Introduction to Wellness: Dimensions of Wellness

What does the term "wellness" or "health" mean? Traditionally, we often think being "healthy" means feeling well, or being free of illness. This definition, however, is only a small part of the wellness concept.

Wellness is often considered a collection of factors, termed "dimensions." There are many models used to define or describe wellness, one of which is a five-dimensional approach. These five dimensions of wellness include the physical, intellectual/mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Please keep in mind you may see other multi-dimensional references to wellness in your lifetime, outside of this course material. While the references may differ the idea is the same: wellness is a multi-faceted, yet holistic, concept.

Physical wellness refers to a person's physical state, as evidenced in the individual's nutritional habits, exercise activities, tobacco use, and other lifestyle choices. For example, a person who smokes three packs of cigarettes a day for years will more than likely experience weaknesses in the physical dimension, such as labored breathing, chest pain when exercising, high blood pressure, and other maladies. Likewise, an individual who eats nutritiously, exercises regularly, refrains from smoking, and avoids more than moderate alcohol consumption will be less likely to experience these physical problems.

Intellectual or mental wellness is a person's ability to concentrate, think critically, be alert and curious. An individual whose intellectual wellness is less than adequate may experience difficulties in the classroom, in the workplace, and other intellectually-demanding environments. Conversely, an individual who is well read and eager to practice mental exercise may be a more effective decision maker, student, worker, family member, friend, or acquaintance.

Emotional wellness is a person's ability to deal with situations provoking anger, anxiety, sadness, or other "unpleasant" feelings. An emotionally unhealthy individual may find difficulty in maintaining relationships with others, or even completing everyday tasks. Such a person may turn to alcohol, tobacco, or other chemical substances in an attempt to alleviate depression or anxiety. An emotionally healthy person, however, can learn to cope with stressors in an effective manner, which can lead to a positive outlook on life.

Social wellness refers to how well person interacts with others. A person who exercises everyday, who keeps up with the latest news and who has ways to deal with emotions may not succeed in the "everyday world" if that person cannot relate to others. An individual who socializes with and cares about other persons may deal with emotional problems more effectively, may engage in self-care for others' sakes, and might maintain intellectual health through stimulating conversations.

Spiritual wellness means more than an active pursuit of religion. Instead, this dimension is a measure of self-purpose. It can be seen in a person's morals, ethics, and behaviors toward the self and toward others. While self-care and concern for other people will generally promote more positive, compassionate behaviors, a lack of spiritual health may lead to hurtful behaviors.
Which of these dimensions is the most important? All wellness components are interdependent, with the ability of any dimension to have an effect on the others. For example, a person who has Lupus (physically unwell) may also be affected emotionally, socially, intellectually and spiritually by the disease. Similarly, these dimensions are interactive: a person who is intellectually well may feel confident enough to take care of other facets of life--physical, emotional, social and spiritual. Finally, an individual is defined as more than merely "well" or "unwell." There is a continuum of wellness--from optimal health to mortality--which hopefully one strives to improve upon throughout the lifetime.

**Reminder:** The above five-component model is merely one approach to looking at health in a multidimensional manner. Other models may use different components, but the intents are usually similar: to explore health as a holistic work-in-progress. One example of an eight-component model is presented at the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (O).