

What does wellness mean to you? For millions of Americans, the definition of wellness likely means a sense of overall well-being. But for those who suffer from mental and substance abuse disorders, wellness does not mean an absence of disease, illness or stress, but rather feeling a sense of purpose in life, being actively involved in work or play that is satisfying, finding happiness, having joyful relationships, and having a healthy body and living environment.

This is according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which offers a great deal of information on the subject of wellness for those with mental and substance abuse disorders.

Looking further into wellness, SAMHSA defines an overall sense of well-being as incorporating numerous aspects of an individual's life. These include physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, occupational, and spiritual aspects. Each one of these aspects can affect the person's overall quality of life, so it is important to consider them all. And this is even more pertinent to consider with persons suffering with mental and substance abuse disorders, since wellness directly relates to their longevity and their quality of life issues.

SAMHSA identifies eight dimensions of wellness that it encourages everyone to incorporate into their lives. These include:

- Emotional
- Environmental
- Financial
- Intellectual
- Occupational
- Physical
- Social
- Spiritual
- Let's take a look at each of these eight dimensions to see how incorporating them into our lives can make a profound difference.

Emotional

When a person is suffering with a mental health disorder and possibly exacerbated by substance abuse, emotions are likely to be hard to manage. Not only are the depressions tough to deal with, but the periods of joy, which may be the other end of the pendulum swing, may throw the person into a tailspin. Not being able to cope adequately with the wild emotional mood swings may result in the person resorting to using substances, either to dull or wipe out the pain or as just a way to get through the turbulent period.

The emotional dimension of wellness, on the other hand, means the ability to cope effectively with life and to create satisfying personal relationships.

Environmental

How and where a person lives has a great deal of bearing on how well they feel in their life overall. In substandard or inadequate surroundings, a person is bound to suffer deprivation of some sort. In addition to lack of safety and security, there may be inadequate heat and other utilities. The neighborhood may be rife with crime, subjecting the person to mounting stress and fear for his or her safety.

Is it any wonder that persons inhabiting crime-ridden areas, often corridors of non-stop drug use, have such a low quality of life? Their wellness factor is dominated by threatening environmental concerns over which they have little, if any control.

But it isn't just inhabitants of the poorer areas of a city, town or countryside that may suffer because of the environment. Anyone who lives in a harsh environment devoid of pleasant surroundings may be at risk.

In the dimension of wellness, environmental means good health by occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support – rather than deter – well-being.

Financial

When you're poor and don't have enough money to properly care for yourself and your family, you aren't able to realize the financial dimension of wellness. This is all-too common during the current uncertain economic climate, both for Americans in general and those with mental and substance abuse disorders in particular.

Millions more Americans today are on food stamps, up to 47 million. It isn't that they don't want to be able to buy food for themselves and their families, but that they can't due to their poor financial situations. Foreclosures, bankruptcies, skyrocketing costs for food, fuel, utilities and household and personal necessities have eaten away at whatever Americans are able to earn. Savings have been wiped out in many cases, leaving individuals with a shrinking budget to help manage essential expenses.

In such dire economic times, it's hard to feel satisfaction with current financial situations. It's potentially even more difficult to envision a satisfactory future financial situation.

But financial satisfaction is an important dimension of overall wellness. It is something to continue to strive for and look forward to.

Intellectual

Each person has his or her own unique talents and abilities. Many of us, however, especially those suffering with mental and substance abuse disorders, feel trapped, invisible, incapable, shunned, and hopeless, unable to find any shred of value in whatever skill or ability we have. It could be that we haven't ever had the opportunity to pursue something that we may be good at, or that we gave up on a skill long ago as a result of our addiction.

But when individuals lack an outlet to express their creativity and to pursue learning new skills, their overall wellness suffers. How can they feel joy or satisfaction in a job well-done if they are convinced that they have no real value, nothing to offer another or to society in general?

Discovering abilities, talents and skills needs a nurturing environment. When we start to feel good about ourselves, we're more encouraged to want to try something new, to venture off in a new direction and take on challenges we'd otherwise avoid. It also helps when we have the support and encouragement of others to help our motivation and to keep us going when we encounter temporary setbacks.

The intellectual dimension of wellness means that we're able to recognize our creative abilities and to find ways to expand our knowledge and skills.

Occupational

Unless a person is independently wealthy – and there are some who fall into this category - everyone needs to work at some kind of a job in order to be able to live and provide for his or her family.

But work needs to be more than just bringing home a paycheck. No matter how little or how much someone is paid to do a job, if there isn't personal satisfaction from the effort and results of the job, overall wellness is less than it could or should be.

Besides taking pride in what we do, there's a sense of personal enrichment that comes from doing a job to the best of our ability. We feel a sense of participation and contribution as a result of our doing a good job. We're more eager to greet each day with at least some amount of enthusiasm. When we can look forward to going to work because we like what we do or gain some satisfaction from our efforts, we're experiencing the financial dimension of wellness.

Physical

The importance of the physical aspect of wellness cannot be underestimated. Coming back from the physical consequences of substance abuse, coupled with mental health disorder, can be extraordinarily exacting. It may take an individual many months or years to restore his or her health following chronic addiction.

For some, a return to full health is no longer possible. But this doesn't mean that re-establishing as healthy a routine as possible cannot benefit everyone. Every person requires an adequate amount of sleep, to eat healthy foods, and to engage in a certain amount of physical exercise – that is, if they want to achieve an optimum physical dimension of wellness.

What this is will vary from one individual to another and there is no one description that covers what it will mean for everyone. Suffice to say that when one is taking care of his or her physical requirements, there's a better likelihood that this aspect of wellness is going to rate in the plus column.

Social

Man does not live in a vacuum, isolated from the presence and company of others. While some may deliberately withdraw from society, particularly someone who is addicted to substances, in recovery from substance abuse, and/or suffers from a mental health disorder, most human beings want and need to be with others in order to share experiences, conversation and to broaden their circle of acquaintances.

What does the social aspect of wellness do for individuals? It gives them a sense of connection, of belonging, and helps them develop a functional and helpful support system.

Spiritual

It can be difficult to understand what has happened to us in our lives and to find some sort of meaning behind our current circumstances. Even though we may be in recovery from substance abuse and mental health disorder, we need something more to help us during the dark hours. When we feel challenged, overwhelmed, or even excited about an upcoming new direction we're about to take, having a spiritual foundation helps us in ways that we can only begin to imagine.

We may consider spirituality something that only applies to a few, but not to us. We would be mistaken. Whether we believe in a Higher Power, or God as we know Him, or believe in the spirit of nature or mankind in general, we know instinctively that there is something beyond ourselves at work in the universe.

Being able to tap into our spiritual side, to derive comfort and peace from our meditation or prayer helps us expand our sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Bottom line: In order to maximize our overall well-being, we should take the time to focus on each of the eight dimensions of wellness. Whether we are in recovery from substance abuse and/or mental health disorder or know or care about someone who is, paying attention to these eight dimensions can help us feel more fulfilled and content.