

### Wellness

In the course of my work as a psychologist with specialized training in clinical psychology, I spend considerable time working with people in psychological or emotional distress, occupational or social dysfunction or psychologically-related medical problems. Often, these problems have evolved over a long period of time and represent the culmination of unhealthy life situations and/or patterns of unhealthy choices. While I enjoy doing this work, there is a much broader perspective on psychological functioning that focuses on psychological wellness, preventing the onset of distress or dysfunction and going beyond striving to lessen or avoid pain to achieving a level of thriving and attainment of one's full potential.

Consider, by analogy, your relationship with your dentist. Dentists are proficient at filling cavities, repairing broken teeth and stopping your dental pain when it occurs. However, modern dentists do not stop there. They teach their patients to do things on a daily basis, such as brushing and flossing to promote dental health. They may discuss dietary issues with their patients to promote healthy tooth formation in children and to promote positive maintenance of dental health. They advocate regular checkups to identify and address problems before they progress too far.

In the same vein, psychologists have historically tried to understand what it takes to go beyond the repairing of psychological dysfunction to the understanding of how to promote optimal psychological functioning (e.g. Adler, 1927). The current term for this concept is "Psychological Wellness." One definition of psychological wellness is offered by Myers:

The concept of wellness refers to a holistic approach in which mind, body and spirit are integrated. It is a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being . . . Wellness is more than the absence of disease, [it is] a state defined as "health" and incorporates a concern for optimal functioning (Myers, 2004).

The concept of wellness includes a number of dimensions which interact with each other and which are "integrated in a purposeful manner with a goal of living life more fully (Myers, 2004)." The most commonly identified dimensions of wellness include: physical wellness, psychological (including emotional and intellectual) wellness, social wellness and spiritual wellness.

**Physical Wellness.** The relationship between physical and psychological wellness is well established. Psychological functioning occurs in the context of the biological organism and optimal psychological functioning is more difficult in the absence of good physical functioning. Mental and emotional factors can cause or exacerbate physical illness (Patient UK, 2007). Commonly recognized elements of physical wellness that contribute to psychological wellness are exercise, nutrition and sleep. There is a growing body of evidence that those who do well with these three elements not only live longer but function better psychologically.

**Psychological Wellness.** Psychological wellness incorporates emotional and intellectual functioning. Emotional wellness involves your capacity to experience and manage basic emotions such as fear, happiness, sadness, anger and love in ways that ultimately enhance your well-being. This includes your ability to accurately identify and assess your own emotions and those of others, to have strategies to cope with stressful feelings without becoming overwhelmed and to proactively create positive emotional experiences either by yourself or through interactions with others.

Intellectual wellness includes maintaining and applying the highest quality intellectual functioning that you are capable of achieving. This includes accepting intellectual challenges, being creative, using critical thinking and not blindly accepting eve-

rything you are told and being curious about your environment.

**Social Wellness.** Social wellness involves your ability to have satisfying and highly fulfilling relationships with others. It includes the ability to build networks of support for yourself and bridges to others to enhance your sense of security, connectedness, and value.

**Spiritual Wellness.** Spiritual wellness is related to your ability to find transcendent meaning and purpose in your life. It involves developing a belief about how you are connected to the universe outside of yourself. It may take the form of public religious observance or private meditation or inspiration.

**Creating a Wellness Plan.** It is hard to imagine that anyone, if asked, would say they do not want to be well. Yet many of us fall short of optimal functioning in at least one of the wellness domains. Many will feel overwhelmed by trying to initiate lifestyle changes that may lead to enhanced wellness. Change, as is often said, is difficult. It is important to remember, however, that success is best achieved in small increments. Incremental changes are less overwhelming and more likely to be sustained. What follows is a three step process to begin to incorporate changes in your lifestyle to help promote your own wellness.

**Step 1.** List each of the wellness domains. For each one, brainstorm all the possible ways in which you might improve your standing in that domain. Try to be specific, so instead of "exercise", write "walk around the block." A sample inventory might look as follows:

Physical: order regular portions of fries instead of "super sized" portions when eating out, turn off the television and go to bed at 10:00, take the stairs instead of the elevator for trips of less than three stories, switch from regular coffee to "half-caf".

Psychological: Ask for something you want or say "no" to something you don't want at least once per day, identify at least three positive things each day that either you did or that happened to you, read the comics in the newspaper in order to laugh more, try to learn at least one new thing each day either through conversation or reading, devote five minutes of your lunch hour at work to closing your eyes and doing deep breathing.

Social: Call a friend you have not had contact with for three months, take note of what you appreciate about a family member and express it to him or her, make sure each day to give your spouse your total attention for at least 15 minutes.

Spiritual: If you used to enjoy church but have not been there for a while, go back once. Identify other experiences in the past that have given your life a sense of meaning or transcendence such as a walk in nature, being around your children, uninterrupted quiet time, identify an area of pain or stress in your life and try to understand it as an opportunity for positive change or growth.

**Step 2.** Implement your plan. Make a commitment to do at least one thing in each of the domains daily or weekly. Record it on a calendar. Be realistic and gentle with yourself. The plan will be more successful if you shoot for many small victories rather than one or two large or difficult changes.

Sample Plan:

Physical: At the shopping mall, I will look to park next to the farthest vehicle from the

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entrance so I can walk a few extra feet.

Psychological: I will read for pleasure for one half hour before bedtime on Tuesdays

Social: I will give at least one sincere compliment to my significant other each day

Spiritual: I will set aside fifteen minutes each morning for quiet reflection before starting my day.

**Step 3.** Periodically repeat and update steps 1 and 2.

Sample: Write on your calendar thirty days from today to review and revise your wellness plan.

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Submitted by Jeffrey Pincus, Ph.D.

### Sleep and Mental Health

Sleep is a little valued and much sought after asset in the United States. It is estimated that one third of patients at primary care settings may experience occasional sleep problems and ten percent have developed a chronic sleep problem (Fadia, 2002). A sleep disorder is defined as a disturbance of normal sleep pattern such as waking during the night, difficulty going to sleep, night terrors, excessive restlessness, snoring and trouble breathing, wetting the bed and nighttime fears. The amount of sleep a person needs varies but, in general, infants need 16 hours, adolescents need around 9 hours and adults do best with 7-8 hours each night. Sleep disturbances in children have been directly linked to behavioral disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), academic problems, and oppositional behavior (Greene, 2001). Sleep deprivation in adolescents has been linked to a greater risk of abuse of nicotine, caffeine and alcohol, as well as impairments in mood, concentration and control of behavior (Carskadon, 1990). In adults, research has linked sleep problems with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and ADHD ("Sleep and mental health," 2009).

There is a "mutual relationship" between sleep and mental health difficulties, meaning that sleep affects behavior and emotional problems and behavioral and emotional problems affects sleep. More specifically, the probability increases that those who have sleep problems will be affected by mental health problems and sleep difficulties may even increase the risk of developing and lessen the chances of remedying such problems. For example, stud-

ies have shown that depressed people who continue to have insomnia "are less likely to respond to treatment than those without sleep problems" ("Sleep and Mental Health", 2009). On the positive side, the correction of a sleep problem may alleviate some mental health issues by boosting the immune system and enhancing learning and memory ("Sleep and mental health", 2009).

The most common of all sleep disorders is insomnia (trouble falling asleep, staying asleep or waking too early). Also very common is sleep apnea (the stoppage of breathing while sleeping), movement problems causing restless sleep and narcolepsy (extreme sleepiness or falling asleep suddenly during the day). While sleep apnea, movement problems and narcolepsy are mostly treated through medical or medicinal interventions, insomnia is optimally treated with a combination of lifestyle changes, behavior interventions, psychotherapy and medication, if needed (Sleep and mental health, 2009). Lifestyle changes may include the following: reducing usage of caffeine, alcohol and nicotine late in the day; engaging in regular aerobic activity (but not within four hours of going to bed) which is thought to make one fall asleep quicker, spend more time in deep sleep and wake up less at night; and maintaining regular sleep-wake times. Regulating sleep-wake times may mean reevaluating one's television viewing and putting into place calming activities such as reading, meditation and progressive relaxation techniques before bedtime. Cognitive behavioral therapy has also found to be effective with insomnia in dealing with the intrusive and repetitive thoughts that preclude some from falling asleep. If lifestyle and nondrug solutions do not work, physicians may suggest over the counter medications, supplements or prescription sleep aids as treatments (Fadia, 2002).

Sleep and mental health difficulties directly intersect each other. People who do not get regular sleep can suffer physically as well as emotionally. Good sleep hygiene has been repeatedly linked to optimal mental health. Persons experiencing sleep problems that affect their daytime functioning, that last more than a few days and do not have a clear causation should consult with their physicians. If no clear medical problem can be found the person may wish to consult with a mental health professional.

### References

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Submitted by Tracy M. Richards, MSW

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