

# THE JOURNEY TOWARDS WELLNESS

by Dori S. Hutchinson, Sc.D.

Like many of life's journeys this one is not easy for anyone. Wellness is something we all aspire to, it is a state of being that we all struggle towards, it is a way of life that most people hold onto as a goal. And when we are there, we know why we struggled, why we aimed for that sense of well-being that makes us feel alive, vibrant and full of possibilities. There is even something about the word "wellness" that implies a confidence in our future, a commitment to life and a focus on possibilities. It is a hopeful word. But wellness is more than a word; it is a way of life, an attitude, a lifestyle and a concept. I have come to believe that there is no right or wrong definition of wellness, nor is there any one path to wellness. But, since every journey needs a beginning point I will start with an attempt at defining wellness: wellness is the self determined process of seeking and achieving a sense of connectedness and balance in our physical, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual lives.

Many of the people I know who have been diagnosed with a mental illness have not had the opportunity to make this journey towards wellness. They have lacked the resources and skills needed to improve and achieve a positive lifestyle that results in a healthy mind-body-spirit connectedness. They

also have been further stigmatized by the prevailing attitude that people with mental illness are not capable of practicing positive self care. I see this attitude reflected in the low expectations or the lack of importance systems of care place on the overall wellness of people with a mental illness. One woman who has been a recipient

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of public mental health care for over 30 years writes, "We wondered if the silence of our treaters when it came to our bodies was collusion with the lack of care of our bodies. Most of our psychiatrists just prescribed medications and did not ask about health issues and left it up to us totally. I felt most lost when it came to being fully informed, so how could I ask the appropriate questions? No one seems to care what it is like living in our bodies with mind altering drugs."

I attended a conference last year where Pat Deegan asked a provocative question that has continued to resonate within me, "What are people with mental illness recovering from?" Clearly people are working to transform their lives after experiencing the financial, social, emotional, spiritual consequences of being labeled and living with a mental

illness. They are also trying to recover from the physical consequences of a mental illness that include negative treatment side effects, abuse, poor physical health, risky lifestyles, poverty and discrimination. What is alarming to me is that many people are not recovering; instead they are dying prematurely or living a poorer quality of life. People with mental illness are acquiring serious, disabling physical diseases that are linked to their lack of positive self care, lack of opportunities for their journey towards wellness, and the lack of support for wellness for people with mental illness. Last month, a young 43 year old man who had been a successful graduate of our computer rehabilitation program died of a massive heart attack. He smoked three packs of cigarettes a day, a habit that was born of the old "reward good behavior" tactic of psychiatric programs. As I was driving home after hearing of his death, I happened upon a large billboard that spoke of the number of deaths resulting from cigarettes and had the slogan "Getoutraged.com". I wonder where is our outrage? Why aren't we concerned, scared, and worried about the people who come to our programs seeking a better way of life? The lack of wellness is a life and death issue for people with mental illness. Yet, quietly, premature death has become an outcome. People are living and struggling with heart disease, respiratory illnesses, diabetes, cancers, obesity, high blood pressure and many other disabling conditions. Stephen Leff, a mental health researcher who has studied the high rates of mortality in people with mental illness, has stated that being diagnosed with a mental illness is now a predicting factor for a premature death. Again I wonder at the lack of concern about people's wellness.

There is a callousness about how

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people with mental illness are treated when it comes to their physical well being. There are numerous research studies that document the fact that people's illnesses go undetected, undiagnosed and mistreated. One woman tells a story that has been repeated many times in her life. Well known in the mental health system of a large urban area, her body is in danger of dying from heart disease, obesity, extremely high blood pressure, poverty, and a very sedentary lifestyle. This year she collapsed on a sidewalk and lost consciousness briefly. Her speech was slurred and one leg was slightly paralyzed. She brought herself to the local emergency room where she was quickly recognized as a psychiatric patient. They immediately brought down a psychiatric consult. Her physical symptoms were dismissed as psychiatric symptoms. Unfortunately, this is a common experience, and it is a traumatizing and discriminatory way for people with mental illness to be treated. Good fortune was with my friend that day, as a young intern with no knowledge of her mental health experiences, suggested that perhaps her symptoms were indicative of a stroke, which it turned out they were, after having to fight for the appropriate medical testing. The journey towards wellness will continue to be a formidable one for people until barriers such as these are acknowledged and removed.

Wellness and mental illness, as a phrase, create a word picture of discord, a tug of war of philosophy, practices and principles. Wellness focuses on health, growth, and ability, while mental illness focuses on disease, dysfunction, and disability. Yet wellness is possible in the midst of living with a mental illness. Every day people with mental illness begin and continue their journey towards well-being despite the huge obstacles. This journey from self neglect, poor health, and lack of wellness to a more positive lifestyle that is supportive of people's quest to transform their lives often begins in subtle and quiet ways. Many people describe the importance of discovering and having hope in the possibility of wellness as essential in

their ability to make lifestyle changes. "When I came to the Recovery Center which focuses on people's wellness, I was hoping...all I had was hope. I came here and found people who were sensitive to my feelings. I found people who tell me that what I feel has meaning and is real." Hope nourishes self determination, which is critical in the journey towards wellness. One woman speaks of the combined impact of her hope and determination and The Recovery Center's wellness program has had on her life, "Health and wellness are important variables that are stressed at the center. Sometimes we all need a push to adapt to a healthy lifestyle and the

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center is not afraid to help one get initiated in those areas. They provide us with not only a space where we can workout, but with genuine and kind instructors who are not intimidating to us, but are knowledgeable about exercise, health, and fitness. This automatically makes us feel better and helps us to achieve and apply wellness in our everyday lives, even if we are not at the center. I can't always make it to my fitness class, but instead of forgetting about it until I can actually attend, I now try to incorporate it into my everyday life. The walks I take and the foods I eat now help me feel less depressed than if I were in a state of crisis and feeling apathetic towards everything. This has been *invaluable* to me. It provides me with more hope than any group therapy class can hope to achieve." I have a vision that one day all treatment and

rehabilitation programs will offer choices that enhance and improve wellness, promote health and educate people to overcome the wellness consequences of a mental illness.

This vision of wellness opportunities for people with mental illness can become a reality through the voices of experience. People who have used wellness strategies to support their journey of recovery, families who have advocated for wellness, and professionals who prescribe wellness interventions and support self determined wellness choices need to speak up and tell their stories. Imagine the difference in people's lives if we work towards reducing the barriers to healthy lives. Imagine supportive services that provide transportation, translation, accompaniment, and education that have lasting positive lifestyle effects. Imagine nurturing people's hope so there is a willingness to risk change and hear more people say the words this woman said "My body has paid the price and now I am working towards the recovery of my body as home." Beverly Sills said there are no shortcuts to any place worth going and this is most certainly the case in convincing our society and mental

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health system that people with a mental illness are capable of, and have a right to, live a life that is focused on their wellness, rather than their illness. ■