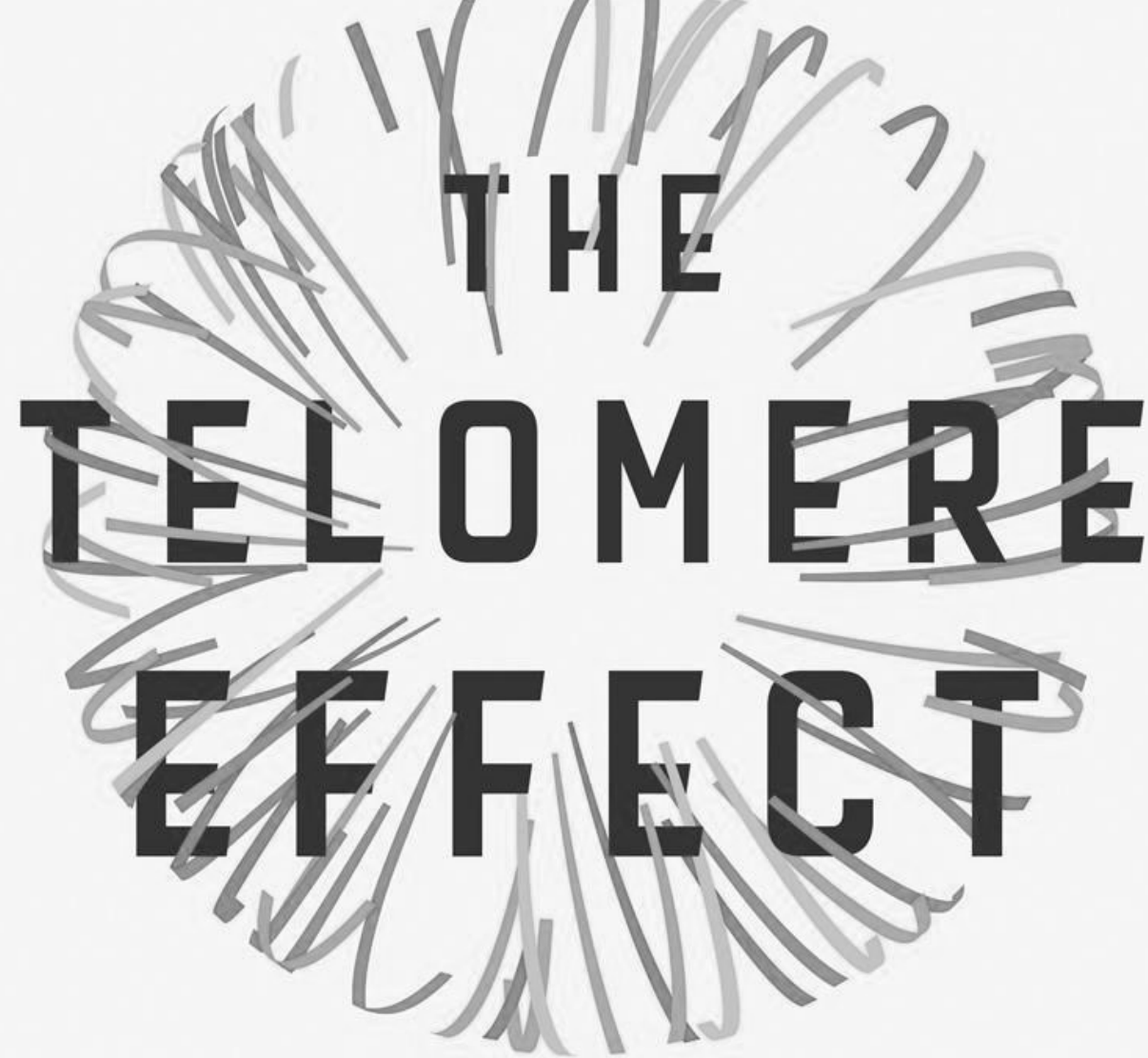
PERCEIVED STRESS
(PSS)



RESILIENCE
(RL)



LONGEVITY
(TL)

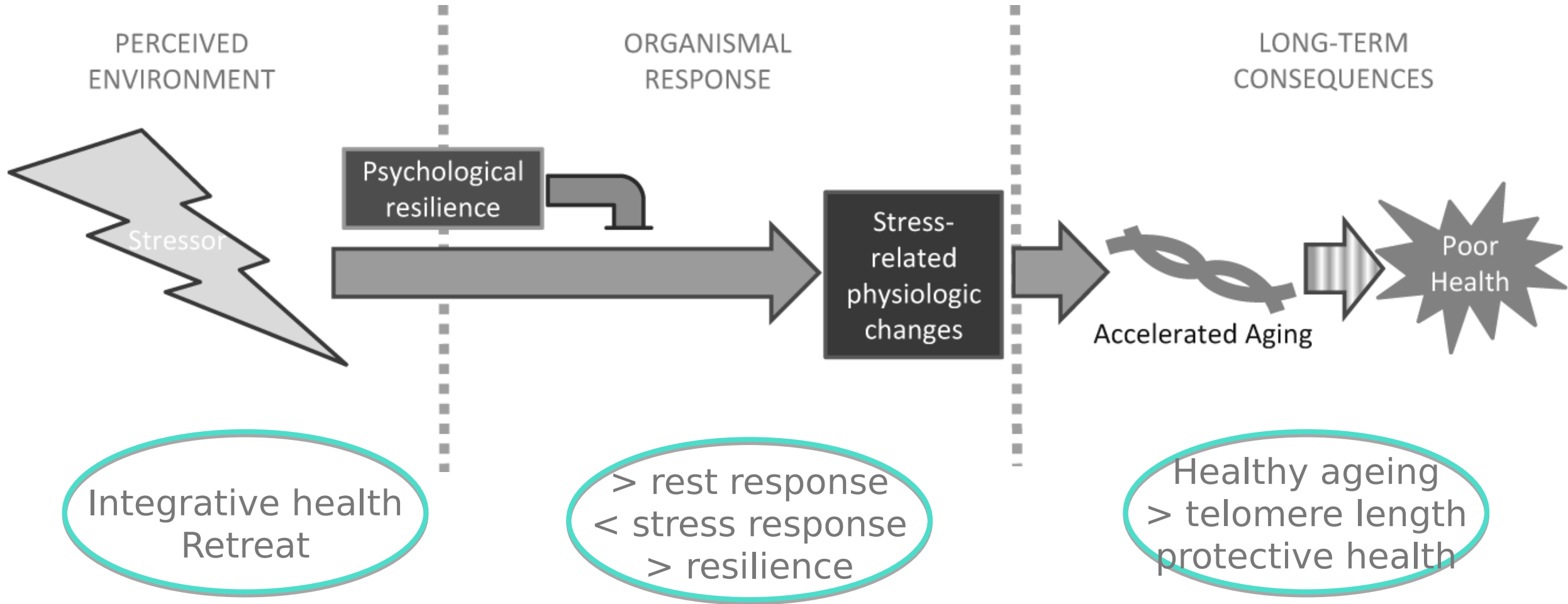


NOBEL PRIZE WINNER

Elizabeth Blackburn, PhD

Elissa Epel, PhD

OVERVIEW: WHAT WE ARE INVESTIGATING...



CONCLUSION: SPA CURE OR VACATION

- >> Preliminary evidence suggests therapeutic and vacation effects...
- >> We need to establish a global evidence base for health retreats including: more clinical trials, larger cohorts, multiple retreat sites, standardised measures
- >> To identify the most appropriate programs for different populations with and without medical conditions

Research explores retreats' benefits

Continued from front cover
Seven studies examined objective outcomes such as blood pressure and biological markers of disease, while 16 had subjective outcomes, mostly involving self-reported questionnaires on psychological and spiritual measures. All of the studies reported post-retreat health benefits ranging from immediately after the retreat to five years later.

“The results suggest retreat experiences significantly improve people’s lives,” said Cohen. “This is evident from reported improvements in quality of life and subjective wellbeing, as well as decreases in the frequency and severity of health symptoms, reductions in body weight, blood pressure and abdominal girth, and positive changes in the function of metabolic and neurological pathways.”

Four studies looked at retreats aimed at improving quality of life for cancer patients, and all showed benefits, including



Residential retreats, such as the Ranch, offer a range of activities

improvements in quality of life, depression and anxiety scores, and increased telomere length, with benefits being recorded as long as five years after the retreat experience.

“The finding that retreat experiences can lead to sustained health improvements long after participants return home suggests they help guests make positive lifestyle changes and adopt healthy behaviours,” said Cohen.

Details: http://lei.sr?a=K9V3E_S

RECOMMENDATIONS

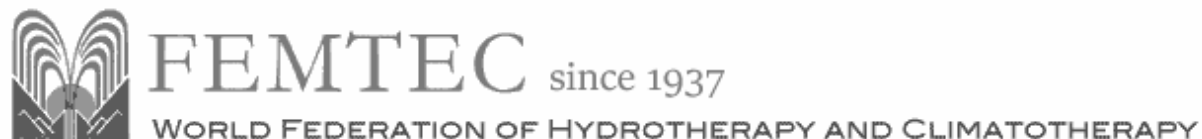
1. Creation of international industry guidelines with standardised diagnostic measures to support health retreats in their evidence-base
2. Inclusion of health retreats in different health systems and insurance schemes around the world
3. Follow up and continuity of care through wellness coaching and service provision to integrate and sustain health outcomes

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