

Veterinary Wellness Bien-être vétérinaire

Dimensions of wellness: Change your habits, change your life

Debbie L. Stoewen

People often think about wellness in terms of physical health — nutrition, exercise, weight management, etc., but it is so much more. Wellness is a holistic integration of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, fueling the body, engaging the mind, and nurturing the spirit (1). Although it always includes striving for health, it's more about living life fully (1), and is “a lifestyle and a personalized approach to living life in a way that... allows you to become the best kind of person that your potentials, circumstances, and fate will allow” (2).

Wellness necessitates good self-stewardship, for ourselves and for those we care about and who care about us. For those in the helping professions, such as ourselves in veterinary medicine, wellness is a professional as well as personal responsibility. In order to ensure high-quality patient and client services, we have an ethical obligation to attend to our own health and well-being (3). Sufficient self-care prevents us from harming those we serve, and according to *Green Cross Standards of Self Care Guidelines*, no situation or person can justify neglecting it (3).

Wellness encompasses 8 mutually interdependent dimensions: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental (Table 1) (1). Attention must be given to all the dimensions, as neglect of any one over time will adversely affect the others, and ultimately one's health, well-being, and quality of life. They do not, however, have to be equally balanced (1). We should aim, instead, to strive for a “personal harmony” that feels most authentic to us (1). We naturally have our own priorities, approaches, and aspirations, including our own views of what it means to live life fully.

Making the right choices for health and well-being can be challenging. Although we *know* what is good for us and how we can do — and be — better, we may not act on it, or if we do, we may, in due course, slide back to familiar ways. Human behavior — what we do, how we do it, and whether we will succeed — is influenced by many factors, 2 of which are of particular relevance when it comes to wellness: self-regulation and habits.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is central to effective human functioning (4). It is “our ability to direct our behavior and control our impulses so that we meet certain standards, achieve certain goals, or reach cer-

tain ideals” (5). It allows us to act in our short- and long-term best interests, consistent with our deepest values (6). There's just one limitation: self-regulation requires mental energy, and the brain is always looking for ways to conserve energy (i.e., save effort) (7,8).

Habits

Habits, in contrast, require very little energy (7,8). As Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* says, “Any behavior that can be reduced to a routine is one less behavior that we must spend time and energy consciously thinking about and deciding upon” (7). With the cognitive economy and performance efficiency of habits (9), the brain can conserve self-regulatory strength to focus on the important decisions in life (9), and free us to engage in thoughtful activities, such as reflecting on the past and planning for the future.

Habits are powerful. With about 40% of our everyday behavior repeated in the form of habits, they shape our very existence, and ultimately, our future (8). Habits, in fact, are key to wellness. For better or worse, habits very much influence health, well-being, and quality of life. If you are striving to improve these, you need to think about habits, because if you change your habits for the better, you change your life for the better (8).

Technically, a habit is “a behavior that is recurrent, is cued by a specific context, often happens without much awareness or conscious intent, and is acquired through frequent repetition” (8). It can be regarded as a formula (or “habit loop”) that the brain automatically follows: “When I see *cue*, I will do *routine* in order to get a *reward*” (7). Studies indicate that once formed, habits become encoded in brain structures and can never truly be eradicated — only replaced with stronger habits (7). That's why they are so difficult to change. It's not just a matter of will-power (i.e., self-regulation); it's a matter of rewiring the brain. To change a habit, you need to create new routines: Keep the old *cue*, and deliver the old *reward*, *but insert a new routine* (7).

Inserting new routines is not easy. Despite knowing what's good for us and best intentions, habits tend to keep us doing what we always do (10). They are difficult to change — any of us can attest to this. But we can maximize the probabilities for success with 2 essentials: self-awareness and strategies. Both are indispensable to successful habit formation (8).

Dr. Debbie Stoewen is the Care & Empathy Officer and Director of Veterinary Services for Pets Plus Us, Oakville, Ontario. She is a licensed veterinarian and registered social worker with a special interest in “the social side” of veterinary medicine.

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Table 1. Dimensions of wellness**Physical Dimension**

- Caring for your body to stay healthy now and in the future

Intellectual Dimension

- Growing intellectually, maintaining curiosity about all there is to learn, valuing lifelong learning, and responding positively to intellectual challenges
- Expanding knowledge and skills while discovering the potential for sharing your gifts with others

Emotional Dimension

- Understanding and respecting your feelings, values, and attitudes
- Appreciating the feelings of others
- Managing your emotions in a constructive way
- Feeling positive and enthusiastic about your life

Social Dimension

- Maintaining healthy relationships, enjoying being with others, developing friendships and intimate relations, caring about others, and letting others care about you
- Contributing to your community

Spiritual Dimension

- Finding purpose, value, and meaning in your life with or without organized religion
- Participating in activities that are consistent with your beliefs and values

Vocational Dimension

- Preparing for and participating in work that provides personal satisfaction and life enrichment that is consistent with your values, goals, and lifestyle
- Contributing your unique gifts, skills, and talents to work that is personally meaningful and rewarding

Financial Dimension

- Managing your resources to live within your means, making informed financial decisions and investments, setting realistic goals, and preparing for short-term and long-term needs or emergencies
- Being aware that everyone's financial values, needs, and circumstances are unique

Environmental Dimension

- Understanding how your social, natural, and built environments affect your health and well-being
- Being aware of the unstable state of the earth and the effects of your daily habits on the physical environment
- Demonstrating commitment to a healthy planet

Self-awareness

Change becomes much more achievable if you pay attention to who you are and insert routines that take advantage of your strengths, tendencies, and aptitudes. With self-awareness, you can cultivate the habits that work for you. Consider, for instance, differences in circadian rhythms. Circadian rhythms reflect our natural tendencies for sleeping and waking and influence our energy and productivity at different times in the day (11). The odds of success to improve your fitness won't increase if, for example, you decide to rise an hour earlier to exercise each day when you happen to be a "night owl" rather than "morning lark." Self-awareness includes knowledge about other aspects of self as well, such as whether you are a marathoner, sprinter, or procrastinator; under- or over-buyer; simplicity or abundance lover; finisher or opener; and familiarity or novelty lover (8). It also includes whether you are promotion- or prevention-focused, and whether you like taking small or big steps (8).

Strategies

Change also becomes more achievable if you choose strategies that enhance your chance for success. Such strategies include monitoring; scheduling; investing in systems of accountability; abstaining; increasing or decreasing convenience; planning safeguards; detecting rationalizations and false assumptions; using distractions, rewards, and treats; pairing activities; and beginning with habits that directly strengthen self-control (8). Most successful habit change requires the coordination of multiple strategies to establish a single new behavior (8), and new habits, on average, take 66 days to form (12), so the more strategies used, the better.

Change your habits, change your life

Sometimes change takes a long time. Sometimes it requires repeated experiments and failures. But for ongoing betterment, the attempts are unquestionably worthwhile and one success often leads to another. When thinking about habits, wellness, and the health, well-being, and quality of life to which you aspire, consider the following: "Are you going to accept yourself or expect more from yourself?" "Are you going to embrace the present or consider the future?" and "Are you going to care about yourself or overlook yourself?"

Wellness is a dynamic, ever-changing, fluctuating process (13). It is a lifestyle, a personalized approach to living life in a way that allows you to become the best kind of person that your potentials, circumstances, and fate will allow. The past is history; the present and future lie in the choices you make today. Don't worry about getting it perfect; just get it going, and *become the best kind of person you can be*.

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