



Wellness and Personality Priorities: The Utilization of Adlerian Encouragement Strategies

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Introduction

For more than a century, mental health professionals have borrowed a model used to remediate physical problems. This approach has resulted in limited success due to its linear, myopic focus. Consequently, professional helpers are beginning to take a proactive role in the area of health promotion counseling. Their efforts have resulted in an action-oriented approach intended to increase the overall functioning of an individual and promote movement toward a greater sense of well-being by mobilizing strengths and coping skills needed for healthy development (Ginter, 1991; Hershenson & Stein, 1991). An Adlerian approach can foster this process, enhance relevant encouragement strategies, and help facilitate one's journey toward wellness.

Wellness is a proactive, multidimensional philosophy. It necessitates self-responsibility and self-care to make useful, daily, health-related choices concerning physical activity, nutritional awareness, stress management, spirituality, and environmental sensibility, including cultivating social interest. The pursuit of wellness entails the courage and discipline to discover opportunities for growth and change throughout the lifespan with a resulting commitment to self-betterment (Ardell, 1982; Carlson, 1979). The antiquated dualistic approach, which separates mind and body, is replaced with a philosophy which views an individual as a holistic system. Therefore, the physical, psychological, intellectual, social, emotional, and environmental processes are intimately connected.

Overall functioning can be enhanced by promoting an integrated life-style of total well-being. This process can be facilitated by better understanding how to encourage wellness in a manner which ensures compliance and motivation (Carlson & Ardell, 1981).

“Conceptually, Adlerians had been writing about holistic medicine fifty years before the term became fashionable” (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987, p. 173). Alfred Adler believed that health was more than the absence of disease and pain. His theory implied that an individual’s physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth are interconnected (Carlson, 1979). Adler (1956) stated that “the style of life and corresponding emotional disposition exert a continuous influence on the development of the body” (p. 226). One’s view of self, others, and the physical and social world seems to impact one’s health beliefs and resulting choices (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). These personal views and their behavioral expressions compose one’s style of life, a key component in one’s wellness.

Personality Priorities and Wellness

Personality priorities are the dominant, behavioral patterns based on an individual’s convictions and, according to Britzman and Main (1990), are empirically related to wellness. Kefir (1981) hypothesized that personality priorities originate at an early age and are impacted by impasses related to social fears. These impasses tend to be exaggerated, however, causing an individual’s choices to become restricted and the resulting life-style to be constant and predictable in an attempt to eliminate feelings of insignificance.

A variety of methods can be used to facilitate detection of an individual’s primary personality priority. An important question to answer is: What style of relating to others seems to promote a sense of belonging and significance for a particular individual? The following techniques can stimulate thought and facilitate insights: (a) elicit a verbal or written description of a typical day; (b) assess life-style, including generating information from family constellation, early recollections, and dream analysis; (c) formulate intuitive hypotheses by becoming sensitive to the use of verbal and nonverbal language, including recognition reflexes; and (d) incorporate usage of instruments such as the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities (Langenfeld & Main, 1983). These methods can generate information which reveals an individual’s quest for significance and belonging, including possible avoidance strategies which deter the wellness process (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). Langenfeld and Main (1983) grouped the life-style patterns into these five personality priorities: achieving, out-doing, pleasing, detaching and avoiding. Next are brief descriptions of

each priority and its relationship to wellness, including ideas to promote a healthier life-style.

The *achieving priority* characterizes an individual who is self-responsible and self-confident in his or her attempt to strive for superiority. An achiever chooses his or her own standards for seeking self-betterment and seems to be quite motivated.

These individuals have the internal motivation necessary to choose and comply with a wellness program. They are most likely incorporating many healthy activities into their lives, but may further benefit by becoming more aware of the important and varied wellness dimensions, including the latest research in health promotion and devising a personal wellness plan. Insuring that their wellness plan is holistic and balanced, as well as facilitating their sense of social interest by encouraging them to help promote wellness in others, may also be beneficial.

The *outdoing priority* depicts an individual who also strives for superiority, but via a different course. The outdoing priority has a critical, competitive style and strives to be the best she or he can be to avoid feelings of insignificance.

Although these individuals seem to have a proactive approach to life, their motivation is often external and, consequently, antagonistic to a wellness orientation. As a result, motivation is generated and maintained by external incentives and recognition for high accomplishment. Conflict can occur when these external reinforcers lose their motivating ability which may cause short-term, desirable behavior to extinguish.

Initially, individuals with outdoing styles may respond best to a behavioral approach. However, as individuals learn how to enjoy the invigoration of activities without the ego involvement (i.e., no winner or loser), wellness becomes self-reinforcing and internally motivated. An internal investment will replace the external orientation as one refocuses on the enjoyment of the process and the efforts related to making small, positive life-style changes. Learning how to better manage stress and facilitate social interest may help individuals with outdoing styles become more congruent with self and others.

The *pleasing priority* describes one who avoids feelings of rejection by seeking other's approval and becoming overly sensitive to other's expectations. This particular individual is typically successful at keeping relationships peaceful, friendly, and noncompetitive.

Individuals with a pleasing priority need to learn to rediscover their own feelings and needs to facilitate a healthy life-style. They are best motivated in a safe, supportive environment and respond to a plan which insures success. Consequently, it is important to allow them to take ownership for their healthy life-style and encourage them to become more self-responsible and internally motivated by focusing on existing wellness

strengths, emphasizing effort rather than outcome, and equating small life-style changes with success.

The *detaching priority* characterizes one who seeks to avoid ridicule related to social embarrassment. The result is an individual who effectively avoids potentially uncomfortable social situations by distancing self and retaining self-control and emotional expression.

These individuals must be encouraged to become responsible for their health and well-being by facing life's challenges, taking risks, and learning to handle the resulting consequences. Developing a stronger existential purpose in life may cultivate the courage needed to begin taking social risks, lessening the need for control, and expediting the learning of how to express emotions congruently. Encouraging better health-related decision making can enhance self-esteem and allow the individual to feel confident enough to reassess a situation and begin changing his or her deleterious belief system.

The fifth pattern, the *avoiding priority*, depicts one who attempts to elude perceived threats of emotional and/or physical pain. The payoff relates to protecting one's sense of self by outmaneuvering uncomfortable, stress-provoking situations. This avoiding propensity, however, can lead to stagnation by reducing growth-producing opportunities.

People who are avoiders, similar to detachers, often suffer from a lack of fulfillment related to minimal risk-taking and a need to reassess their missions in life. Reframing can be advantageous because avoiders often believe wellness is restricted to inordinate amounts of sacrifice and hardship and fail to take into account its holistic nature. Focusing on preexisting wellness strengths, encouraging effort rather than outcome, and promoting internal motivation by discovering that wellness can be an enjoyable process may also help these individuals make small, positive life-style changes. Patience, perseverance, and realistic expectations are needed to facilitate the empowering process.

One's personality priority and resulting convictions seem to impact choices regarding wellness. Health-promotion counseling can potentially benefit all personality priorities, but those with an avoiding or detaching priority appear to have a profound need for encouragement toward wellness (Britzman, 1987; Britzman & Main, 1990).

Implications for Wellness Promotion

The process of Adlerian therapy is conducive for wellness education and encouragement to occur. More specifically, the reorientation and reeducation stages of therapy can provide an opportunity to reveal how one's particular style of life impacts not only the presenting problem(s),

but also the resulting wellness-related choices. Unhealthy attitudes and apperceptions can be challenged in a caring fashion, and individuals can be encouraged to develop alternate, more functional attitudes. As a result, promotion toward wellness can occur in a concomitant manner with other life-style issues and may help empower an individual to overcome discouraged feelings.

The understanding that personality priorities are related to one's orientation toward wellness can result in numerous implications for promoting higher levels of well-being. Seemingly, there is a need to encourage wellness in a manner which takes into account one's unique and creative life-style. Cooperation is contingent upon aligning the goals of the health promoter and promotee. This can be more readily accomplished with better understanding of an individual's personality priority and resulting perception toward wellness. Several encouragement strategies consistent with Adlerian theory and advantageous for wellness promotion are summarized.

1. Encourage Self-Awareness. Strategies to increase an individual's self-awareness may increase the likelihood for that individual to attend to her or his wellness dimensions. An individual is, perhaps, most well when she or he perceives herself or himself as having control of most of the wellness dimensions (mental and physical); conversely, one may be most unhealthy when there is the perception of little or no control. This statement reiterates the importance of knowing oneself and one's life-style; continually reassessing personal health needs (mental and physical); evaluating the fulfillment (or lack of fulfillment) of these health needs; being cognizant of the wide spectrum of health choices; attending (in some manner) to the varied dimensions of well-being; recognizing individual strengths, as well as areas needing improvement; and realizing wellness is a lifelong pursuit and process.

The Britzman & Forey Wellness Instrument (BFWI) may be useful in facilitating self-awareness, challenging apperceptions within a holistic wellness context and in a manner consistent with Adlerian theory (Forey, 1988). In initial findings, this instrument's questions were found to be related to high levels of wellness (see Figure 1).

2. Individualize One's Wellness Plan. Everyone is unique and creative and can be educated about the numerous wellness choices which are available, regardless of a particular orientation toward gaining a sense of significance and belonging. The goal is to make wellness choices which positively, appropriately, and personally integrate and enhance an individual. For instance, people with an avoiding priority may respond best to a plan which entails a minimal amount of emotional and/or physical

Figure 1

The Britzman & Forey Wellness Instrument (BFWI)

Respond to the questions in one of these ways: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Strongly Agree, Agree, Mildly Agree.

- *My personality does not enable me to handle stress well.
- My parent(s)/guardian(s) encouraged my spiritual life.
- I believe I am part of a whole.
- I enjoy being a volunteer.
- I try to learn more about how my body works.
- I enjoy helping others in need.
- I treat individuals with dignity and respect.
- *I do not enjoy responsibility.
- I can handle almost any situation.
- *I do not take pride in my decision-making ability.
- Eating nutritional foods is very important to me.
- I try to understand the effect(s) foods have on me.
- *I cannot discuss my spiritual values with others.
- *Nutrition was not important in my family while I was growing up.
- I care about the welfare of others.
- Cooperation is important to me.
- I can easily concentrate on a task.
- My friends can rely on my commitment to them.
- I have the courage to approach stressful situations.
- I can express my emotions easily.
- I am aware of the foods which fulfill my nutritional needs.
- I invite new challenges.
- I try to reach out to others.
- My parent(s)/guardian(s) handled stress well.
- I work well under pressure.
- I use common sense when it comes to eating.
- *I seldom display my emotions and feelings.
- I can easily talk about my problems.
- I grew up in a supportive environment.
- I try to minimize foods which are high in fat, oils, sugar, cholesterol, and salt.
- *I seldom face my fears.
- *I did not grow up in a relaxed family environment.

*Items which are reversed score.

pain. Those with a detaching priority may need to be assured that there is a minimal chance that she or he will suffer from social embarrassment and ridicule. Individuals with pleasing styles may respond more quickly toward wellness when the risk of rejection is minimized. People with outdoing priorities may be oriented to feelings of significance through recognition and incentives. Lastly, individuals with achieving styles may just need appropriate education concerning wellness and resulting health-related opportunities. The understanding of one's personality priority can be an important tool for encouraging one toward health and wellness.

3. Reframe Wellness to Increase its Appeal. Unfortunately, numerous individuals have faulty logic concerning the true meaning of wellness. They often believe wellness is restricted to inordinate amounts of physical activity and fail to take into account its holistic nature. Consequently, individuals must be taught the true range and diversity of wellness and the numerous daily opportunities available to increase and/or maintain well-being.

4. Focus on Existing Wellness Strengths. Too often concentration is on the price paid for one's life-style rather than the useful, healthy behaviors that already exist. These healthy behaviors need to be identified and capitalized in attempts to empower individuals. For example, although an individual may avoid physical activity, she or he may be well-versed in a particular relaxation technique, such as self-hypnosis. Counselors, as talent scouts looking for strengths, can help mobilize individuals to generalize their "I can do it" mentality to help overcome perceived wellness weaknesses. This empowering strategy conveys that one already possesses the resources necessary to make useful, health-related decisions.

5. Encourage Effort Rather Than Outcome. Individuals must be encouraged to enjoy the process and pursue wellness activities which are joyous rather than arduous. Enhancing physical fitness, healthy food consumption, stress management, sense of purpose, and connectedness with social and physical environment can be accomplished via a myriad of enjoyable wellness choices. The means become more important than the result. Outcome orientation, on the other hand, is often discouraging and difficult to sustain for a lifetime.

Secondly, it is advantageous to equate small life-style changes with success. Too often, expectations are grandiose, unrealistic, and fuel for discouragement.

6. Facilitate Self-responsibility and Internal Motivation. External reinforcers may be needed to promote initial movement toward wellness.

However, ultimately individuals must be encouraged to enjoy the process of self-betterment and the invigorating feelings associated with it. Persons who experience a high level of wellness often enjoy numerous healthy activities. However, they are probably not motivated by the need to lose weight or look better, although these can be the residue of an active life-style. They seem to have the courage to make healthy choices without the need for external reinforcements because their activities are self-reinforcing. These individuals are positively and internally motivated toward personal wellness.

7. Promote Individual Ownership of Wellness Choices. Internal motivation is enhanced and outside dependence is minimized when individuals choose their own wellness program based on their peak interest activities. Although people need guidance from a holistic health team to insure a medically appropriate program, this does not override the importance of allowing an individual to gain a sense of power, ownership, and significance by developing one's own course of action (Ardell, 1982; Britzman & Main, 1990; Carlson & Ardell, 1981; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987).

Closing Thoughts

The aforementioned encouraging strategies, while not exhaustive, reflect the importance of assessing an individual's unique and creative life-style when devising a personal wellness plan. Everyone has the inner resources to make useful choices regarding wellness. This potential, however, often lies dormant due to faulty beliefs related to feelings of significance and a sense of belonging.

Mental health professionals can benefit by incorporating an Adlerian approach to promote holistic growth in a more pragmatic fashion. The Adlerian philosophy of altering perceptions and supporting efforts to expand behavioral repertoires can awaken inner resources, lead to feelings of significance and well-being, and facilitate one's wellness process. Avoiding strategies can be replaced with a renewed commitment to self-responsibility and movement toward higher levels of wellness (Adler, 1956; Britzman, 1987; Britzman & Main, 1990).

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