

What are Health and Wellness?

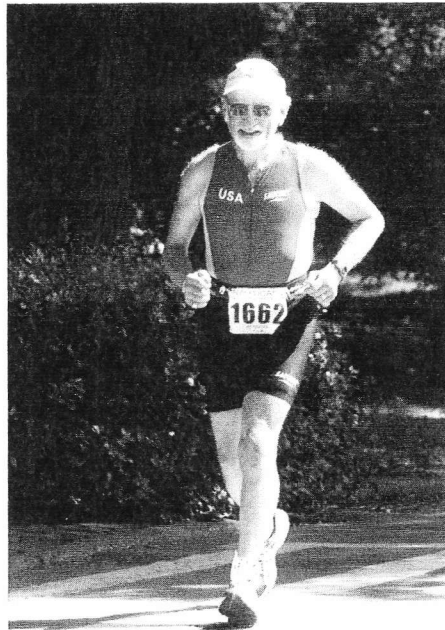
By Steven Jonas, MD, MPH

Over the past several issues in my “Message from the Editor” I have been discussing various aspects of health and wellness. Because both are important aspects of why folks regularly exercise and train, I thought it would be appropriate in this issue to share a few thoughts with you about the two.

Health and wellness. You know the drill. If you practice a healthy and well lifestyle, you can lower your risk of contracting a wide variety of diseases and negative health conditions or, at least, can delay their onset. As readers of the *AMAA Journal* know, engaging in what can be called “baseline” dimensions of healthy living can improve your fitness level, help you lose weight, better your physical appearance, and enable you to handle life’s stresses more effectively. Most importantly, practicing this type of lifestyle can provide immediate feedback to help you feel better about yourself now.

Entering the broader stream of the health and wellness lifestyle can also positively affect the emotional, intellectual, cultural, occupational, spiritual, and social elements of your life. In this list are several elements not usually associated with health, but often associated with wellness: the intellectual, cultural, creative, and spiritual dimensions of life.

At any given time, health status is determined by three broad groups of factors: genetic, environmental, and personal/behavioral. All are important. All are constantly interacting with each other over time in a complex, dynamic, three-dimensional feedback loop. As Dr. Lester Breslow, Dean Emeritus of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Public Health and one of my early mentors, noted: “[L]ifestyle consists of ways of living, the patterns of behavior, in the circumstances of one’s life. Increasingly in industrialized society we create for ourselves, individually and collectively, both the circumstances of life and our ways of living in those circumstances. And we are beginning to



recognize that both those facets of lifestyle strongly influence how long we live and how well.” (*References available upon request.*)

The Ten Central Concepts of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

On the academic side of my work, I developed what I refer to as the “Ten Central Concepts of Health Promotion/Disease Prevention.” There is nothing magical or mystical about them. For the most part, each one is simply a restatement of an element of received wisdom about the substance and processes of health and wellness and how to go about becoming healthy and well. The central idea here is that theory can inform practice and be the handmaiden of it.

- I. Health is a state of being; wellness is a process of being.
- II. Health status is determined by a broad range of factors, not just one.
- III. Health has a natural history, just like disease does.
- IV. Central to the wellness process is a broad array of health and wellness-

- related activities and interventions.
- V. In many behavior change endeavors, success is relative.
- VI. Risks to health can be reduced; rarely is there any certainty of outcome.
- VII. The essence of healthy living and wellness is achieving balance in one’s life.
- VIII. For most personal behavior change efforts, there is a common mental pathway to success.
- IX. Motivation is a process, not a thing.
- X. Assessment, goal-setting, and mobilizing motivation are the central mental tasks in personal behavior change.

Instead of providing discussion and analysis of the Ten Concepts, I will briefly show how they fall into two groups. The first seven are the primarily “substantive” common denominators of healthy and well living. These concepts define and describe what health and wellness are and are about, what their theoretical and philosophical substance is, and how they may be characterized and understood, both in individuals and in the abstract.

The “process” concepts are common denominators showing how individuals go about changing their personal health-related behaviors. They describe the mental process one follows in order to get to a healthy/well state of being. The first seven (substantive) concepts inform that mental process. The last three concepts concern the mental process of becoming and being both healthy and well itself. Of course, each concept has elements of both substance and process, but they are grouped according to which element is the most prominent in each one.

Some Thoughts about Health

What are definitions of “health?” Some folks think that health is simply the opposite of disease or illness; however, even the ancient Greeks recognized it was not as simple as that. They made a

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philosophical distinction between the concepts of health and disease. As the eminent medical historian Henry Sigerist once said (*references available upon request*): “The [Greek] physicians had an explanation for health. Health, they believed, was a condition of perfect equilibrium. When the forces or humors or whatever constituted the human body were perfectly balanced, man was healthy. Disturbed balance resulted in disease.” This is still the best general explanation we have.

There are numerous non-Western approaches that are similar to that of the Greeks. Dr. Sidney Kark, a South African/Israeli epidemiologist, quoted a Hindu physician: “To the Hindu, health is harmony; [harmony is] being at peace with the Self, the community, God, and the cosmos.”

This idea recognizes both balance with the outside world and balance within the person as necessary for the achievement and maintenance of health. The Taoist concept of health is much the same. Kark also cited the Native American Navajo concept of health. The similarities to the Eastern philosophies cited are striking: “[When there is] balance between the individual and his total physical and social environment, as well as balance between the supernatural and man...good health is the result; and upset in this equilibrium causes disease.” This, of course, is very similar to the Greek concept of health described by Dr. Sigerist.

The definition of health adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) steps across both geographical and historical boundaries and resonates with the concepts just reviewed: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

Taking into account all these different approaches to a definition of health and many others not quoted here, a useful and functional definition of health is perhaps this one: “Health is a positive,

balanced, state of being, characterized at any given time by the then best achievable physical, psychological, emotional, social, and intellectual levels of functioning, the absence of disease or the optimal management of chronic disease, and the control of both internal and external risk factors for both diseases and negative health conditions.” This is the definition I generally use, but always refer back to the concept that health is a state of being, one that is measurable at any given point in time.

Some Thoughts About Wellness

Many of us who work in the field of “wellness” give great credit to and take much of our direction from my dear friend and colleague Donald Ardell, PhD (who has an “Invitational Editorial” on health care reform in this issue). It was Don who discovered the, at first, rather obscure work of Dr. Halbert Dunn, a retired public health service physician. His study of Dr. Dunn’s work, followed by his own subsequent extension of that work, started us down the road to the point where “wellness” has become somewhat of a household word.

Dr. Dunn was one of the first, if not the first, to use the term “wellness.” In the 1950s, he developed the concept of what he termed “high-level wellness.” For the individual he defined it as: “[A]n integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable. It requires that the individual maintain a continuum of balance and purposeful direction within the environment where he is functioning.” He added that: “Wellness is a direction in progress toward an ever-higher potential of functioning.”

Since the 1970s, Don has been one of the principal proponents of the concept and has produced an evolving series of definitions of the term. In 1986, he said that (quotation slightly reordered): “In pursuing wellness...your mind, body,

and spirit are integrated and inseparable...you must be involved in total, including your self-concept, your work, your primary and other relationships, your environment, and so forth.”

By 1998 Don had boiled it all down to: “Wellness . . . is devoted to the promotion of a strategy or philosophy that will help you achieve an optimal level of physical and psychological well-being *and* enjoy a wonderfully successful and satisfying life of consequence.”

Over the past several years, Don has significantly expanded the concept to what he calls “REAL Wellness,” the REAL part standing for “Reason, Exuberance, and Liberty.” As Don says, “I adopted the modifier REAL to promote wellness as a deliberate mindset or philosophy inspired by reason, exuberance, and liberty. The purpose of wellness is to achieve, maintain, and fine-tune a high quality of life. REAL wellness education, materials, or programs do elements of living, for the well person the wellness process ends only with a terminal condition and death. Wellness is thus a journey that has many intermediate milestones but only one end-point.”

An important perspective implied by the Dunn and the several Ardell definitions is the recognition that what constitutes a “personal state of well-being” for any individual can vary over time. In most of us, it does indeed vary over time. Therefore, health is a *state of being* that changes over time and can be measured at any time. Wellness is a *process of being* with a goal of trying to achieve optimum health at any given point in time.

I hope these thoughts I’ve shared will be helpful for you when “Talking About Training” with your patients and clients.