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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



Kickstart Your Wellness

Wellness, it seems, is the next big thing that everyone must conquer. The past two years of pandemic upheaval have given people a chance to assess and reflect on their overall health and well-being, prompting a wellness renaissance. However, jumping on board with trends may lead to the actual value and understanding of wellness to become diluted by social chatter and marketing buzz.

For wellness to be purposeful, it must be personal. In this article, we're going to look at wellness from the standpoint of how one-size-fits-all solutions aren't the answer. We'll go back to basics examining wellness as a multi-dimensional concept and explore what it means to be well overall. We'll look at some of the foundations of physical and mental wellness by addressing how some of our choices complicate our ability to find the right balance, including nutrition's effect on your brain. Finally, we'll discuss determining your path to wellness, sharing some tips and strategies that will help you kick start your journey.

Wellness, defined

Wellness has always been linked to good health, preventative care, and positive lifestyle choices. It's a concept that's been present for thousands of years but has gotten a lot of attention, especially over the past decade. More people are paying attention to wellness, which is reflected in the general interest and messaging we regularly see from governments, businesses,

medical experts, and the media. Because health and wellness are intrinsically linked, where sometimes the terms are used interchangeably, it helps to look at each individually and their relationship. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (illness)" and wellness as "the optimal state of health of individuals and groups... expressed as a 'positive approach to living.'"¹

Multi-dimensional wellness

Wellness encompasses many different things and is often contextualized using these eight dimensions²:

Physical

- How you fuel your body
- How much you move your body
- How you rest to restore your body

Intellectual

- Things you do to learn, be creative and grow
- How you view the world
- Finding enjoyment in trying something new

Emotional

- How you use positive thinking
- How resilient you are
- How you recognize and use your strengths

Social

- How you interact with family, friends, coworkers and communities
- Practicing gratitude and kindness
- Communicating and building relationships to decrease feelings of loneliness

Spiritual

- Connecting with something “greater than ourselves,” be it religious beliefs, the planet, other people, or with something more profound
- How you live according to what you value
- How you are mindful of the effect you have on your surroundings

Occupational

- How purposeful you feel about contributing to the world through work, school, or volunteering
- Appreciating and joining efforts to improve or help something you believe in
- How you can gain meaning from helping others

Financial

- Learning about money so you can use it strategically
- How you budget
- How you can be happier making financial decisions that improve other people's lives and your own

Environmental

- How aware you are of your surroundings
- Choosing “calm, safe, non-toxic” environments
- Finding balance by spending time in nature

What does it mean to be well overall?

Wellness is fluid and adaptive depending on evaluations of circumstances and situations. There is no singular correct approach because each of us has a different view of the world. Determining your view of wellness comes from being self-aware and self-regulating to make choices that help you form habits. However, living fully aware of what makes you feel fulfilled and recognizing and realizing your potential gets you only part of the way. Whether they are beneficial to us or not, our habits are determining factors in our wellness. Knowing what is good for us is one thing, but ultimately, we determine the amount of effort we are willing to invest in ourselves. When you make conscious choices to integrate good things into your life, you increase the

degree of wellness that you will feel. For example, caring for yourself, by extension, is an act of caring for others: both the people we care about and those who care about us. Remember that highly personalized wellness is based on your choices, actions, and attention to maintaining it.

What we tend to focus on: Physical and mental wellness

We often focus on physical and mental wellness and take actions to care for our bodies and minds to maintain or improve current health and protect our future health. However, some other wellness dimensions heavily influence our physical and mental well-being. For example, if you worry about your job security, money, paying the bills, or think that saving for the future is only a dream, you can undoubtedly feel stress building that will affect your physical and mental wellness. Similarly, if you feel lonely or disconnected socially, this stress will also show up physically and mentally. As humans, we need to connect actively, that is, through speaking, laughing, interacting in shared spaces for our brains to process the benefits. Research has shown us that “social connection can lower anxiety and depression, help us regulate our emotions, lead to higher self-esteem and empathy, and actually improve our immune systems. By neglecting our need to connect, we put our health at risk.”³

While many would argue that social media does an excellent job of helping us stay connected, it and even other technologies such as video chatting do little to reduce loneliness. Social media can contribute counterproductively to overall wellness because of its addictive and passive nature. Many people find themselves scrolling through posts from others' lives and draw comparisons between what they view in these highlight reels versus what they are experiencing. It's important to remember that what is being shared is highly curated and may be inaccurate. Drawing comparisons and aspiring to lifestyles depicted on social media can intensify feelings of inadequacy and lead to being disappointed in life. Instead of looking for solutions there, engage with people outside of social media. These may be professionals such as your doctor, psychologists, counsellors, social workers, coaches, family members and friends. It's worth your time and investment to connect through conversations and interactions to listen to the natural cadence and pauses of conversations and to observe expressions and body language in a way that technology simply cannot duplicate.

What are some easy ways you can support physical and mental wellness?

Everything is connected. Building healthy habits that support your entire body is key. Movement completed during a walk or other type of exercise benefits not only your muscles, bones, lungs, and heart but also your brain.

But the length of time, effort and duration of exercise needed is not as intense as you may think, and that could act as an incentive to invest more in developing a positive habit. While moderate exercise helps, “too much exercise, particularly over time, pushes metabolic demands to the point where your brain’s innate protective systems are overwhelmed...[leading] to cellular injury and accelerated ageing.”⁴ Exercise decreases negative emotions, thoughts, depression, feelings of anxiety, and helplessness. So, it’s essential to think of it as an addition and not a solution to wellness. Instead, it would be best if you continued with the exercise plus everything else your doctor has recommended, including taking medication and participating in any other forms of therapy suggested.

Eating nutritious food and drinking water regularly are other simple ways to support overall wellness. It starts by understanding how the nutrients you consume are absorbed and feed all your cells. People are often surprised to find out that being malnourished and dehydrated affects their mental health. By consuming the proper nutrient-dense foods that work with your body, and increasing your daily water intake, your diet can help you improve your overall wellness. Dr. Uma Naidoo, a Chef and Nutritional Psychiatrist, has researched how different foods can trigger psychological responses such as depression, anxiety and negative emotional responses that are “not great for our long-term brain health.”⁵ Cravings, comfort food, and the crash we feel after consuming the wrong foods, especially sugary ones “made to be hyper-palatable,” is something to avoid because it’s very hard on our bodies.⁶ Understanding that there is a connection between food, gut health and the brain can help you form new habits. Eating nutritious foods allows us to feed the gut with microbes that maintain balanced transmission between the brain and the gut through the Vagus nerve and reduce inflammation, a catalyst for poor mental health.⁷ Psychological stress and trauma are also heightened when people are anxious and worried about food allergies. Knowledge of dietary choices and alternatives can reduce this type of anxiety.

Boundaries = balance

When considering other aspects of your overall wellness, it’s important to evaluate whether you need to establish boundaries that offer support and eliminate stressors. Often, relationships fall into patterns that can cause some discomfort. There’s also sometimes a danger of someone losing their sense of individuality in a relationship. Work pressures and challenges, including the difficulties posed by working from home, can hover over relationships like a fog. Addressing these situations calmly will often bring about better awareness of the behaviours that are straining your relationships. From there, you can introduce boundaries and consequences to going beyond them to help you find a better balance to your overall wellness and sense of fulfillment. It’s essential to be clear, respectful and show that you care as you articulate them.

Tips to kick start your wellness

Get up and move

- Set realistic goals to boost your physical activity. They need to be achievable, not monumental.
- Be sure that you’re focused on becoming stronger, and not on losing weight.
- Avoid focusing on your appearance. Be kind to your body. It works hard for you every day.

Get creative

- Sing, dance, paint, play with clay, knit, crochet or something else.
- Neuroscience shows that these are “simple, playful ways to help adults unwind and relieve stress.”⁸

Get in touch with your senses

- Immerse yourself in the sensory experiences within your environment. Explore tactile objects and think about the sensations you feel. Pay attention to the sounds, aromas, and visuals. Slow down when you eat so you can take time to taste the flavours of your food.

Get positive

- Try boosting your mental wellness with a moment of daily positivity to help bring about self-acceptance. It’s as easy as writing these three things in a small notebook or on a calendar:
 - Something you’re grateful for
 - Something you’ve been thinking about for a while
 - Something you are choosing not to do today

Get comfortable with your finances

- Start with something short-range like making a simple budget to get you through a day, a week, or a month. Look at your spending and saving decisions. Ask yourself if you have room to choose a different path on any of them.
- Once you’re comfortable with the short-range items, move on to long-range considerations. It doesn’t have to be about lump sums or investing. Start with something basic such as saving \$2 a day. Set up an automatic transfer to a savings account or go with coins in a jar. It doesn’t matter which method you choose, more that you’re training yourself to see the value in it. You can build onto more long-range goals once the habit is formed.

Get social

- Reach out to a friend once a week, by phone or video chat to have a short conversation. It doesn't mean texting; it's about talking.
- Join a group with like interests. Perhaps you want to learn an instrument or a language. Your brain will benefit from these new skills. You'll also develop the habit of lifelong learning.
- Reduce screen time and take a social media break. You may be able to see just how many times a day you touch your device and begin to break that habit. Many mobile devices have tools and apps built-in to help regulate usage.
- Live your experiences. Being present and watching things happen live creates memories in our brains. When you are focused on recording something to watch later, you'll find that the memory isn't as easy to recall because you didn't form it in the same way as being immersed at the moment.
- Ensure that your recreational use of alcohol and tobacco is both in control and in moderation. It's easy to get caught up in social and cultural marketing that promotes these as acceptable ways to medicate and detach from the stress and pressure of daily

life. There's an inherent danger in this as it encourages people to rationalize and deflect from stressors, normalizing substance abuse.

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