



WHAT PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS Need to Know About Wellness

Why Is Wellness Important?

A 2006 study by the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) found that people with serious mental illnesses die decades earlier than those without these disorders, most often of cardiovascular disease.¹ They also experience diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, and obesity at a rate that is 1.5 to 2 times that of the general population.^{2,3,4}

As persons in recovery or peer leaders, we care about our wellness and the wellness of our peers and other community members. Caring about all dimensions of wellness can improve our quality of life and help us live longer.



Wellness Matters

Consider Jane, a person in recovery who got a wake-up call during a health screening, where she was told that her blood pressure was dangerously high. Jane had already lost two sisters to heart disease, so she decided to take off the weight she had gained while taking anti-depressants rather than adding another medication. “At 40 pounds, [my blood pressure] dropped like a stone,” she said. “I am not considered a cardiac risk anymore. Screenings are crucial. Paying attention and taking action saved my life.”

Jane’s example shows the importance of tending to both physical and mental health. Wellness is more than the absence of disease or stress; it refers to your overall well-being. It’s having purpose in life, participating actively in work and play, and having relationships that give you joy. It also involves physical health, a positive living environment, addressing trauma, and overall happiness.⁵ SAMHSA’s Wellness Initiative believes that wellness has eight dimensions:⁶

- Physical
- Emotional
- Social
- Occupational
- Intellectual
- Financial
- Environmental
- Spiritual

The following areas have been shown to enhance well-being and recovery:

- In 2008 and 2009, Australian researchers found that **belonging to a social group** like a book club or volunteer group can improve both physical and mental health.⁷

Ken Jue of Monadnock Family Services in Keene, NH, had seen too many of his clients die prematurely from chronic health issues. Ken and his team created **InSHAPE**, a wellness program for peers and persons with behavioral health disorders in his community. Participants work with a mentor to create a personal health and fitness plan. They learn to take responsibility for their choices and work on the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of wellness. Participants report feeling better, engaging in activities they hadn’t done in years, and even finding employment.



- **Stopping smoking** is the single most important thing you can do to improve your health. Data shows that peers and persons in recovery are 25 to 40 percent more likely to die from cardiovascular disease than others, and smoking is a major contributor.⁸
- An Israeli study in 2011 suggested that shiatsu, a Japanese style of **massage**, can benefit people diagnosed with schizophrenia.⁹

The Eight Dimensions of Wellness¹⁰

What wellness means and what we focus on varies from person to person. Yet it is useful to think about how we are doing in each of the areas below.

PHYSICAL—Exercising, eating, and sleeping well, and preventing disease

Tips:

- Stay active by taking the stairs and walking instead of driving.
- Make healthy food choices.
- Get enough sleep. This is as important as diet and exercise.
- See your primary care doctor regularly.

EMOTIONAL—Coping effectively with life's challenges

Tips:

- Be aware of your feelings.
- Express your feelings to others.
- Seek support for coping with upsetting emotions.

SOCIAL—Connecting with others and developing a support system

Tips:

- Make a list of supportive family, friends, co-workers, and peers.
- Make at least one connection per day by calling, emailing, or visiting someone.
- Join a club, social group, or support group.
- Volunteer with an organization whose interests you share.
- Get involved in peer support.

OCCUPATIONAL—Getting personal satisfaction and enrichment through work and school

Tips:

- Ensure your job (paid or unpaid) supports your well-being.
- Communicate with your supervisor regularly and get support when needed.
- Take work and/or study breaks.

INTELLECTUAL—Being creative and expanding knowledge and skills

Tips:

- Take a class or read a book, and share what you learned with others.
- Create a scrapbook or a discussion group.
- Research a topic that interests you.

FINANCIAL—Finding satisfaction in your current and future financial situation

Tips:

- Be thoughtful and creative about budgeting and spending.
- Plan and prepare for the future and open bank and saving accounts.

ENVIRONMENTAL—Finding a pleasant, stimulating environment that supports well-being

Tips:

- Paint a wall, organize a closet, or donate household items you don't need.
- Take a walk or seek out music and other experiences that have a calming effect.

SPIRITUAL—Expanding your sense of purpose and meaning in life

Tips:

- Make time for practices that enhance your sense of connection to self, nature, or others.
- Find a community that shares your spiritual outlook.

Additional Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Wellness Initiative aims to inspire individuals

to improve one physical health behavior while exploring their talents, skills, interests, social connections, and environment to incorporate other dimensions of wellness. Visit www.samhsa.gov/wellness for materials and to take the **Pledge for Wellness**.

FDA Office of Women's Health
www.fda.gov/womens

Million Hearts™
www.millionhearts.hhs.gov

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
www.hhs.gov

Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation
www.bu.edu/cpr

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
1-800-950-NAMI (1-800-950-6264)
www.nami.org

The National Empowerment Center
1-800-POWER2U (1-800-769-3728)
www.power2u.org

The National Wellness Institute
www.nationalwellness.org

healthfinder®
www.healthfinder.gov

Faces & Voices of Recovery
www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org

ENDNOTES

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