

WELLNESS: WHAT IS IT REALLY AND WHAT WORKS?



By: Yvonne Caputo, MS, MA

Dr. Donald Ardell's book, *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs, and Disease*, was one of the central texts for a high-level wellness class that I took in 1978 at Gannon University in Erie, Pennsylvania. It was one of the keys to my trying to live and teach about wellness from that time until the present. The essence of my understanding of wellness is captured best in a definition from UC Davis - "Wellness is an active process of becoming aware of and making choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life. Wellness is more than being free from illness; it is a dynamic process of change and growth. It is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

What is most important about this definition is the idea that wellness is a dynamic process of change and growth promoting physical, mental, and social well-being. UC Davis has defined 8 dimensions of wellness: emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social, and spiritual.

Often, when individuals or companies want to promote wellness, they focus primarily on the physical dimension. Losing weight, exercising, stopping smoking, getting regular physical checkups, and eating well-balanced diets are all wonderful strategies, but, without the incorporation of the other dimensions, wellness

programs miss the mark. Focus on the other dimensions is crucial. Emotional wellness is the ability to name feelings and to manage them in appropriate ways. It helps decrease stress and increase life satisfaction. Environmental wellness centers on respect for the land, taking action to protect it, and enjoying the comfort that being outside brings. Financial wellness is the ability to manage money, and not having enough is repeatedly a source of stress. Intellectual wellness is being open to new ideas, having a curiosity about things and a love of learning. Occupational wellness is enjoying work and appreciating one's contributions to an organization and to people in general. Social wellness is having a support network. It means having different relationships with different people. Spiritual wellness is not the same as having a "religious practice." It is having a system of values that lets one find meaning and purpose.

Research supports the idea that healthy people work harder, are happier, are more productive, are less conflictual, and are more efficient. Relationships and companies prosper when people are actively trying to live a wellness lifestyle.

For individuals seeking such a lifestyle, it is important to assess where you are right now and then decide where you would like to go. Like making a New Year's resolution, choosing to do too many things at once becomes overwhelming. Choose just one thing. Make a commitment and a plan on how you will achieve that one thing. When that one thing becomes a habit, choose something else and repeat the process.

Research shows that corporate wellness plans are ineffective, but there is also research that shows that corporate-sponsored programs can be really effective. Harvard University suggests the following steps for a successful program:

1. Leadership commitment and support

I remember attending a wellness conference at which the then-governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, spoke about his own path to wellness. In a video, he stated that he couldn't ask the state to do something he was unwilling to do himself.

2. Building a culture of health

This is not an occasional walking campaign. It is an integrated health model using all of the dimensions of wellness. It is built intentionally.

3. Asking for help

It requires not imposing but engaging employees in the design and execution of programs with the support of management.

4. Spreading the word

Communication, communication, communication - finding a variety of methods and means of getting the word out.

5. Offering smart incentives

The key is choosing the right incentives. Care must be given to make them fit within employment law. It also requires

knowing which ideas incentivize and which do exactly the opposite.

6. Measuring the right things

What is the return on investment, what works, and what doesn't? Rand Corporation has been cited by the Society for Human Resource Management for having calculated cost savings in many ways through its wellness program.

What is important about choosing a wellness lifestyle is the impact that it has on personal and organizational well-being.

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