

Beyond Ordinary Wellness: Full-Spectrum Wellness

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John W. Travis, MD, with Meryn G. Callander, thewellspring.com

Background

The word “wellness” was completely unknown in the US in 1971 when I first encountered it in the title of a book on the clearance table of the Johns Hopkins Medical Bookstore. I spent \$2 on what was to be the best investment of my life. Discouraged by how I saw medicine being practiced during my medical training in Boston, I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up, and was midway through my residency in general preventive medicine and also discouraged to realize that it was mostly early detection—not true prevention.

This little out-of-print book, *High-Level Wellness*, by Halbert Dunn, MD, published 11 years earlier, opened me to a whole new universe. Dunn's multidimensional view of health incorporated body, mind, emotions, and spirit. It was radical for that time and even today; seldom do most health programs, conventional or alternative, pay more than lip service to the non-physical dimensions of emotions, mind, or spirit. Dunn provided the key to alleviate my frustration with the medical system's terminal focus on the physical body, disease, and drugs. His model offered the promise of true disease prevention—and even more—his term “high-level wellness.”

While I thought the word “wellness” was too weird sounding to ever catch on, nevertheless, when I opened my little office in Mill Valley in 1975, I named it the “Wellness Resource Center.” My part-time secretary and I soon tired of having to spell out “w-e-l-l-n-e-s-s” to callers and I began to regret this decision, but thanks to a colleague Don Ardell, who took it to hospitals and planning agencies, the word *did* catch on. The only problem was that, when the medical system co-opted the word, they gutted it of the mental, emotional, and spiritual components that Dunn had outlined. They also continued to focus mostly on treatment, rather than the aspects of self-awareness, awareness, education, and growth that are central to the paradigm of wellness.

Holistic medicine, which became better known as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), *did* have a focus on the mind-body connection, but the emotional and spiritual components are not as often addressed. Moreover, the focus was also on treatment—fixing people instead of showing them more effective ways to live. Now, as the medical system is co-opting CAM under the name of integrative medicine, less of the mental component is given credit. And again, the focus remains on treatment, not learning about yourself.

In the 80s, as I continued on my path in wellness, I was joined by my wife, Meryn Callander, who came to study at our center after reading about it in her homeland of Australia. At that point, we moved from offering direct client services to teaching helping professionals, who were burnt out by the authoritarian model of the medical system, about how to work within the partnership paradigm. Much of this came from Meryn's studies in feminist, earth-centered spirituality, which honors partnership, works with people in circles rather than lecture halls, and recognizes our immanent worth as part of the fabric of nature. I had always been relatively conscious of nature (from my father's compost pile to our three years of living in a self-sufficient rural community of American Quakers on a mountaintop in Costa Rica) and the newly emerging Gaia Hypothesis, which inspired an expansion of our already holistic approach to wellness.

I saw clearly how authoritarian systems reinforce separation or alienation and a “power-over” type of relationship, while a partnership paradigm reinforces connection and “power-with.” The connection

that comes with a partnership paradigm automatically increases the wellness of the whole planet—people who feel connected don't foul their own nest, because they recognize their connection with it.

But how did people become so disconnected? Was it just “human nature”? And why did it sweep over the entire planet about 5000 years ago—even in the still isolated Americas.

Meryn and I spent more than a decade working with people suffering from the many forms of disconnection that have become so prevalent, yet unrecognized, in our culture. When a colleague pointed me to Jean Liedloff's *Continuum Concept*, we discovered that this disconnection is *not* inherently part of the “human condition,” but rather is instilled in infants by cultural practices designed to break the strong mother-infant bond that all subsequent relationships are built upon. In other words, alienation *is preventable!* This led to my career shift, nearly two decades ago, to infant wellness and its impact on adult life and the planet.

For much of that time, I struggled with how to incorporate infant wellness into our earlier work with clients and helping professionals. Most people who aren't actively raising children (and many who are), show a profound disinterest in the childhood origins of wellness, and even many of those who are, are too overwhelmed dealing with their own lives and immediate issues to consider yet another dimension of wellness.

But then, one morning in March 2008, the term “full-spectrum wellness” came to me in a flash. I tried it out on some friends, discovered a few people using it on the web (but none in the sense we do), and have now adopted it as the framework that incorporates the 37 years of work that resulted from my first discovering Halbert Dunn's little book.

Symptoms Indicating the Need for Full-Spectrum Wellness

Our culture is plagued with: depression, addiction, violence, chronic illness, “niceness” (inauthenticity), fear, rage, greed, fundamentalism, decaying social networks and ecocide.

One example: Depression:

- Is the leading cause of disability in the United States and abroad for persons over the age of five.
- Claims more years of life than war, cancer, and AIDS put together.
- Causes or contributes to the cause of other illnesses such as alcoholism and heart disease.
- May be the biggest killer on earth.

The cost of fixing these problems, *if a fix is even possible*, is beyond our means.

Prevention is the key (an ounce (30 grams) of prevention is worth 3.2 tons of cure).

And, even more important, is embracing wellness, which goes beyond the simple hope of avoiding a negative condition.

The Real Problem Behind the Symptoms

To understand both the underlying causes of dis-ease and the value of wellness, we must recognize the massive levels of disconnection around us—we are disconnected, on unprecedented levels, from ourselves, each other, our community/village, nature, and the sacred or divine (however perceived).

Today, we are faced with four generations of human beings who have been raised in the US (three in Australia?) without benefit of having their basic mammalian needs met—needs that have evolved over millions of years.

As a result, most Westerners are now profoundly disconnected—yet largely unaware of it (just ask someone who grew up in a connected culture!).

This disconnection begins with medicalized births that interfere with release of the hormonal cocktail designed to facilitate mother and baby falling in love. Bottle-feeding, circumcision, lack of skin contact and lack of movement (the results of being carried in inert plastic containers instead of on a warm body), sleeping alone rather than snuggled next to another warm body, and premature weaning, all take their toll on the bond that began *in utero*.

Almost any “problem” (usually only symptom) seen in modern culture can be traced directly to a failed connection during the primal period (conception to age one), with that lack of connection continuing as we develop and mature.

Full-Spectrum Wellness

Full-spectrum wellness describes a multi-dimensional approach to health and wellbeing.

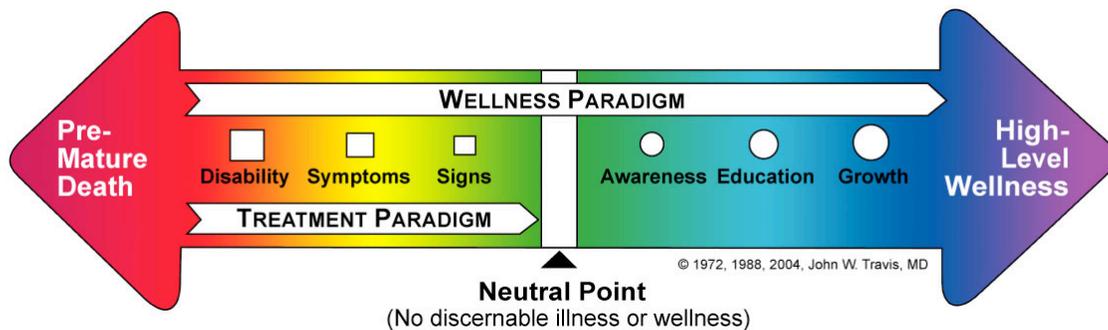
Full-spectrum wellness is about the *connections* between our state of wellbeing and our:

- body, emotions, mind, and spirit
- earliest life experiences and our health over our entire lifespan
- family, friends, and community
- personal and work-life
- environment—from our internal mind-chatter, to our home space, our neighborhood, and the entire planet.

Enhancing Personal Wellness

Enhancing personal wellness can be greatly facilitated by a comprehensive roadmap, sourced from the three key concepts of wellness detailed in the *Wellness Workbook*.

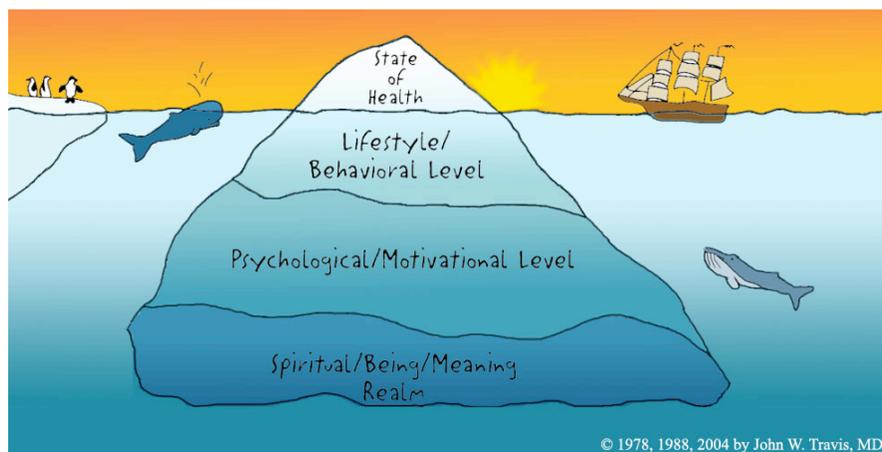
1. The first key concept is the **Illness-Wellness Continuum**, which highlights the distinctly different paradigms of treatment and wellness.



Illness-Wellness Continuum

The currency of wellness is connection

2. The second key concept is the **Iceberg Model of Health and Disease**. Our current state of health, be it one of disease or vitality, is like the tip of the iceberg. We can chisel away at an unwanted condition but, whenever we knock some off, more of the same comes up to take its place.



Iceberg Model of Health and Disease

To understand the underlying determinants of our current state of health, we must look deeper. The level just below the surface is the behavioral level. This level reveals how what you eat, how you exercise, relax, etc., determines the condition of the visible tip.

To understand why we may engage in neglectful or destructive behaviors in these behavioral areas, we must look still deeper, to the psychological/motivational level. Moving even deeper, we find the spiritual/being/meaning realm. There are no clear boundaries as to where this realm begins or ends. In actuality, it permeates everything, everywhere. In this realm, connection is primary. In this realm, we find the mystical and mysterious, our reason for being—our place in the universe. Ultimately, it is this realm that determines whether the tip of the iceberg, representing our state of health, is one of disease or wellness.

Definitions of Wellness

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 wellbeing.

Wellness is a process—a developing awareness that there is no endpoint, but that health and happiness are possible in each moment, here and now.

Wellness is a balanced channeling of energy—energy received from the environment, transformed within you, and returned to affect the world around you.

Wellness is the integration of body, mind, and spirit—the appreciation that everything you do, and think, and feel, and believe has an impact on your state of health and the health of the world.

Wellness is the loving acceptance of yourself.

Increasing Individual Wellness

The first step to increasing the wellness of the world is to work on ourselves. There are a myriad of excellent wellness programs. As a somewhat biased example, here is the Wellness Inventory, which is based on the three key concepts from the *Wellness Workbook*.

Step 1: Take Inventory

Assess your own strengths and identify the areas you are most motivated to change, using the 350-item Wellness Index in the *Wellness Workbook* or taking the 120-item online Wellness Inventory.



Step 2: Make a Plan

After completing the Inventory, you are guided, step-by-step, to make your personalized wellness plan.

Step 3: Get Support

Daily or weekly email reminders are a convenient and free source of support. A wellness coach, a peer support person, or a group are more intense sources of support that can facilitate desired lifestyle change.

Step 4: Make a Difference in the World

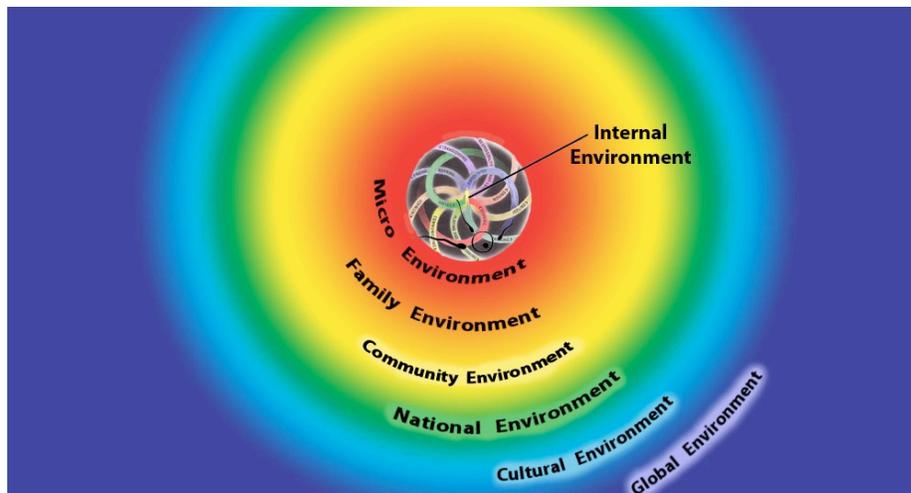
Your personal wellness is intricately connected with the wellbeing of the world. Therefore, besides making your own lifestyle changes, know that how you relate to the children in your life (an investment in your future), your relationships with the people in your life, as well as the causes you support, and, how you treat the planet, all determine your own life experience—as well as so that of the planet.

Beyond Individual Wellness—The Four Dimensions of Full-Spectrum Wellness.

Full-spectrum wellness encompasses not only our personal energies but also an awareness of the significance of our connections to other people; the environment we create/experience around us, both the physical and energetic; the next generation; and ultimately, the planet.

Full-spectrum wellness implies at least the usual four dimensions of space/time (the fourth dimension is time) that we live in—and probably other dimensions we don't fully understand, such as morphic fields.

If we see our environment as extending from the surface of our skin out to the edge of the universe, the wellness of the whole system is dependent on many different factors along the way. From the viewpoint of the individual in the center of the diagram below, there are a multitude of levels of environment with which we are in contact—from the micro-environment on our skin to the whole planet.



The Three Dimensions of Environment

Moving to the fourth dimension—time—reveals that our wellness is intimately connected with our experience of our entire lifespan—most notably the crucial connections established and nurtured (or not) during pregnancy, birth, and infancy. These connections shape the rest of our life, culminating in our transition at death.



The Fourth Dimension—Time

Three Key Concepts Revisited

As implied above, the three key concepts of personal wellness also apply to the wellness of communities and the planet. Taking the Iceberg Model (above) as an example, we can see that the environment around us is the tip of the iceberg. It can be either pristine or trashed. To understand

what's happening at this level, we have to look at what is happening at the next level down—the behaviors of people that lead to the condition of the tip of the iceberg.

Do we carelessly leave lights on? Do we drive gas-hog cars, and not walk when we could? Do we support deforestation by wastefully consuming paper products? Or do we take care to minimize our resource “footprint” on the earth.

The third layer (the psychological, etc., layer in the Iceberg model) reflects our underlying thoughts and feelings toward our environment.

- Do we act competitively, or cooperatively?
- Do we unconsciously fall into the roles of Victim, Persecutor, or Rescuer; or recognize ourselves as co-creators of the world around us?
- Do we believe in “unlimited growth” and feel entitled to plunder the earth’s resources?
- Do we understand that every dollar spent is a vote for the kind of world we live in?
- Do we believe that our every thought and action impacts the planet?
- Do we believe that the earth is an intelligent, living organism?

The deepest level of the iceberg reflects our underlying spiritual essence—the realm where everything is connected.

As the ancients believed, and modern physics substantiates, We Are One.

Conclusion

Full-spectrum wellness is a multidimensional approach to health and wellbeing that extends from the individual to the collective, and ultimately the planet itself. It enables us to explore and avoid many of the underlying causes of disease that manifest in humans, families, communities and the environment. Embracing and addressing the fundamental elements that characterize full-spectrum wellness has the potential to raise the level of wellbeing on the planet, creating a world that honors connection and Oneness, which aside from anything else, just makes sense.

The next time you look in a mirror, let your eyes see everything, Do not limit your focus to that body labeled with your personal name. Your real body, your whole body, is the Universe itself. When you look at the world, you are seeing yourself reflected. —Fredric Lehrman