

HEALTH AND HAPPINESS: SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?



Pharrell Williams might have been singing an ode to my hometown of Waconia, Minnesota given recent research showing we're one of the happiest places in America¹. And, to affirm what public health researchers have known for years, a review of my county's health rankings shows we are also among the healthiest². What variables predict each of these domains? High income levels, low unemployment rates, and high marriage rates. To be sure, lifestyle and healthcare access also contribute but, as the clever new phrase goes, our ZIP codes matter more than our genetic codes when it comes to health and happiness.



To see where your county ranks in health go to:
countyhealthrankings.org.

I'm happy that happiness is trending strong in our field of health and well-being. I'm happier still that principles of positive psychology are coming up as often as those of behavioral economics as we expand our tool-kits to support people in living fuller, healthier lives. What occasionally turns my smile upside down, though, is when a health promotion practitioner stumbles into flipping this coin as if 1 side wins more than the other. When my dad offered to flip for something, he'd quickly say: "Heads I win; tails you lose." I'm eager to better understand relative contributions of the power of purpose, the influence of gratitude, and the pull of positivity in shaping good health and a good life. Yet I'm skeptical of those who cast these concepts as the new, and better, way forward for the field of health promotion. What's more likely to improve health: showing gratitude every day or getting on a scale every day? Good evidence supports each idea, but I'd be surprised if anyone has done a comparative

analysis. Nor is there a need for that if we embrace these new tools as 2 sides of the same coin.

My brother Pete comes to mind when boosters for happiness imply a rich life solves for poor health practices. Pete was a beloved sponsor for dozens of other recovering alcoholics. He had a Buddhist-like devotion to taking 1 day at a time and lived a full, happy life... full, that is, until he died at age 59 due, no doubt, to his 2 pack a day habit.

Should our field become more fully rooted in the scholarship of purpose and positivity, we'll learn that reconciling Pete's early demise only begins with brain science and how his neurons influenced his thought and action. We'll also come to wrestle with concepts like determinism and agency as we consider whether Pete lived out, or up to, his potential; whether, as Stephen Cave explores in *The Atlantic*³, there is such a thing as free will. We'll learn that meaningfulness and molecules are more closely linked than imagined.

Rather than pit positive psychology principles against other approaches like risk reduction, my hope is that our field gets ever more sophisticated about what approaches fit best for which kinds of people and in which types of environments. To this end, the movement from wellness to well-being shows promise to the extent that the term becomes the big tent under which psychological, spiritual, physical, and community domains commingle and grow. Of these factors, I consider community health to be the critical factor that got short shrift in the wellness movement. Indeed, HERO, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has spent the past several years studying how employers

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can better engage with their communities toward the advancement of health for all. To learn more about the business case for caring about the health and happiness of your community, visit our Healthy Workplaces/Healthy Communities web page at get-hwhc.org⁴.

It's fanciful to imagine that had Pete lived in Waconia he would still be here for his many loved ones, reminding us of the gift of this moment. Though it's easy for me to experience the health benefits of gratitude simply by remembering how happy he was and how happy he made others, it makes me no less committed to advancing proven remedies to tobacco addiction and finding better ones.

For thousands like Pete, happiness is just 1 side of the coin. 🇺🇸



References

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VISIONARY THINKING GUIDES WORKPLACE WELL-BEING



If you follow national politics, it's easy to get frustrated with the endless rhetoric and posturing. But in spite of the gamesmanship, the US system of government endures as one of the most successful and admired in the history of the world.

It works that way because, when the Constitution was drafted, the critical question wasn't "Who should be president?" or "Who's the smartest to lead us?" Instead they concentrated on issues like:

Processes — what can be put in place to ensure leaders have guardrails?

Principles — what values are the foundation for our form of government?

Systems — what can be installed to balance power and result in decisions for the good of all the people?

Outcome — what freedoms, rights, responsibilities do we want as a way of life for our citizens?

Visionary thinking allowed the founding fathers to create a government that works more than 2 centuries after they're gone.

Organizations need a similar vision if they hope to create a healthy workforce. Today, more than ever, health promoters need to be visionaries — resisting the

temptation to implement the "program of the month" or give in to "we do it because employees like it" thinking.

Some questions to start you out:

Outcome. What do we want the well-being function to accomplish — in 1 year, 5 years, 10 years? What effect will it have on employees' work, health, quality of life?

Systems. What can ensure employee health and well-being remain priorities — regardless of business or leadership changes? How can those systems become self-perpetuating and part of the fabric of the organization?

Principles. What values drive our actions — not just for today, but always? How will we conduct our business so those values are evident to employees/management?

Processes. What can establish efficiency and effectiveness, regardless of who's managing the well-being effort?

The obsession with quarterly profits can make long-term, delayed-gratification, visionary thinking risky. But to build a program that lasts, one that survives layoffs and cutbacks, will require strong, visionary leaders committed to doing what's right for today and tomorrow. 🇺🇸