



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
MINISTRY FOR HEALTH

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**HOW DOES THE
WAY WE LIVE**

**DETERMINE
OUR HEALTH?**



Introduction

Most of us are aware that exercise, a balanced diet, and not smoking are amongst the key factors contributing to better health. But what about our job, education, environment, and relationships? Can they affect our health, too? Research conducted across Europe by the WHO European Region Reports has shown that all these things can make a significant difference to the quality of health we enjoy.

For that reason, the Superintendence for Public Health within the Ministry for Health has started working on the ESF Project – Establishing a National Platform to Address the Social Determinants of Health. Its aim is to understand which of these factors are most likely to affect the health of the Maltese population, how they can do so, and what we can do to tackle them as individuals and as a nation.

Part of this campaign is the booklet you are holding, which is the first in a series of five. In this one, the focus is on how learning and literacy can be used to make positive changes that will enhance the chance for better health and health outcomes for you and your loved ones.

Of course, this is not a one-size-fits-all affair. Each person and family is distinct and faces unique economic, cultural, and societal realities. Nevertheless, change doesn't need to be overwhelming to be effective: small, yet decisive steps towards being healthier and feeling more fulfilled are just as powerful. Moreover, the Government, through its many services, offers help along the way, fostering and encouraging positive change for all.



Mario is reading peacefully when the doorbell rings. He puts his book to the side, and struggles to get out of his armchair.

"I really need to start going for walks again," he says to himself before rushing to the front door.

"Nanna!" he says as he opens the door. "What are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Mario, don't fret, but I received a letter yesterday and it looked urgent. I tried Dun Ġwann's house but his helper told me he's down with a cold. Could you read it for me, please?"

"Sure, come in. I'll make us some tea."

Nanna Ćikka hands the letter over to Mario. He puts the kettle on and starts reading it.

"It's a letter from the Local Council, Nanna. It's to inform you that they are starting a new series of evening courses," Mario explains.

"Oh! When I saw the emblem I thought it was something urgent. Mario, are they offering a reading course?"

"A reading course?" Mario asks, incredulously. "Nanna, you're 85 years old, why bother now?"



"I have wanted to learn how to read all my life, Mario," Ćikka says, with sadness in her voice. "It's something I wanted to do as a child, but we were a large family and my parents needed me to help them,



so I didn't go to school. Then I got married, had three wonderful children, and had a house to take care of, so I never had time to learn. As you know, your grandfather used to read my letters for me, but now he's gone, I have to go to the priest, or to a neighbour, or else I have to inconvenience someone else. It's also very difficult to go through life without being able to read. When I watch TV, I never know what the scribbles on the screen mean. I can't get the news by reading a newspaper, or read my own hospital appointments, or learn a new

recipe from those cookbooks my sister had given me for my wedding. I want to learn how to read – I'm not too old to learn, am I?"

"You're never too old to learn," Mario says, smiling at his grandmother. "And you're right, it is very important. That's what I keep telling Christina and Jade. The more time they spend reading, the cleverer they'll become and the more opportunities they will have in life."

"How are the girls? I haven't seen them in so long!"



Later that afternoon, seven-year-old Christina runs down the stairs and is about to walk into the kitchen when she she overhears her mother discussing her dentist appointment.

"Can we make it an hour later? Christina has a dentist's appointment at that time," Jacqueline says.

"Of course," Mario replies "She didn't tell me she had a toothache..."



"Oh no, she's totally fine," Jacqueline replies. "It's just for a check-up. I think it's good to teach her that she shouldn't only go to the dentist's when she has a toothache, but rather to make sure everything is okay. I'm also going to ask the dentist to explain the best way for her to brush her teeth; I'm sure she can do a better job than I can."



"Yeah, great idea. Actually, maybe you could speak to my parents when you visit them later. They're now in their 70s and they still refuse to get regular tests to monitor their blood pressure and sugar levels. Unless they're really sick, they don't even bother with the doctor!"

Jacqueline spots Christina listening in on their conversation.

"It's rude to eavesdrop, Chri," she smiles. "Now come have your milk before we go to Nanna's."





As Jacqueline closes the car door, she sees Christina and her sister, Jade, running towards her in-laws' house. They both start knocking enthusiastically.

Nannu Pawlu opens the door, with the couple's dog, Lucky, right behind him wagging his tail. Jade kneels on the doorstep and starts patting Lucky. "We've missed you, Lucky!"

"Is it the children?" Nanna Ġuża shouts from the kitchen. "I have some peaches for them."

"Who wants peaches?" Jacqueline asks the girls.

"Me! Me!" Christina and Jade shout in unison as they rush into the kitchen.

As Nanna Ġuża places the freshly-washed peaches in a bowl, Jacqueline approaches her and asks her if they could speak in private.

"Is everything okay, Jacq?"

"Yes, thank you. We've still not managed to conceive, but the doctor says that there are still a few things we can try out, so we're trying to stay positive. How's your leg, Ġuż? Is it any better? That was such a bad fall!"

"I bought some cream from the chemist's, but it doesn't seem to be working as well as I'd hoped," Ġuża explains as she limps into the living room and tells Jacqueline to sit in one of the armchairs.

"Can you let us take you to the doctor's? Dr Brincat will know what to do. And while you're there, you can



get those tests we've been talking about for a while," Jacqueline says, tentatively.

"There's no need for a doctor, but maybe you can look something up on the computer? I've been told there are many websites that can help explain these things."

"Absolutely not!" Jacqueline snaps. "All those sites do is make you worry. We're not doctors, Ġuża, but Dr Brincat is. You've also known him for a long time, so there's no reason to be worried. In fact, you should tell him to book you in for regular tests... I know it's not nice to hear, but none of us are getting any younger. Remember when they found out that my mother was diabetic? If she hadn't been in the habit of getting those tests done even when she was feeling fine, they wouldn't have caught it so early and her condition may have worsened in time."

"Maybe you're right," Ġuża answers, pensively. "And Pawlu. I need to speak to him about Pawlu. He's finding it harder and harder to go up the stairs and he's barely communicating with me at the moment. Do you think Mario will be able to take us?"

"Of course," Jacqueline says as Jade, Christina, and Lucky chase each other into the room, "just let us know when. And if Mario is on night duty that day, I'll take you myself. It's not far and I need to ask him something about my medication, anyway."

"Mum, can we get a dog, please?" Christina asks Jacqueline.

"Pleaseeeeeee," Jade implores.

"We'll see!" Jacqueline says, before quickly changing subject.



The next day, Christina wakes up in a foul mood.

“It’s Saturday, why can’t I sleep in? I don’t want to go to piano lessons!” she grumpily tells her mum.

“But I thought you wanted to become a pianist when you grew up?” Jacqueline answers while placing a bowl of cereal topped with fresh slices of fruit in front of Christina.

“Yesterday, my friend Jessica said that playing the piano is not a real job. She was making fun of me for going to piano lessons. I don’t want to go.”

“Actually, Chri, a lot of people around the world make a living by playing an instrument. But that’s not the only reason why you should play the piano, anyway. Learning to play an instrument helps boost your creativity, gives



you the opportunity to meet other children, and helps you grow as a human being. You may not know it now, but you will be very thankful in the future.”

“I don’t want to go to piano lessons!” Christina reiterates, rather loudly.

“Today, you will go to piano lessons,” Jacqueline answers, keeping her cool, “but if you still feel this way next week, then we can talk about you stopping these lessons and finding something else for you to practise and learn.”

“I already go to school to learn things,” Christina says, calming down slightly.

“School teaches you a lot of important lessons, Chri, but it can’t teach you everything. Of course, it is very, very important, but creative pursuits help you relax,



unleash your imagination, and see the beautiful side of life. And it's not just because you're young. Mario and I go to a pottery class together every week, don't we? And Bužnanna Ćikka is learning to read at 85! And Jade loves her sewing course. It's important to keep learning and exploring different things."

"Mummy?"

"Yes, Chri?"

"But do I still have to become a pianist if I go to piano lessons?"

"You can become whatever you want, my darling: a pianist, a banker, a teacher, a doctor, a ballerina, a carpenter, or a baker. All you have to do is focus on what you want to be and work hard at it. Either way, learning an instrument or any other skill will make you happier in life."

Christina rushes out of the kitchen. Stopping just outside the door, she turns around and says, "Maybe I will become a pianist after all, Mummy."

Jacqueline smiles.





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