

Natural Pathways to Wellbeing

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Disclosures

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Has no financial relationships to disclose.

Views expressed are my own and do not represent Kaiser Permanente or any affiliated organization.

THE SCIENCE OF WELLBEING



For most of psychology's history, the focus was on what goes wrong.

Around 2000, a different question emerged:

What helps people flourish?

Since 2000: over 100,000 peer-reviewed studies
Measurable · Learnable · Clinically consequential

Pursuing your own wellbeing is not self-indulgent. It is evidence-based health promotion.

Physician distress correlates with medical errors, reduced empathy, and adverse outcomes.

What Happiness Actually Is — and Why It Matters

What happiness actually is:

- **Frequent positive emotions** — not constant cheerfulness
- **A deep sense that life is good and meaningful**
- **A learnable skill** — not a personality trait or stroke of luck
- **Emotional flexibility** — the capacity for joy AND difficulty

What happier people experience:

Better health & longer life · Stronger relationships · Greater creativity & clinical performance · Faster recovery from adversity · Better diagnostic accuracy & more empathic care

What Determines Lasting Wellbeing?

50%

Genetic Set Point

Your biological baseline — relatively fixed

10%

Life Circumstances

Income, location, title — far less than we expect

40%

Intentional Activity

What you choose to do, think, and practice — your greatest lever

40% is within your direct control. That is an enormous opportunity!

“I’ll be happy when I…”



Finish training · Get promoted · Reach the next milestone

Temporary boost. Adaptation. Reset.

In medicine — where achievement is the entire culture — contentment can remain perpetually just out of reach.

What Actually Drives Lasting Wellbeing

Less than we think:

Income, possessions, and status · Job title and professional recognition

What reliably works:

- **Meaning and purpose** in life and work
- **Genuine connection** and contribution
- **Presence** and intentional practice

External achievements have a surprisingly small and temporary impact. What endures is meaning, connection, and intentional presence — available right now.

A Prescription for Wellbeing

What helps us recover, reconnect, and thrive



Evidence-based. Free. Available today

GROWTH MINDSET

Physicians with a growth orientation have lower burnout and higher clinical engagement

Fixed: Treats challenges as threats

Growth: Treats challenges as information




SOME DAY, WE WILL ALL DIE, SNOOPY!
TRUE, BUT ON ALL THE OTHER DAYS, WE WILL NOT.

HUMOR & LAUGHTER

The Healing Power of Laughter

1/5

Recurrent Heart Attacks

Cardiac rehab patients watching 30 min/day of self-chosen humor had one-fifth the recurrence rate vs. controls

↓ BP

Blood Pressure

Regular laughter lowers systolic BP measurably — with effects comparable to some antihypertensives

40%

Laugh Less in Adversity

Of coronary patients — exactly when humor is most protective, we suppress it most

Humor is not a distraction from healing. It is an active mechanism of it.

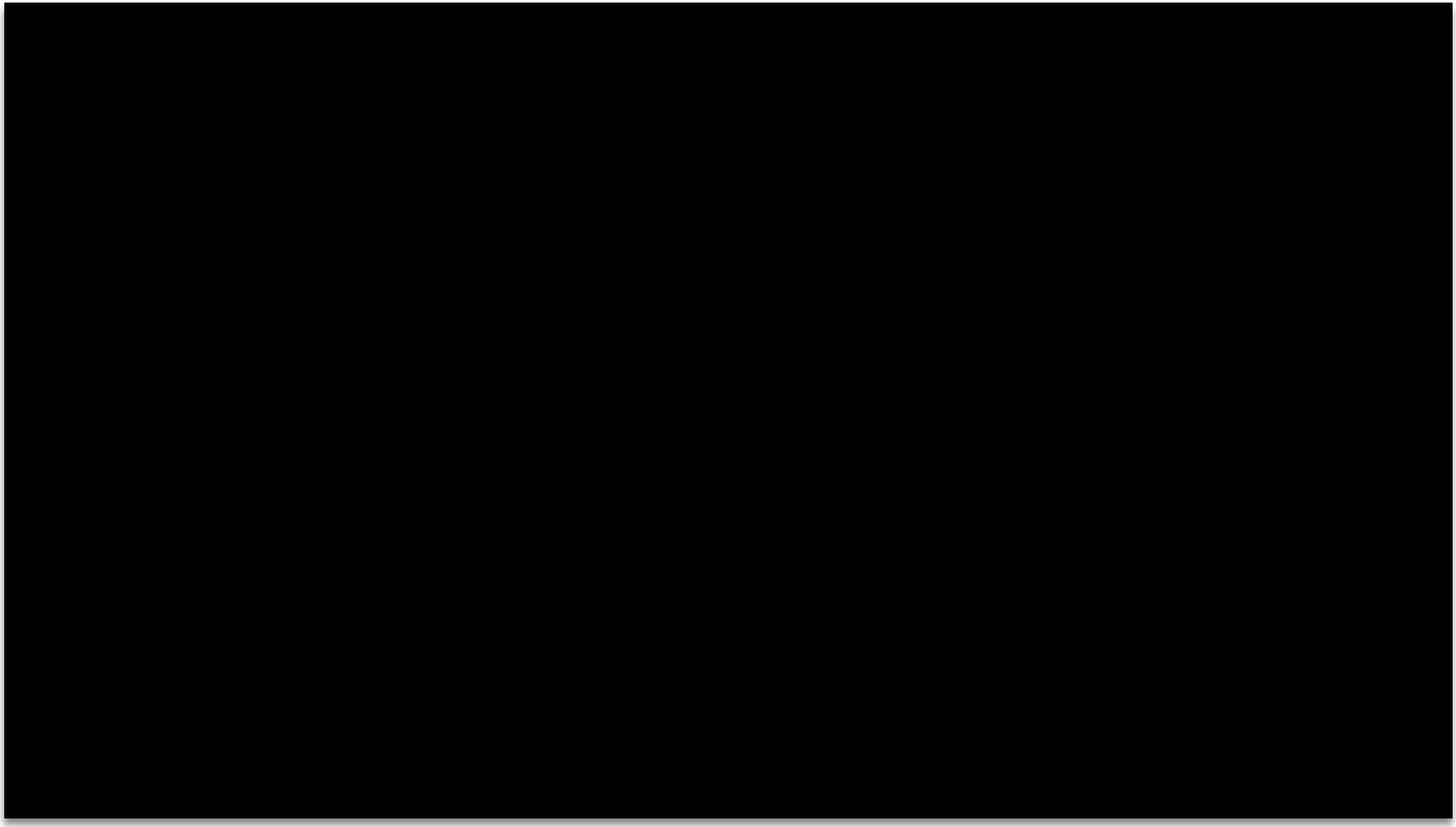
JOY & JOYFUL EXPRESSION

The Power of Joyful Expression

- **Singing releases endorphins** and activates the vagus nerve — lowering heart rate and anxiety
- **Even 5 minutes of music** measurably shifts mood and lowers cortisol
- **Playfulness in clinical teams** is associated with psychological safety and lower burnout

Small, joy-filled moments compound into meaningful wellbeing over time.

The simplest human pleasures are often the most powerful medicines.



SLEEP & RECOVERY

Recovery Is Not Wasted Time

20 min	Enhanced memory, alertness, and reaction time
30 min	Increased cytokine production — stronger immunity
60 min	Lower cortisol, higher serotonin
1–2×/wk	48% lower risk of cardiovascular events



Rest is the mechanism that makes performance sustainable. Not a luxury. A strategy.

NATURE & MOVEMENT

Nature’s Wellness Wonders

Patients with window views of nature recovered faster, needed fewer pain meds, and had shorter hospital stays. Same care. Same procedures. A window made the measurable difference.

- Nature exposure lowers cortisol and restores directed attention
- Benefits from 15-min walk, sunlight, or proximity to water
- We are neurologically adapted to natural environments — deprivation has costs



THE HEALING POWER OF PETS

The Healing Power of Pets

- **Lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and cortisol** in pet owners
- **Increased oxytocin** — same bonding hormone as human connection
- **Reduced loneliness** and improved immune function



MOVEMENT

The Most Evidence-Based Antidepressant

- **Multiple RCTs: exercise matches antidepressants** in treating mild-to-moderate depression
- **A 10-min walk** measurably lowers cortisol and improves cognitive performance
- **Both cardio & strength training** reduce burnout and improve emotional regulation
- **The goal:** consistent, sustainable movement — not optimization



Movement is one of the most effective natural antidepressant we have — and the most under-prescribed.



Chocolate: The Sweetest Medicine (in moderation)

- Dark chocolate · Fiber, iron, magnesium, polyphenols, and flavanols
- Lowers BP · Reduces heart disease risk · Enhances cognition · Boosts serotonin & endorphins

GRATITUDE & GIVING

The Power of Prosocial Spending

We assume that spending money on ourselves should increase our happiness. The research says otherwise.



$5	Giving to others reliably boosts the giver's wellbeing more than equivalent self-purchases
More	Windfall recipients who give money away report greater happiness than those who keep it
Why	Contribution activates meaning — a more durable wellbeing source than pleasure

CONNECTION

Our Most Powerful Health Resource

Social isolation is as harmful as smoking

- **Close relationships** are the #1 predictor of health and longevity
- **Strong social ties** reduce stress hormones and lower rates of heart disease and depression
- **Quality of connection** matters more than quantity or relationship status



GRATITUDE

Attitude of Gratitude



Gratitude is associated with:

- Greater resilience under stress
- Stronger relationships
- Greater wellbeing

The practice:

Notice it.
Pause long enough to recognize what is sustaining you.

Express it.
Tell people the impact they have on your life.

Gratitude doesn't deny hardship.

It redirects attention toward what is still sustaining.

ALTRUISM

The Feel-Good Factor

Two strangers collided in the Olympics. One stopped to help — at the cost of her own medal. Both were celebrated as the most memorable athletes of those Games — not for their times, but for their humanity.

- Helping others boosts health, immunity, and longevity
- Kindness activates the same neural reward pathways as receiving
- Contribution is a more durable wellbeing source than achievement



D'Agostino & Hamblin — Rio 2016

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is not only a stress tool. It is a wellbeing builder.

- Intentional attention, practiced consistently, changes brain structure and emotional baseline.
- The smallest consistent practice changes how we experience our days.

“The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh

THE PLEASURE PRESCRIPTION

Connect with others — including your pet. Sing. Express gratitude. Be kind. Eat dark chocolate in nature. Alternate with napping, meditating, and giving away money.

Before You Leave: Choose ONE

One small, specific, sustainable practice — starting this week.

1	**One mindset reframe**	I will practice this week
2	**One relationship**	I will invest in this month
3	**One daily pleasure**	I will allow — guilt-free
4	**One act of gratitude**	or kindness — small and specific
5	**A moment of stillness**	— even 60 seconds
6	**One form of movement**	I will protect


The path is the practice