

Four Pillars of Wellness

(An Overview of the Stinson Personal Wellness Model)

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Emotions, intellect, body, spirit, social and vocation are all traditional wellness dimensions *but what do they have in common?* Are there principles that unify these dimensions?

The Wellness Centre at Trinity Western University has identified four pillars of wellness (Stinson Personal Wellness Model) that provide a foundation for the dimensions of personal wellness. These pillars can be applied to each wellness dimension and to the relationship between dimensions. In addition, they form a grid by which we can begin to assess our own level of wellness. The four pillars are purpose, balance, congruence and sustainability.

Purpose

Purpose relates to intentional movement toward a chosen outcome. The first step is to choose a direction and begin moving. It is fairly common to dream big and then get discouraged if we don't see significant progress in a short period of time. It is important to dream big but equally as important to create a strategy of small steps and goals that will help move us in that direction. A common misconception is that once in place, goals can't be altered. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Life is a journey into the unknown. Every day we live is a new day and although we may think we know what's ahead, there is a lot that is out of our control. So while purpose is about setting goals and moving intentionally toward them, we need to be flexible as we journey so that we can adapt to unforeseen circumstances.

As mentioned, the first step is to get moving. If you are stuck in a rut, you may need to make some challenging decisions to get moving again. Dream a little. What would you like life to look like and feel like? Go ahead, dream big—but recognize that the key to accomplishing dreams is in the strategy set out to overcome the obstacles that will be encountered along the way. To start in a direction, set small goals that you can achieve in a day, week or month. If you don't achieve your goals within the timeframe that you set, then break them down into even smaller pieces that you know are achievable.

People who live "well" have articulated purposes and intentionally pursue their goals. Implicit in the idea of wellness is a disciplined aspect to living that helps people make healthy choices over comfortable choices. Purpose provides the rationale and motivation to make good choices and follow through with them to achieve wellness.

If you have been goal directed for a while and are not stuck in a rut, then a lot of your work around purpose will have to do with discovering your soul—the inner core of who you are. In a book entitled *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer makes reference to the “grain of your soul”. We will discuss this a little later, but understand for now that purpose needs to be aligned with the grain of your soul. To find satisfying purpose in life people need to assess their strengths as well as embrace their weaknesses, a process which helps identify a good direction of travel.

Purpose is found at the point where a person is willing to commit to action. Without this level of commitment, they are simply dreaming about tantalizing ideas.

Question: Are the choices I make intentional and do they enhance and reflect the goals and beliefs to which I am committed to act on?

Balance

The second step is to balance our lives based on our purpose. Balance is neither simple nor static. Balance involves determining how much time and energy we will expend in various areas without neglecting elements that are critical to living well. So we balance multiple aspects of life and continue balancing them as we encounter additional and expanded life issues. Living a balanced life in a complex society is truly an art.

We can only live a balanced life to a degree and with a certain measure of uniqueness. Everyone has to prioritize some aspects of life over others so balance may look different from person to person. With balance being such an individual pursuit, how then can we identify whether we are living a balanced life or not? The best way is to look for imbalance (neglect) in critical areas. What often happens is that once we get balanced, the pressures of life divert our attention away from something that we say we value and soon we are neglecting that area. If you catch yourself regularly neglecting an aspect of life you value, watch for early warning signs that can help you address the imbalance before it reaches a critical stage. For example, there is pressure as professionals to perform at a high level and achieve success. Imbalance develops if that desire (which is a healthy thing) causes one to neglect family. Balance helps to recognize and limit the excesses that can have a destructive affect on our health and lifestyle.

While the concept of balance may be easy to understand, those who live balanced lives have artfully developed methods and boundaries that protect them from the many pressures that can invade and disrupt a balanced lifestyle.

Question: What areas of my life that I say I value are being neglected? What will it take to begin to restore balance?

Congruence

Congruence is the third pillar of wellness. Congruence means “the quality or state of agreeing or coinciding.” People that live in “wellness” have found a relative state of congruence in the various areas of life. There is congruence between their beliefs and actions. Their understanding of who they are—their uniqueness, strengths and weaknesses—coincides with their purpose in life and is firmly based on their personal worldview.

Those who find relative congruence have identified unifying beliefs that provide congruent structures in their lives. Even though we live in a complex and challenging environment, living in congruence means living a life characterized by inner peace. It has to do with discovering the grain of one’s soul. Master woodworkers understand that strength runs with the grain of the wood and they carefully construct furniture so that the grain runs the length of the piece of wood. Similarly, discovering the grain of one’s soul allows a person to choose vocations and involvements that use their strengths in the best way possible while avoiding activities that cut across the grain of their soul. The result is that they are stronger, and because they are using their passion they can sustain their effort easier and longer. A well-developed sense of identity and personhood allows a person to remain anchored to his or her beliefs and values even when external currents and pressures pull in different directions. Congruence allows a person to live from the inside out, but bear in mind it is not a static or inflexible aspect of wellness. It is a lifetime endeavor to live congruently through the various stages of life.

Question: Does my life reflect harmony between the various aspects of life? What would need to change in order to create greater inner peace?

Sustainability

Lives that are lived well are sustainable. From time to time everyone experiences being stretched and overwhelmed with life issues. This is natural. If, however, life becomes characterized by being overwhelmingly busy and stressed, we will likely encounter sickness of one sort or another. Sustainability is about pacing ourselves over time.

Sustainability is built on the values and understanding of one’s personal worldview. Discovering one’s soul assists in determining what fits well for a person and as such allows a person to experience fulfillment and enjoyment from life.

There are two aspects to sustainability. First is the idea of avoiding burn out. Healthy people, therefore, manage life in such a way that they can live long, productive lives. The second aspect of sustainability, one that is often missed, is the idea of personal growth. Without life-long learning a person will stagnate. Healthy people find ways to continue to grow and develop.

Question: Am I living life at a sustainable level? Can I continue at this rate for the long term? What do I need to change to pace myself? What structures have I built into my life that facilitates learning?

Worldview (Foundation of Identity)

As we examine the pillars of wellness, we quickly come to some of the deeper questions of life. What do we value and believe? Why have we chosen the lifestyle we are living? What guides our decision-making? These are “worldview” issues. Each of us has a personal worldview even if it cannot be consciously expressed.

A worldview is a personal perspective that we hold about who we are in the world and how the world around us operates. Parts of a personal worldview may be very strongly held and carefully articulated when it concerns something a person cares about deeply. Other aspects of a worldview may be unarticulated and passive, particularly when a person has no interest in that area of life. For example, I am passionate about *wellness* and have well articulated views on the subject. I am a lot less passionate about local government and as a result have a very inconsistent understanding and worldview about what is going on in local politics.

A personal worldview is rarely consistent across all aspects of life and at times parts of a person’s worldview as expressed in his/her lifestyle may be in conflict with some other part of their lifestyle. For example, a person might value the concept of “fair trade”. When they buy coffee grown in Ethiopia they pay more to be fair to the farmers who grew the coffee. On the other hand they might wear designer shoes that were made in a factory in a third world country where people were mistreated.

It is not uncommon to identify “gaps” where our lifestyle does not match our beliefs and values. The challenge is to reduce “gaps” and identify principles that help align a person’s personal worldview both internally and externally. Exploring “gaps” throughout the span of one’s life is an important aspect of living well. Those who explore and seek to reduce “gaps” develop a more mature and clearer personal worldview, which leads to greater congruence and a greater measure of inner peace.

Question: What do I believe or value enough to act on? Are the things I say I value reflected in my lifestyle? How could I close the gaps between my values and my lifestyle?

Conclusion

The pillars of wellness link our personal, internal lives to the external world in which we live and work every day. The pillars, our personal worldview and the external environment we live in are all interrelated and help form the larger “whole” that affects personal wellness.

Because wellness is not static, we continually monitor and adjust all aspects of wellness as we progress through life. As we discover more deeply who we are meant to be, we are able to align our lives to make use of the passion embedded within us and live directed from the inside rather than being pushed and pulled by the currents around us.

Living well creates a tapestry of life where beautiful threads get woven into a design to create uniqueness and beauty in each person. When we look at the back of our personal tapestry we may see the knots and flaws in the weaving, but others looking upon the front will see a unique and beautiful design. Both sides are authentic. We all have “gaps” and problems in our lives but as we embrace them authentically, often threads that are ugly on the back are woven beautifully in to the design on the front. Be encouraged—begin the journey and pursue the challenge of living well.