



Introduction to Health and Wellness

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- define health and its various dimensions;
- describe the factors influencing your personal health and wellness;
- discuss the value systems that affect decisions about your personal health and wellness;
- demonstrate an understanding that health is a personal responsibility and lifelong journey.

Health is an important resource for living, but it is very specific to people's lives. To achieve good health it is important to personalize the information presented to make it relevant to your daily life. Throughout this chapter, and subsequent chapters, consider the ways health and wellness is expressed in your own life and the ways you set out to contribute to your health through, for example, physical activity, spending time with friends and family, enjoying time to contemplate the world around you, and challenging yourself to reach new heights.

Definitions and Dimensions

Health can be defined as “the capacity to lead a satisfying life, fulfill ambitions, and accommodate to change.” This modern definition of health recognizes that health is a dynamic, ever-changing process of trying to achieve one's individual potential. There are six dimensions of health: physical, social, mental, emotional, spiritual, and environmental. These dimensions are interdependent but interact and overlap with each other to produce health.

Wellness, on the other hand, can be defined as the combination of health and happiness. It is the concept of achieving balance in one's mental, physical, emotional, social, environmental, and spiritual life.

Examine the health and wellness pie (Figure 14.1) to reflect on the various dimensions of health that are part of our lives. To help you reflect on each dimension of health from your own perspective, consider the statements included in each section of the pie:

Physical health I have lots of energy and can get through the day without being overly tired. I find time to be vigorously active almost daily.

Social health I like to meet and interact with people. I am a good listener. I participate in a variety of social activities.

Emotional health I find it easy to laugh about things in my life. I take positive steps to cope with stress. I feel good about myself.



Environmental health I try to conserve natural resources. I believe it is important that everyone have opportunities to participate in physical activity pursuits regardless of culture, socioeconomic status, and race. Sport is a safe place to play (safe = free from discrimination, ridicule, and abuse).

Mental health I am ready to learn from life's challenges. I consider the alternatives and choices I have to live a healthy life.

Spiritual health I have hopes and dreams. I am passionate about a number of different things in my life and society. I take time to enjoy



nature and the beauty around me. I take time to think about what is important in my life – who I am, what I value, where I fit in, and where I am going.

Discussions with young people about health often center not just on individual health but on the quality of their relationships with varied

environments. In other words, to what extent is the individual coping with the many interactions and transitions that are occurring in his or her life? Adolescence presents many new challenges:

- **An increase in autonomy and individual identity.** I am doing more on my own and I make more decisions about what I want to do;



Figure 14.1 The health and wellness pie.

- **An increase in responsibilities.** I am more reliant on myself to accomplish what needs to be done;
- **An increase in industry.** I can participate in more challenging and sophisticated tasks at school and in work settings;
- **Intensification of relationships.** I am engaged in relationships with peers and intimate others that are emotionally, mentally, and physically more intense; and
- **Changes in body structure.** I will grow physiologically in ways that enable me to reach new levels of achievement and participation in a wide variety of experiences.

Dimensions of health that focus on adolescent transition might fall under the headings of **being**, **belonging**, and **becoming** (Figure 14.2).

Being Who am I? What do I stand for and believe in about myself and other people and things? Who am I becoming as a person?

Belonging To what organizations and groups (school, ski club, drama club, choir, and so on) do I connect with and feel a sense of belonging and affection?

Becoming Achieving personal goals, hopes, and aspirations. What accomplishments am I striving for? What goals have I set for myself? (“practical becoming” – work, school, volunteering; “leisure becoming” – activities that promote relaxation and stress reduction; “growth becoming” – activities that promote knowledge growth and skills that enable me to adapt to change).

These transitions are exciting opportunities for self-expression, leadership, and citizenship. It is important that we think of health as emerging new opportunities to participate in shaping the future and in the growth of society. Health should be understood holistically (i.e., in terms linked to the individual’s capacity to interact positively with his or her physical and social environment and not simply the absence of disease). Health is related to the quality of one’s life (i.e., the degree to which a person enjoys the important possibilities in his or her life). It is the recognition that health is directly related to people’s ability to cope with the challenge of change in varied situations that led to the World Health Organization’s definition of health as “the capacity to lead a satisfying life, fulfill ambitions, and accommodate to change.”



Figure 14.2 The adolescent transition focuses on being, belonging, and becoming.



Health and Wellness Is a Personal Journey

Health and wellness encompasses a lifestyle that includes the joys of physical activity as an integral part of daily living (Figure 14.3). Although we



Figure 14.3 Integrating physical activity into your daily life is essential for optimal health and wellness.

ultimately make the decisions about our own health and how we choose to live our lives, these choices are not made in isolation from the environments in which we live. Numerous factors that have a strong impact on our outlook on health include family influences, the media, culture, or society. It is this perspective on health that will largely guide our lifestyle habits and behaviors throughout our lives. But the achievement of health and wellness is not a single event; attaining and maintaining health and wellness is an ongoing process, and indeed, a resource for everyday life.

Making healthy choices such as participating in regular physical activity, avoiding smoking, developing healthy relationships, and following good nutritional advice are all important guidelines to consider. But it is equally important to remember that these are simply guidelines, and it is up to you to find out what combination of factors creates a healthy balance for you. Moderation is a word many professionals like to use when talking about health; whether referring to nutrition or exercise, too much (or too little) of anything is a potential problem. From the average citizen to the most successful athlete, we must all find this balance in our lives to achieve optimal health. Consider the two personal stories in the box on the next page.

Chris's views about health might be considered a little old-fashioned – if you're not sick, why worry about your health? This view is what health professionals refer to as a *reactive* or *curative* approach to health. In other words, as long as you don't have some disease or illness, you can be considered relatively healthy. When you do get sick, seek a cure specifically for the illness. Chris would probably argue that Erin's efforts to live a healthy life haven't done much good because they both get sick despite their very different health habits. On the surface, both Chris and Erin appear to enjoy the same level of health; but according to more modern versions of health, Erin has adopted lifestyle habits that, in the long run, will enable her to do more than avoid and recover from illness. Erin is taking what health professionals call a *proactive* approach to healthy living. She is asserting much more control over how

she leads her life. Although Chris's attitude toward life appears to be care-free and fun-loving (i.e., free from responsibility for health care), in reality it is Erin's life choices that are enabling her to be free to live a life that is referred to as wellness.

Wellness Is Your Personal Responsibility

Wellness encompasses elements of a person's life that extend beyond his or her microbiological or medical condition. Wellness is reflected in the

way a person chooses to live his or her life. Wellness is therefore dependent on the individual's capacity to interact effectively with his or her environment and to build and maintain physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being throughout his or her life span. Wellness involves having a deep understanding of what it means to care for oneself in relation to others and one's environment. In short, wellness is making informed choices and taking responsibility for the way we live our lives. Thinking back to Chris and Erin, Erin was able not only to make conscious decisions about how to live a smoke-free life but also to deal with pressures coming from friends and the media to start smoking. Erin is deliberately working toward certain goals and ambitions. Her value system guides the decisions she makes about her individual living habits. The way Erin behaves

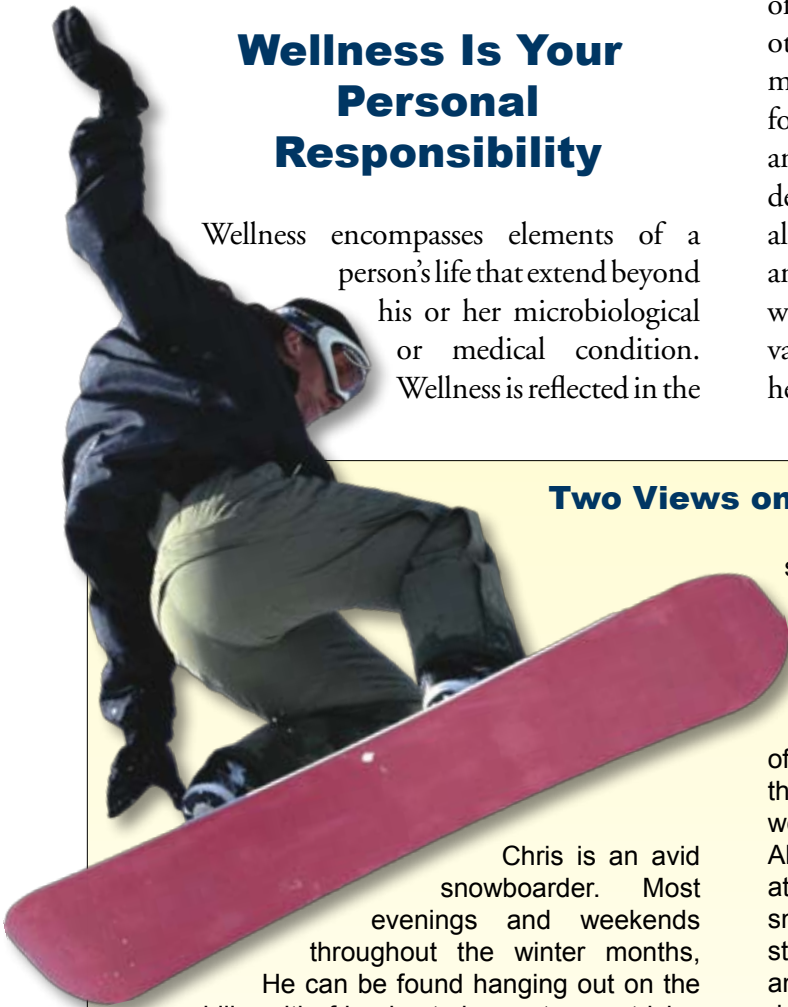
Two Views on Health

something my friends and I enjoy doing together; besides, it's more fun doing stuff with them than it is doing homework."

Erin is also a dedicated snowboarder. Like Chris, Erin works hard to perfect new moves and enjoys the physical and mental challenges of snowboarding. She also weight trains two or three times a week at a local fitness center and works out on the StairMaster three times a week. Although many of her friends smoke, and have at some point or another tried to persuade her to smoke, Erin has made a conscious decision not to start. She is careful to eat a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. Fries and soft drinks are an occasional substitute for what Erin refers to as a "power meal – pasta, low-fat meats, veggies, and juice – a meal that gives me energy and will build my strength and stamina."

Like Chris, Erin usually gets a cold at least once a winter, and she also suffered from the flu this past season. Erin's philosophy on health is: "I'm building for the future. What I do for my body today lays the foundation for a lifetime of involvement in healthy activities." Erin would prefer to be out on the hills than in school but admits school is okay: "I get to be with my friends, and the teachers aren't bad. I even like some of the stuff we have to learn, especially in physical and health education."

Chris is an avid snowboarder. Most evenings and weekends throughout the winter months, He can be found hanging out on the hills with friends, trying out new tricks. Although snowboarding is a mentally and physically challenging activity, Chris's overall lifestyle habits are less beneficial. Because many of his friends smoke, Chris has also become a smoker. Most mornings, he avoids breakfast, and he snacks throughout the day on fries, soft drinks, candy bars, and coffee. Late nights, excessive smoking, and poor nutrition have, on more than one occasion, left Chris so fatigued that his attendance at school and assignment completion have suffered. Most winters Chris gets a cold, and just this last winter, he suffered through a bout of the flu. Chris's philosophy on health is: "If you're sick, take a few pills; otherwise, have fun and enjoy yourself! I'll quit smoking later. For now, it's





shows her dedication to following a personal wellness plan.

Not everyone has a clear sense of what it means to be healthy and how to achieve wellness. This confusion is partly influenced by our families, the media, our peers, and the culture in which we live. A closer look at the influence these factors have on health and wellness will help us understand more about the lifestyle choices we make.

Family Influences

Our parents teach us a great deal about health and wellness. A simple example is the advice our parents give us to stay healthy: “Wear a coat outside or you’ll catch a cold.” Traditional family attitudes and actions send strong messages about health, well-being, and a general sense of life satisfaction (Figure 14.4). Families that value physical activity, for example, introduce their children to sports, games, and recreational pursuits that they enjoy

at an early age. Most young people today get their start in dance, hockey, tennis, volleyball, skiing, and swimming because of their parents’ interests/attitudes and enthusiasm for these same activities (Figure 14.5).

Although many children express an interest in an activity because of prominent role models, it will be the parents’ willingness to support their children’s physical pursuits that will enable optimal development to occur. Tiger Woods is a prime example of how parental encouragement, guidance, and the willingness to support the development of high-performance skills have resulted in the emergence of a great champion. Countless households throughout the world devote time and money to giving their children the opportunity to experience the joy of participation. However, only an extremely small percentage go on to play their sport of choice at the professional level.

Supportive parents see participation in



Figure 14.4 Positive family attitudes and actions send strong messages to children about the value of physical activity at an early age.



Figure 14.5 Parents introduce children to sports, games, and recreational pursuits.

physical activity as an opportunity to develop more than epidemiological health. They see opportunities for their children to develop self-esteem, self-confidence, skill potential, perseverance, humility, friendship skills, teamwork, respect for others, dedication to goals, and communication skills and to share good times with others. Physical activity is embedded in a more holistic perspective on health. In other words, health is the capacity of the individual to interact with his or her environment and to work toward fulfilling his or her potential.

Alternatively, families that push their children to compete for rewards outside of the physical, mental, social, and spiritual benefits of activity cause their children to withdraw prematurely from participating in, and gaining benefits from, sport and physical activity. Physical activity for the sake of activity, and for the sake of living a more energetic and satisfying life, is what engaging in physical activity and wellness is all about.

Media Influences

The media has “hyped,” commercialized, and distorted interpretations of what it means to be an accomplished performer and what is to be expected from participating in sport and other physical pursuits. Sports coverage in the media has sensationalized many sports and sporting events, making athletes celebrities, role models, and international heroes (Figure 14.6 A). Unfortunately, sports coverage has also converted the pursuit of athletic excellence into a marketplace for the sale of clothing, beverages, training equipment, and personal health care products. One of the greatest distortions that has emerged as a result of the commercialization of sport has been body image (Figure 14.6 B). Stereotypical versions of the ideal body shape and size have resulted in drug abuse, eating disorders, and a host of other mental and physical problems. The countless hours of training, conditioning, and coaching are downplayed by