

## Tapping Into the Wellspring of Wellness

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*Wellness is the result of internal as well as external factors. This article examines 3 internal means for promoting wellness: humor, metaphor, and writing. By using these resources, individuals may stay healthier and happier psychologically and physically. Research on the power of these factors is briefly described.*

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In a classic Peanuts cartoon strip, the beagle Snoopy ponders a question about the nature of life. "I wonder why some of us were born dogs and others of us were born people? Somehow it doesn't seem fair. Why was I the lucky one?!"

A parallel query for those of us in the "people category" might be: "I wonder why some individuals are more alive and well than others? Somehow it doesn't seem fair."

To be honest, being well and staying well are not about fairness. Rather, they are about strategies and the daily practice of habits that help us enhance, optimize, and maximize our lives. Staying balanced in regard to what we do, what we eat, and how we exercise are givens. Where these obvious life enhancers end, other aspects of wellness begin.

For me, there is a wellspring in wellness that goes beyond the mundane nature of overt behavior. That wellspring may be best described as the inner resources and values of our lives, such as a love and appreciation for music or the spoken word. These qualities are what give our lives meaning and make them full of zest and passion. We value these aspects of our personalities for they are at the core of who we are as people and how we relate to others and the world.

There are many such sources within us if we take the time to recognize them and build our plan of wellness on the foundation they provide. These resources energize us. They give us optimism and enjoyment. They draw us toward others and into a deeper understanding of who we are. By tapping them, we keep healthy and stay well in the broadest definitions of these words. For me, this wellspring of life forces is primarily composed of humor, metaphor, and writing.

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## HUMOR

I like to laugh. As a child and adolescent, I was enthralled with comedians such as Red Skelton, Bill Cosby, and Jonathan Winters. Their ways of developing personalities and telling stories were delightful, exciting, and surprising. Their character sketches enabled me to see myself and others in multiple domains, as tragic, as heroic, and as comic. I have played their routines in my mind many times.

From these comic figures of yesterday, I have learned to cultivate my own humor. At first, I did it for sheer delight and to keep from being bored or frightened. Later, I did it in the spirit of Paul Watzlawick (1983) who wrote, "The situation is hopeless, but not serious." Now I cultivate and call up the power of mirth because of the positive aspects of it related to wellness. Norman Cousins (1979) is my hero in this category. He showed personally what has now been shown scientifically: A sense of humor and laughter can lead to health and well-being (Martin, 2004). So my selection of reading, listening, and viewing material contains books, recordings, and videos by such humorists as Roy Blount Jr., Garrison Keillor, Lewis Grizzard, and Jeff Foxworthy. It also includes a sprinkling of written client and colleague remarks as well as memories of family and personal faux pas. For instance, many years ago after a movie on a first date, the woman I was courting voiced her suggestion for where we should go to get something to eat. "Let's go to your house," she suggested. I was a little taken back and thought she was a bit brazen until she read my pained expression and said, "Your House is the name of a restaurant, silly." Although I could have done without the "silly" word, I remember both laughing and feeling a deep sense of relief. I never dated that particular woman again, but it was not because of her choice of eating establishments.

I truly believe a little bit of humor makes life healthier, happier, and more fun. Thus, when our family dog is at the backdoor barking, I will sometimes say to one of my children, "Listen to that sound! Maggie either wants to come in or to play poker. Could you go to the door and see which one?" Then we laugh and the dog comes in. (If she ever picks up the playing cards near the entrance, we are headed for Las Vegas!) Humor nourishes our interest and curiosity with life, casting a new light on familiar scenes and capturing our imagination for what might become as well as for what is.

## METAPHOR

Figurative language is also a path I pursue in living a life of wellness. Meaningless chatter and mundane metaphors have little content value and are often awful ways to try to communicate. For instance, although "walking the talk" or "putting your money where your mouth is" may imply that people should behave congruent with what they say, both phrases are hackneyed because they have been overused and are worn out.

I think I learned the value of metaphors from my dad, who would frequently make comments that were descriptive, accurate, and pointed. For instance, after he initially looked at my dorm room in college, he said, "Your room is so small that I don't think you could swing a cat around your head without getting fur in your mouth." There was humor in his remark but vivid imagery as well. A good metaphor is like that. It stretches our minds and holds our attention. It makes us think of comparisons and how one object is related to another. For instance, I once had a client who described his tendency to wait for others in this way, "I am the lake, not the river." I quickly got the message that he saw himself as deep but not quick. That is what a good metaphor does.

There is research on the power of metaphors starting with the Metaphor Research Group in the late-1960s. This group, which was led by Howard Pollio (1974) at the University of Tennessee, found that clients and counselors problem set and problem solve by using metaphors. For instance, a client may say, "My life is a merry-go-round, and I'm tired of going in circles." With insight like that provided by the metaphor, steps can be taken by the client and counselor to look for repetitive, nonproductive action and assist the client in getting off a routine that promotes them. Thus, troubles we may have as well as solutions to them may be based on our ability to use metaphors. In addition, when clients are getting better, the research shows they use more metaphors (Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001; Pollio, 1974). Perhaps this increase in metaphoric language is because metaphors require both a higher order of thinking and an expanded openness to experience. Metaphors connect people and places in an understandable way, where previously there were only disparities.

## WRITING

Before James Pennebaker (1991, 2004) did his landmark work at the University of Texas on the connection between writing and wellness, I was aware intuitively that writing had a way of transforming life. My epiphany came as a result of situational depression I experienced as a young adult. Looking back without wallowing in details, I probably was diagnosable in one or two categories included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, I was determined not to give in to feelings of hopelessness or helplessness. Having no one to turn to because I had just moved into a rural environment far from friends and family, I started writing. The words were initially slow to come because denial is a part of homeostasis and the inertia that comes when in disbelief. However, with each day came new ideas and fresh realizations. My writing could not undo what had happened, but it brought reality into a light, freed my mind from rumination, and liberated my life from potentially ruinous

thoughts and actions. I realized that through writing, I could not only express my grief but find relief and renewal. I established a paper trail in the process that informed me of my progress.

Later, when I was better, I found writing was something I enjoyed. Now, I find that writing helps me clarify my thinking and express myself in a manner that verbally I cannot do as well. In addition, writing rewards me not just with better physical health, as Pennebaker (1991, 2004) has found, but with mental health that goes beyond feeling good. For me, writing is what William Glasser (1976) might describe as a "positive addiction." It rewards me by releasing endorphins into my brain. Two hours of writing are about as much as I can do at a time, because I am simply "high" and more sensitive after such a time period. That heightened sense of awareness and satisfaction flows into my ability to be with others, including friends and colleagues, in a way that I am not able to do otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

So, in regard to wellness, I see it as something whose roots are often internal. For me, wellness is a wellspring connected to the deeper aspects of my life where I find meaning and purposefulness. Humor, metaphor, and writing are three major facets of wellness for me. They inform me about what it is like to be a person in the fullest sense. I take some comfort in realizing that the proven benefit and effectiveness of these three entities have a strong research base. However, I believe I would still tap them, as one who draws from a well, because I discovered them initially through intuition and happenstance and they were life enhancing.

I think that people from all cultural backgrounds know much about wellness from this perspective. They realize at their finest moments, through a number of processes, that there are many roads that lead to wellness. Such moments occur when they take the time to discover and uncover those aspects of their lives that they value most. For some individuals, the power of wellness and the spring from which they draw lies in the arts. Still others find faith to be the nourishment that enriches and sustains them. There are other numerous resources to draw on too. The point is that lives of exemplary men and women, from Viktor Frankl to Eleanor Roosevelt, are filled with the power and potency of finding strength, wellness, and possibility within and beyond what others might consider the basic elements of life.

When we use our inner resources, life is transformed and revolutionized. It becomes deeper, and our insight becomes keener. As I once wrote to a client who was struggling, "In meeting you when you're flooded with pain, I discover myself." Likewise, when knowing ourselves and the wellsprings within, we can take heart and strength in being people. At such moments, in contrast to Snoopy's analysis, we are the lucky ones!

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