

ESSENCE – a useful wellbeing checklist

Environment

Every living thing interacts with its environment to stay alive. Humans however, have more in mind than just staying alive, they need to interact in certain ways with their environment in order to grow and flourish. Poor environments – those places that inhibit growth – could include the bedroom for the depressed person; the lounge room for the couch potato; or the computer desk for the gaming addict. Spend too much time in them and the mind does not get enough stimulating challenges to function properly, and the first signs will be some sort of physical or emotional distress. A simple change of environment like a walk in the bush or being with a community centre can stimulate thinking and increase the possibilities of growth. Remember, it is *interaction* with the environment, not merely being there.

Stress

Stress is a state of high emotional alert. Emotions prepare us for action, and will discharge once the action has taken place, or as has been found recently, discharged during a healthy sleep cycle. However, a lot of the emotional alertness is better suited to the jungle than where we live. A lot of emotional disorders including stress can be put down to an exaggerated survival response. The body, being ready for running or fighting, does neither. This places stress on the system mainly because it does not return to its normal state where all parts of the system operate properly. Digestion, for example is not needed for survival, in fact it takes energy that could be needed elsewhere, so it is shut down during a stress response. If the stressed state continues instead of being discharged, the body suffers digestion problems – heartburn, gastric reflux, and worse. Emotion management is the clue – recognising the factors that contribute to emotions in the first place, and changing them.

Spirituality

The propensity to worship or the recognition that we are part of something bigger is an essential part of being human – one of two characteristics found in every society on the planet (sex-regulated behaviour is the other). As far as wellbeing is concerned, the benefits of having a spiritual dimension to our lives are many. In its simplest form, it could be considered the opposite of stress – a contemplative serenity that we are not the centre of the universe (or masters of it for that matter); but merely part of the cosmic order of things and, come what may, our lives will go on. Stress causes us to think our very survival is threatened if somebody wrongs us, spirituality tends to remind us that this moment is but part of the scheme of things and it will pass. The development of a routine reflective practice – whether meditation, prayer, or a quiet walk without the phone – will allow us time to consolidate the day's experience and promote a balance between alertness and relaxation.

Exercise

Humans are designed for movement, and several problems arise when they don't exercise enough. Without sufficient movement in all parts of the body, toxic waste can build up in the cells and reduce efficiency of the system in general. Wellness relies on these systems working properly, and an early sign of things not working properly is a feeling of tiredness in body and apathy of mind. Inability to concentrate is another sign, as the brain requires good circulation to keep the cells oxygenated to make the connections between them efficient. Even a short brisk walk in the cool air can serve as a boost for the system.

Nutrition

The fuel for the body, in the form of energy, comes from what we eat, drink, and breathe. At the risk of sounding 'preachy', eat poorly and you will function poorly. Advertisers would have us believe that certain food and drinks help us perform better. However, the reality is that highly processed, pleasant-tasting, readily available food is usually the very worst kind for us if we are interested in performance - physical, mental and emotional.

Everything we ingest has to be either assimilated, or eliminated. This basic law determines sound nutrition, and gives us a good reason to care about nutrition. Easily assimilated food is usually what the body can use for nourishment and energy because it has:

- a high water content
- it has a natural energy frequency close to the body's own frequency
- the time between when it was alive and when it is ingested is short.

Food that is difficult to assimilate is usually highly processed, in a form difficult for the body to deal with, or contains biochemical substances that build up in the system by resisting assimilation and elimination. Instead of providing good nutrition:

- energy is used to get the minimal nutrition from it
- energy is used to eliminate it through the skin, lungs or bowels
- vital systems for absorbing nutrients and eliminating toxins become clogged

Connectedness

Wellness is directly linked to our social connectedness. The effect of social alienation, divorce and loneliness on stress, poor immune function, and life expectancy is profound – far worse than smoking, overeating and lack of exercise combined. A recent study claims the most accurate method for calculating life expectancy in relationship to heart attacks is to measure how many times in a (recorded) conversation a person says "I", "me" or "my" – in other words how self-centered they are. We are at our healthiest when we focus outwards – stretching ourselves mentally, physically, and living successfully with others.

While humans are naturally social (some would say 'herd' animals) we expect more than to merely occupy space together. In highly developed society like ours, successful and fulfilling interaction with others needs to be learned. This knowledge is either modeled or learnt from our parents during our formative years, or consciously learned and practiced as an adult.

Education

The brain is a problem-solving organ. The thing that most stimulates it and causes nerve cell growth is dealing with the novel or unfamiliar. Making sense of new stimuli is what it does best, in fact a special high-capacity part of the brain is devoted to this process, and it literally 'switches off' if nothing stimulating is happening. In terms of wellbeing then, new challenges are important, we are designed to learn new things and make sense of our changing environment. Our capacity to take in information, understand complex situations, and learn new ideas and concepts is directly linked to all the other dimensions of the ESSENCE model.

(Adapted from: *The ESSENCE of Health*, Dr Craig Hassed, Random House, 2008)