

Wellness - Step by Step

What is "Wellness"? More than anything else it is an attitude to life. Wellness means that, whatever the circumstances affecting one's health, one is determined to strive for better health. Whether one is blessed with a strong, well-built body, a sound mind and a cheery disposition or one has a chronic, debilitating and depressing disorder, one is going to do one's best to be stronger, healthier and happier.

Physically, one pays close attention to diet, exercise, safety, and the physical environment; one acquires knowledge of and confidence in one's body, and acknowledges the signals the body sends.

Mentally, one seeks to acquire and improve stress coping skills, discipline, memory, concentration, knowledge, self-esteem, equanimity and creative expression.

Socially, one seeks strong and lasting friendship, mutual respect, tolerance, non-competitive interactions, openness, trust and interdependence, and arising from these, membership in and a positive contribution to community at the local, national and international level.

Spiritually, one constantly reaffirms - and even redefines - one's beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life. For some this is achieved through the worship of their God; for others, through moral action at the individual and the community level. For most people, it is both, the important point being the process of continuing reaffirmation.

Occupationally, one seeks fulfilment of potential, ever-extending reach in one's skills, and an ever-widening scope in one's usefulness to society. Material reward is recognised as a means to an end: whenever assets threaten to become little more than an accumulation of wealth, they are quickly transformed into an investment that will further the growth of both the investor and the society.

This commitment to higher standards of health in all dimensions - social, mental, physical, spiritual and occupational - is the essence of wellness. Its importance lies in the fact that life is never the same for very long. Circumstances are always changing, and if only due to the ageing process alone, we must know that the health we enjoy today cannot be guaranteed tomorrow.

Wellness, then, is dealing with change in a positive way. Wellness means being proactive rather than reactive - taking in front, as they say in Trinidad & Tobago. But wellness goes beyond prevention in the usual sense of avoidance and defense against assaults on the status quo. Wellness implies a constant improvement in the status quo. Prevention is aimed at maintaining one's health; wellness means optimising one's health - which process incorporates preventative measures.

Step One

Wellness begins with a commitment to change. This is where most people fail; not because they are weak-willed, undisciplined or irresponsible, but simply because the first step can be postponed - and postponed and postponed - and it is in our nature to postpone things that we do not have to do today.

The difficulty is compounded when we enjoy what we are doing now - like overeating, smoking, lazing and otherwise indulging ourselves; in a sense, being ourselves. Few people really want to change, even when they know that they should.

And so it is that change is a question of being. There is an existential dilemma at the core of the change process, and virtually all societies have had to devise formal structures to deal with that dilemma. Hence the *rites de passage* such as christenings, graduation ceremonies, weddings and funerals.

Initiation is the key to successful change. Wellness must begin with a rite; a point of departure that will remain a reference point for the rest of your life. A Wellness Assessment will fulfil this objective in a number of ways, some of them quite subtle. A blood test, for example, involves the pain of the needle, the sight of the blood being drawn from the vein, and the fact that the results could have dire consequences. That is why “big men” can seem to be as scared as children at the prospect.

A Wellness Assessment, then, is the first step on the road to better health. Unlike a medical “check up”, it is not routine, nor is it an examination of body parts to see if any repairs are needed. It has as much to do with change as it has to do with assessment (which is why medical examinations are so ineffective in raising the standard of health of patients, even when the doctor conscientiously tries to advise the patient to change his ways).

Step two

A Wellness Assessment begins with a talk with a doctor. Not a listing of complaints with a view to elucidating a diagnosis, but a heart to heart talk about health objectives.

Certainly, medically significant events in the past must be reviewed; current complaints must be discussed and on-going treatments noted, but just as important as these disease-oriented concerns are health-related habits and circumstances. Home and work environments, stressful situations, interpersonal relationships, food preferences and exercise history will all have contributed significantly to past levels of well-being, and will have to be taken into account in setting a course for the future.

One of the things the doctor will be particularly interested in will be attitude to health. Many, if not most people are conservative about what they can and cannot do, and the older they get the more conservative they become. In other words, if an action becomes too difficult or too painful, they simply stop doing it.

Most commonly, when an overweight person’s knees start hurting - as they almost always do - he or she simply stops squatting, jumping or otherwise “aggravating” the knee. And the doctor he or she has seen for the pain would usually have gone along with this, prescribing pain-killers and recommending rest. And so the legs get weaker and the knees get more and more unstable, which leads to more pain - and more treatment. It is not unusual to find people who have not fully flexed their knees for years.

Wellness requires that such a vicious cycle be broken. People who are afraid to push themselves are never going to get well. If their lives have been reduced to “hanging on” and they are not prepared to take any risks, then their best bet is to take medication to stabilise their condition and see how long they can last.

Those with a healthy attitude will not be afraid to test themselves. It would be foolish, of course, to jump out of bed the day after a heart attack and see how quickly you can walk a mile, but eventually, if you are to regain your health, you will have to walk that mile - and then a mile and a half, and then two miles.

Such an attitude is the essence of wellness, and there is no medical condition in which it will not lead to higher standards of health and well-being.

And so, having had a chat with the doctor, and with his help, having painted the picture of wellness that is desired, the next step is to take some tests in order to establish a baseline for change. In order to know where you are going, you must first know where you are.

Step Three

There was a time when a laboratory was only a diagnostic facility: if you wanted so much as your blood type you had to get a letter from a doctor. In those days doctors did not tell patients anything they “did not need to know”. If a patient inquired about a blood test result, the doctor was quite likely to say “let me worry about that”.

Purely diagnostic tests are still the preserve of doctors, and rightly so. Diagnosis requires expertise and hence should be left to the experts. But some “tests” do not only serve diagnostic purposes. They also provide information that any individual needs in order to understand and better manage his health. Diabetics need to know their blood sugar levels on a daily basis - to the extent that home testing equipment has been built for them. People with hypertension ought to own a sphygmomanometer, and asthmatics, a peak flow meter. Every parent ought to know their child’s haemoglobin level (and nowadays, every couple with previous sexual experience should have HIV tests.)

Doctors used to order a cholesterol test to see if the patient had hypercholesterolaemia and was therefore in need of treatment. The man-in-the-street now understands that his cholesterol level is just one of many risk factors that he needs to control in order to enjoy a high standard of health. The focus has shifted from “treatment” to “control” and the responsibility has accordingly shifted from the doctor to the patient. The man-in-the-street needs to know his cholesterol level - whether it is normal or whether it is high.

But patients still complain that they cannot get their laboratory test results from the hospital, or even from their personal physicians.

Quite apart from the fact that the laboratory report rightfully belongs to the person who has paid for it, the medical profession, it seems, is yet to realise that the person who can make the most effective use of the results of certain tests is not the doctor but the patient.

A Wellness Assessment involves laboratory tests as a source of information about health. It goes beyond “screening” for disease; indeed, the goal is the prevention of disease, and the essential requirement for effective prevention is knowledge. With knowledge will come changes in attitudes and beliefs, and thence a change in practice. Providing people with information does not always lead to change in behaviour, but it goes a long way towards that objective. It is true that most people will wait for an actual heart attack before changing their lifestyles, but it is also true that concrete evidence of a high risk very often leads to healthy changes. Laboratory tests are an important part of such evidence.

Step Four

Physical condition is the one aspect of health that is most likely to be taken for granted. Unless one is accustomed to being fit, one does not “feel” unfit. Ex-athletes will remember the energy they used to have; the way they used to jump out of bed on mornings and lime late into the night without so much as a yawn, but the average person nowadays cannot even imagine such a condition. Apart from the sports he used to play as a teenager, he has quite likely never exercised a muscle, least of all doing the sort of hard work on the land that his grandfather had to do.

We are paying a very high price for our sedentary lifestyles. Sedentariness, as it is called, is arguably the single biggest cause of disease and disability in the modern world. Physical complaints like backache and joint pains are second only to the ‘flu’ as a cause for absenteeism

and low productivity; fit employees are half as likely to take sick leave as unfit employees, and return to work sooner when they do. Poor physical condition contributes to stress, boredom and low self-esteem, and is the main cause of decrepitude in old age.

We all have very good reasons for getting fitter, but exercise requires more motivation than anything except mental exertion. A Wellness Assessment therefore includes tests of fitness mainly as a jump-start.

Comparing the number of push-ups, sit-ups or curl-ups one can do with the standards required for minimal fitness can be a sobering experience. Even more startling can be the measurement of the percentage of fat in the body. Healthy-looking, well-proportioned bodies can turn out to be mush. Tight skin holds it all in place in the young, but as the years pass that excess fat will begin to hang and flap or show up as “cellulite”.

Aerobic capacity is a measure of the body’s ability to burn oxygen, and oxygen, we all know, is the stuff of life. Low aerobic capacity (cardiovascular fitness) is perhaps the ultimate indication of poor physical condition. It does not manifest itself in any complaints, nor is it a diagnostic criterion in any disease so doctors do not measure it when doing a check-up, but there is probably no better indication of the margin of health with which one is living. (Testing for aerobic capacity may involve walking on a treadmill, but unlike the similar “Stress ECG”, the goal is not to push you to the limit to see if any problems arise, but to see how efficient the cardiovascular system is when exercising.)

A common fear of fitness testing is that you would “drop down” or “burst a blood vessel” while doing the tests. Any one who is that close to collapse is not going to last very long in any case, so unless you have resigned yourself to simply hanging on (and you are prepared to give up climbing stairs, sexual intercourse and any sort of physical exertion), you might as well do the fitness tests and see where you have to start in order to make some changes.

What if you have ischaemic heart disease? The doctor will tell you not to exercise because you might precipitate a heart attack. That is fine for today, but what is going to happen tomorrow if you do not get any exercise? That is the question.

Step Five

So far, on this journey to wellness, you have had a chat with the doctor, a number of laboratory tests and a fitness assessment, including a test of your cardiovascular fitness and the measurement of the amount of fat in your body.

Beyond those physical evaluations is an inventory of your lifestyle - the type of food that you habitually consume, the frequency with which you drink alcohol and the amount, your exercise habits (which can be quite adequate without being formal), risk-taking behaviour - at home, when driving, sexually and otherwise, your attitude to medication, your spiritual awareness, your interpersonal relationships, and so on.

Particular attention must be paid to stress, low levels of which are a prerequisite for a long life. Happy people are healthier people. Those who live with a lot of stress eventually fall ill or have an accident. (Studies show that above a certain level of chronic stress there is a fifty percent chance of a serious illness within two years.) High stress levels are manifested mainly in a sense of frustration; a feeling that things are not under control; a constant desire to “get away” from it all.

Alternatively, it can be largely physical or emotional. Stress can show up in an endless variety of ways, and some people do not even realise how much stress they are living with. They have a fighting spirit, and often believe that that is all that is required.

A Wellness Assessment also includes an exploration of knowledge, attitudes and practices in health care, especially if you have a chronic medical condition like diabetes or high blood pressure. Healthy people understand what “wellness” means and know how to look after themselves. More important, they want to know. A person with diabetes, for example, will often know more about diabetes than his doctor - and so it should be. Living with a chronic disorder requires good management, and that in turn requires competence in both theory and praxis.

Screening tests are an important part of looking after yourself. Even if a cure for cancer were to be discovered tomorrow, early detection would remain crucial. Some forms of screening - like annual chest X-rays, for example - are not worth the risk or the cost, but mammograms, Pap smears, prostate examinations, stool occult blood, intra-ocular pressure and colonoscopy should all be undertaken according to the recommended schedules.

Having had a thorough Wellness Assessment, you are equipped - and better prepared - to start making changes in your life. Wellness does not come overnight, and no one ever achieves perfect health. Striving for higher standards is a lifelong undertaking. The road is long and your steps are small. Sometimes you will turn off the path for a while, and even appear to be going backwards.

And why not? The straight and narrow path is boring. What is the point of being healthy if you cannot break the rules sometimes? In fact the freedom to take liberties with your health is the best reason to be healthy. You can then eat, drink and be merry today, not because “tomorrow you may die”, but because you know you will live. A life well lived is a life filled with many responsibilities well met - and occasional acts of irresponsibility.

Step Six

To get things done efficiently, one should have a plan. A healthy life is in many ways a planned life. Impulsive actions will add spice to the mixture of experiences upon which one would like to be able someday to reflect, but there must be a bedrock of clear objectives in the majority of actions that one takes. It matters not if objectives change over time; in fact it is inevitable that they will, but at any moment one’s course of action must be directed by objectives.

The last step therefore consists of a planning exercise. When the tests have been done, and the information gathered, a picture emerges, the total being more than the sum of its parts. It is not now simply a matter of where do you go from here, but why and how and when. We would all like to be stronger and fitter and happier. We will all agree that we “need more exercise” and more time to relax and a host of other things that are important to a long and healthy life. But we all know that it is not going to work out that way.

Wellness planning means setting the stage for a healthy performance. The intention to get more exercise, for example, must be strong enough to ensure that by the end of any week, you have exercised enough. One therefore does not “set aside” time to exercise and hope that there will be no interruptions in one’s schedule. Rather, one aims to get more exercise in everything that one does, and at every opportunity. Exercise, including “workouts”, must become a normal part of life. That is a very different thing from an exercise programme - which you well know will sooner or later become inconvenient or boring.

The same goes for nutrition, relaxation and personal growth in all dimensions. Wellness goals should include specific targets - like a specific weight by a specific date, but more important they must include small changes in the way in which everyday tasks are completed. Big changes take a long time, but small changes can happen overnight, and they should. “From tomorrow,” you might decide, “I will stop buttering my toast”.

Wellness goals are ultimately “intentions”, and while the road to hell is indeed paved with many good ones, the road to heaven is founded on them. It is only when you truly intend to lose weight that those pounds will come off, and it is only if you fully intend to be a healthier person in every way that they will stay off. Our intentions define our purpose and give meaning to our actions. Without them we will get nowhere.

Intentions, however, need feedback and reinforcement to sustain them. We need to know that we are indeed going where we are intent on going. Our actions therefore must be measured and recorded. We must chart our progress even when it is obvious that we are making progress. A written record is not only evidence of our past course, it is a source of inspiration for our future actions. In seeing what we have accomplished we will know what we can accomplish.