

Is Wellness an Overused Term???

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What is wellness? In their *Wellness Workbook*, Travis and Ryan (2004) stated that: “Wellness is a choice—a decision you make to move toward optimal health. Wellness is a way of life—a lifestyle you design to achieve your highest potential for well-being.”

All of us are in a constant state of wellness, regardless of our current state of health. We can be living well in a challenged body, or we can be very unwell even though we may appear healthy.

Many people think of *wellness* and *health* as synonymous—that is, if one is healthy, one is therefore well. This is not the case. An individual may appear physically healthy, may work out every day, eat fruits and vegetables and decry anything artificial and yet be emotionally and spiritually drained, bored with life, or unhappy in relationships. That is not wellness.

Wellness is dynamic. It is always in process. As our body changes each day through the process of living, so does our state of wellness. Just as there are various levels of illness and disease (*dis-ease*), so too there are various levels of wellness and well-being. Wellness is the integration, balance, and harmony of one’s mind, body, spirit, and emotions in which all parts of the individual are working in balance and harmony.

I believe that in coaching in the arena of Wellness, terms like well-being and optimal living are more useful for the lifestyle changes and choices one can make.

High-level wellness is a term first coined by physician Halbert Dunn, who published a book of the same title in 1961. He described wellness as starting “with personal awareness and desires, supported by attitudes, behaviors and lifestyle choices for the purpose of living a life that is satisfying to oneself in all dimensions of life” (Dunn, 1961/1977). Dunn was clear that wellness was a whole-person approach and a disciplined commitment to personal mastery, including personal responsibility and environmental awareness.

Although wellness has come to relatively recent attention in Western culture, it is interesting to note that the concept is not new.

In Eastern cultures, wellness practices are as old as the cultures themselves. In some Asian cultures the doctor is paid to keep people healthy and is not a doctor of illness but a doctor of prevention. In China, hundreds of citizens gather every day in various locales to practice tai chi, a martial art with proven health benefits. This is such an ingrained practice that business professionals arrive, do their tai chi, and then put their suits back on to continue on to their place of work.

Wellness practices can also be found in other cultures. The Native Americans used the *medicine wheel* as a function of daily life and in making choices toward wellness. The medicine wheel is a spiritual and psychological practice for creating a mindset that is grateful and open to all the earth gives. One can find similar practices in the Ayurveda tradition of India, the Huna practices of Hawaii, tribal practices in Africa, the aboriginal cultures of Australia, practices and traditions in the Orient, and other ancient cultures across the globe.

Indeed, Western medicine was actually founded with the notion of “physician as educator” by Hippocrates, the proclaimed father of Western medicine, more than 2000 years ago. However, in the evolution of medicine’s scientific and technological advances the role of the physician has become that of a disease manager rather than that of an educator. “Prevention” in the medical practice of the West, tends to consist of disease screening (e.g., cholesterol level, bone density, and mammogram screenings) instead of health-promoting practices.

That is not to say that the concept of wellness has been entirely absent in the West. Certain individuals have been instrumental in defining and giving life to wellness practices. As mentioned previously, in 1961 Halbert Dunn introduced the term *wellness* in his book *High Level Wellness*. This work was followed in 1977 by Don Ardell’s (1977/1982) *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs, and Disease*. Ardell extended the concept of wellness to include our relationship to our planet. His work continues to this day.

Another pioneer of the wellness movement in the United States is John W. Travis, MD, MPH. Travis trained at the John Hopkins Medical School and worked in the U.S Public Health Service under the tutelage of Dr. Lewis Robbins, the creator of the Health Risk Appraisal so widely used to this day. Travis was greatly influenced by Abraham Maslow’s concept of self-actualization. Travis decided to dedicate his life to “teaching people to be well” rather than treating patients. He created the first wellness assessment (Wellness Inventory) and authored the classic *Wellness Workbook*].

Paul Zane Pilzer (2007) wrote in *The Wellness Revolution*; “Wellness is the next natural step forward in our destiny and in the advancement of humankind. By extending

your years of strength and wellness, you can accomplish those things you really want to accomplish”

As Life Coaches, no matter what your specialty or niche, we teach to coach the whole person. How can you bring the conversation of optimal living and well being to your clients? And your own life too!