



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #4: MY WELLNESS



For some people, it's very easy to get caught up in the responsibility of taking care of others. We're taught to be kind and considerate and help people in need of care. We're rewarded for our efforts with endorphins and experience emotions that make us feel good about helping others. So, why is it so difficult to focus on personal wellness and to dedicate the same investment in time, energy and care for ourselves? We often worry about appearing selfish and tend to give more credence to negative or judgmental thoughts. We also don't recognize that being caught up in a cycle of continually giving ourselves to others can become toxic.

In this article, we're sharing information about how important and necessary it is to focus on yourself and what you can do to achieve better overall wellness.

What is wellness?

Wellness is a term that we hear mentioned often, both in and outside of our workplaces. While it holds a different meaning for different people, it's important to determine what it means for you to "be well" and to recognize when you're taking action and making choices that affect your

well-being. Some people aspire to achieve a sort of wellness nirvana, which isn't everyone's cup of tea, and it may not be realistic or authentic. At its most basic, feeling well means that you are generally healthy physically, mentally and emotionally. Perhaps a more well-rounded definition includes the notion that wellness is more than just a state of being. The pursuit of wellness has an aspect of self-direction: you need to have the motivation to pursue goals and to make improvements that can enhance your life. So, to view wellness as perpetual happiness may not be the most realistic approach. Wellness has many different dimensions. Sometimes, we can experience poor wellness when different stressors make our lives feel less balanced. At other times, our awareness and motivation to be well introduces many positive changes in our lives and helps us to develop and grow as individuals.

Recognizing that many factors can influence how we measure our wellness is important, because it will fluctuate significantly throughout our lives, depending on the reality of our circumstances and situations.

Are you motivated?

Abraham Maslow created a theory that helped explain how we develop motivation, growth, and progress to fulfilling our needs as individuals. His Hierarchy of Needs shared that people are motivated first to satisfy lower level basic needs moving to progressively more complex needs. That motivation increases as each level of need is met.¹

A complete picture of someone's wellness, should consider how well those basic and progressive needs are being satisfied. If someone is experiencing financial or food insecurity, they may not feel safe or secure in their job. They may not have somewhere to live, hence their motivation will focus on fixing these elements. Only after they are feeling satisfied will they feel motivated to focus on psychological needs like developing friendships, finding loving relationships and increasing self-esteem.

At the top of Maslow's Hierarchy are activities that help people achieve their full potential and self-fulfillment. Being aware of what to focus on and the idea of what wellness means to you comes into play. Focusing on yourself means that you recognize the importance of self-care and self-kindness and give attention to self-esteem and self-worth. In short, you've been able to view these as essential elements of your identity. Honest self-assessment and self-perception are required, as is the ability to acknowledge personal growth. It's something that many people struggle with and it can lead to them feeling both unfulfilled and incomplete.

Stress. Understanding the impact.

Suppose you're struggling because your needs have not been met. In this scenario you are more likely to develop mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression and physical diseases such as obesity and heart disease that can affect your overall wellness. The common catalyst that runs like an undercurrent through these struggles is stress. Stress is a powerful influence that can dredge up memories of traumatic events that occurred decades earlier and affect someone's ability to focus on improving their wellness. These individuals may only focus on those earlier events and have difficulty processing and/or managing any additional environmental stressors.

Pandemic life has illuminated the need to focus on improving wellness

If you asked most people how well they feel in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, they would likely express their vulnerability and fatigue. Public Health protocols surrounding social distancing, isolation/quarantine requirements, the demands of working from home while simultaneously helping school-age children with online learning or managing the daily challenges of caring for younger children are all having detrimental effects on people's mental, physical and emotional health.

People are experiencing insomnia and disinterest in tasks that require physical effort. There's been increases in obsessive-compulsive behaviours, social anxiety, and germaphobia relating to cleanliness protocols. Some people have also experienced significant losses, be it of the lives of family and friends who have succumbed to COVID-19, or their own health if they happen to be dealing with longer-term effects of COVID-19 on their lungs and heart, for example.

Right now, researchers and psychologists are quite concerned about the long-term effects that stress has been having on people as we continue to live in the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. They're apprehensive because of the duration and scale of all aspects of life that have been affected. Many people who have experienced job loss have had difficulty maintaining adequate food supply and/or maintaining housing or related costs. They have yet to see reliable recovery and are dealing with high rates of adverse mental health due to chronic stress.

Joshua C Morganstein, Assistant Director of the Centre for Study of Traumatic Stress, points to catastrophic events worldwide -- everything from the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the SARS pandemic in 2003 to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. He cautions that the "adverse mental health effects of disasters impact more people and last much longer than the health effects."² Morganstein recognizes how detrimental stress is and how deeply it can affect people and consequently, society. He advocates that we need to begin to view stress "like a toxin, such as lead or radon" and appreciate how exposure to stress will affect people longer-term.³

However, for a subset of people, pandemic life has been "remarkably positive."⁴ For some people who experienced high levels of stress in the pre-pandemic world, the restrictions have reduced their anxiety, eliminated panic attacks, and they have enjoyed a greater sense of freedom

and safety. In these instances, they've achieved better work-life balance and accomplished tasks they may have previously avoided, such as decluttering and have even started hobbies.

Getting back on track to creating wellness by looking holistically at mental, emotional and physical health

It's not enough to focus on just the physical or mental aspects of feeling well. It also makes sense to focus on emotional health to build "skills and resources to manage the ups and downs of day-to-day life" and "foster resilience, self-awareness and overall contentment."⁵ While it makes sense that all aspects should be of equal importance because of the interconnectivity between them, there is still an obvious bias towards physical health that needs to change. Until that happens, underreporting of mental health because of fear, stigma, and misunderstanding will make it challenging to find a better balance and to recognize the relationship to physical conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

- Mental health disorders account for 15% of the world's diseases.⁶
- Depression is most common; 300 million people live with this debilitating condition.⁷

- The World Health Organization has projected that depression will be the leading cause of disease in the world by the end of this decade.⁸

What can I do to improve my wellness?

One of the best ways to start is to reflect upon where you are within your life's mental, physical, and social aspects. Think about any concerns you have or behaviours you want to address to support better wellness.

From a mental health standpoint:

- Focus on the present and practice relaxation and stress reduction through mindfulness and meditation.
- Maintain relationships with friends and family by exploring new ways to connect and come together while apart. You may be able to participate or host watch parties to view different television programs or movies, attend virtual events such as paint nights or cooking classes, and even explore collaborative online gaming. It's important to revive the social aspects of life by talking and listening. Remember to reach out to people who you haven't heard from in a while as they may be facing challenges of their own.
- Explore services and supports offered through programs such as Wellness Together Canada.



From a physical health standpoint:

- Keep up with simple exercise such as walking and housework, or explore online classes, like yoga, that are low impact and don't require equipment.
- Maintain good sleep hygiene and sleep routines. Plan on getting eight hours on a regular sleep schedule and where possible, plan for naps as well.
- Ensure that your nutrition is optimized to provide the nourishment, vitamins and minerals that your body needs. Food sources are generally preferred over supplements but consult your health care providers about their recommendations for common deficiencies.

From a social standpoint:

- Keep connected to your health care providers who can offer input and advice.
- Don't feel that you need validation from friends or family. It's for you. What you can focus on is setting healthy boundaries with them that support your wellness needs.

Above all, recognize the need to be kind to yourself. Taking action is the first step to shifting into regular behaviours that will help you optimize your wellness.

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