

Living The Ten Tenets of Wellness

Michael Arloski PhD, PCC

Wellness always seems to be working at answering one critical question: why don't people do what they know they need to do for themselves? Providing people with good information about physical fitness, stress management or nutrition is important, but insufficient. It is not a matter that we are lacking information - with the amount of media attention given to health and well-being, it is hard to believe that most people don't already know more than enough to live very well lives. Articles on cholesterol, healthy relationships, exercise and smoking cessation abound. Where is the motivation to change, and what is blocking it?

Whether we are looking at our individual health or wellness programming for a small or large organisation, there seem to be certain factors that have emerged from the last thirty years or so that indicate the field of study of wellness. Let me share some informal suggestions or tenets that, after many years in the "wellness biz," I feel it all comes down to for me.

1. Wellness is a holistic concept. Anything short of that is incomplete and ultimately ineffective. We need to look at the whole person and program for the mind, body, spirit, and environment. Just picking the dimension of wellness that you like and minimising the other elements doesn't work in the long run.

2. Self-esteem is the critical factor in change. Wellness is caring enough about yourself to take stock of your life, make the necessary changes and find the support to maintain your motivation. Find what is holding you back from feeling good about yourself and work through the blocks, not around them.

Gerry Jampolsky suggests everything we do comes either from love or from fear. Where do your wellness lifestyle efforts come from? For many of us change requires the hard, roll-up-the-sleeves work of facing our fears and experience growing up in our families, peer group and community. Positive affirmations, or self-statements, are excellent, but need to be coupled with this type of life-long self-reflective work.

3. Who we surround ourselves with either helps us stretch our wings and soar, or clips them again and again. Positive peer health norms encourage wellness lifestyle changes. Mutually beneficial relationships with friends, lovers, family and colleagues who care about us as people are what we need to seek and create in our lives. Rather than being threatened by our personal growth, they support it. Do your friends (partners, etc.) bring our your OK or NOT OK feelings? Giving and receiving strokes are what it's all about. Friends keep friends well.

4. Break out of the trance! Conscious living means becoming aware of all the choices we have and acting on them. It involves a realisation that we don't have to run our lives on automatic pilot. We can turn off the television (remember TV stands for "time vacuum"), read labels, turn off the lawn sprinklers when we have enough rain, notice how our food tastes, notice how tense and contracted we are when we drive fifteen mph over the speed limit, etc. It means consciously working on our relationships, life goals, and maximizing our potential.

5. A sense of connectedness to other people, other species, the earth and the "something greater", grounds us in our lives. We are all of one heart. Much of this sense can come out of the land we live on. By identifying with where we live and getting to know the plants, animals, weather patterns, water sources and the landscape itself, we develop not only a love for it, but feel that love returned. Through our commitment to our place on earth we value and protect our environment by the way we live our lives, and by how we speak at the ballot box. Through our contact with the natural world we experience a solid sense of belonging, peace and harmony.

Theologian Matthew Fox likes to say that we can relate to the earth in any of three ways. We can exploit it, recreate on it, or we can be in awe of it. I believe it is within a sense of awe that our potential for growth and healing is multiplied. From such a state of wonder it is easy to see all other species as relatives. The Lakota like to close every prayer with "Mitakaue Oyasin" - "For all my relations."

6. We are primarily responsible for our health. There are the risk factors of genetics, toxic environments and the like, but our emotional and lifestyle choices determine our health and well-being more than

anything else. As much as we'd like to cling to blame and copouts, we do have to be honest with ourselves. The flip side is the empowerment that this realization gives us.

One path out of passivity and illness is to realise what you can do to boost your immune system. Stress and fatigue and poor diet have a tremendous influence on our body's ability to resist illness and disease. Most people report excessive stress and chronic sleep deprivation.

7. From increased self-sufficiency comes the confidence and power that overshadows fear. The Australian aboriginal people say that when a person cannot walk out onto the land and feed, clothe and shelter themselves adequately, a deep, primal fear grips their soul. Recognizing our interconnectedness, we grow tremendously when we can care for ourselves on many different levels. Skills, information and tools that enable us to choose our food, become more competent at our career, adjust the gears on our bicycle or take a hike into a wilderness area increase our self-respect and self-confidence. We need to learn these skills and teach them to others.

8. As much as we all need time with others, we all need time apart. Solo time, especially in the natural world, helps us relax, de-contract, and get beyond the distractions of modern life that prevent us from really knowing ourselves. There are some powerful reasons that peoples from all around the world have spent time alone (often in remote settings) in order to gain vision about the direction and meaning in their lives.

9. You don't have to be perfect to be well. Extreme perfectionism is a shame-based process that feeds a really negative view of ourselves. Workaholism and other addictive behaviors can result. Wellness does not mean swearing off hot-fudge sundaes. It just means not "b.s.-ing" yourself about when you last had one! Whenever our "healthy habits" move from being positive addictions to being compulsive behavior that works against us, we're usually the last ones to know. Lots of times extreme behavior is a way to distract yourself from some other issue that needs your attention.

10. Play! We all need to lighten up and not take ourselves (and wellness) so seriously. Remember the lessons of the coyote and be playful, even ornery in a non-malicious way. Let the child within out to play. Give yourself permission.

The "work hard, play hard" philosophy does little to help us maintain the balance needed for a healthy life. Psychophysiology works twenty four hours a day, every day (not just on weekends). Integrate a healthy sense of humor and play into the workplace. Make sure your yang equals your yin!

Even with these tenets there is no concrete wellness formula. You have to discover what works for you. Take them not as rules, but as modern folklore gathered by one who has walked the wellness way for a few years.

"The Ten Tenets of Wellness" was published in Wellness Management , the newsletter of The National Wellness Association, in 1994. It is also appears in the website of the Am. Holistic Health Association www.ahha.com, and as the lead article for the wellness section of HealthWorld Online www.healthy.net.