

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Five Keys to High-Level Wellness

High-level wellness is an uplifting lifestyle you can design to enjoy the highest degree of health possible. There are five keys that will unlock the doors to your goal, but no one key is enough. All five must be used together to achieve high-level wellness.

Key Number One: Take Responsibility for Your Health

Key number one is the most important. Unless you are prepared to take charge of your life and actively pursue a health-enhancing lifestyle, the other four keys will be worthless.

It's no secret that many people neglect or give up to others responsibility for their own well-being. They drift along, engaging in high-risk behaviors, and when something goes wrong, hope their doctor can put it right. By taking responsibility for your health, and avoiding high-risk behaviors, you can minimize the risk of physical problems.

Two typical high-risk behaviors are smoking and alcohol use. The negative effects of both are well known. By controlling high-risk behaviors like these, you'll not only feel more alive, but also increase your chances of living a longer life.

Key Number Two: Be Aware of Nutrition

One of the most serious health problems in North America is over-consumption combined with under-nutrition. In fact, five of the 10 leading causes of death have been identified as diet related.

Being aware of nutrition simply means choosing food wisely and maintaining a sensible diet pattern. Unfortunately, with many people, this is more the exception than the rule. Eating properly is usually a little extra trouble, may cost more, involves improved nutritional awareness and can usually take additional time. Here are a few tips to improve your nutrition:

- **Use natural foods.** Fresh fruits and vegetables are far more nutritious than canned or frozen.
- **Vary your diet.** Try different foods of all types, including fruits and vegetables; grains and cereals; dairy products; and meats, poultry and fish.
- **Avoid food additives.** You can start by reading labels. Known and suspected carcinogenic elements are present in many foods as artificial colors, additives and preservatives.
- **Cut back on sugar.** Sugar is the king when it comes to empty calories. Empty calories are worse than no food at all because they take the place of calories that do provide nutritional value.
- **Reduce salt consumption.** Most North Americans use two to three times as much salt per day as they need. Too much salt in your diet can lead to high blood pressure and increased risk of heart attack, stroke and kidney disease.
- **Limit caffeine.** Both coffee and tea contain caffeine, which, in sufficient quantity, can cause heartburn, bleeding ulcers and other related disorders.
- **Minimize fat and maximize vitamins.** Bake or broil instead of frying. Trim fat from meat, and skin from chicken. Steam vegetables using only as much water as needed, and cook for as short a time as possible to preserve vitamins.

Key Number Three: Practice Stress Management

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It has been scientifically proven that long-term stress, left unmanaged, is linked to many diseases. Migraine headaches, peptic ulcers, heart attack, hypertension and emotional problems are a few of the most common.

In today's fast-paced world it’s virtually impossible to avoid stress; instead, we have to learn to cope with it. And the best way to cope with stress is to find some skill, activity or technique that helps you to relax.

Deep breathing, aerobic exercise, listening to music, gardening—all of these are used by people to get rid of stress and restore peace of mind. What works for one person may not work for another. The idea is to discover what works for you, then make it part of your daily regimen.

There's also one other important idea to keep in mind when you're coping with stress. Remember: Stress is not really outside you; it’s your evaluation of a situation. Therefore, you have the power to control and manage your own stress response.

Also, by anticipating stressful situations before they happen and planning your response, you can often substantially reduce the amount of physical and emotional stress you will have to face when, and if they arrive.

Key Number Four: Fit Fitness into Your Life

It’s difficult to exaggerate the importance of physical fitness. And yet, it has been estimated that approximately 45 per cent of North Americans never exercise. No matter how much you practice self-responsibility, are sensitive to nutrition and work at managing stress, you cannot be healthy if you are not physically fit.

The benefits of being physically fit are many. They include lower or lowered heart rate, blood pressure, percentage of body fat, stress level, cholesterol and fats in the blood; reduced joint stiffness; and stronger muscles to better support the skeleton and improve circulation.

What activity is good for getting you into shape? Just about any that gets your heart pumping faster and lungs breathing deeper. Consider jogging and running, biking, swimming, tennis, hiking and brisk walking.

Exercise is also a way of getting in touch with nature, yourself and others. And, don't forget that a little activity goes a long way. Even just two or three 30-minute sessions per week will make a difference you can see and feel.

Key Number Five: Be Sensitive to Your Environment

Your environment consists of three aspects—physical, social and personal. To achieve a lifestyle of true well-being, you should become aware of how the physical and social parts of your environment affect you. As well, you should also deliberately structure your personal environment.

The air you breathe, city or town in which you live, your neighborhood and home—these components of your physical and social environments influence both your physical and emotional health. Your office, home and leisure places make up your personal environment. Shaping these spaces to enhance your well-being is what structuring your personal environment is all about.

One way to start is by making a list of what upsets you during the day, what distracts, interrupts or prevents you from doing something constructive in any of the other four dimensions of well-being we have discussed. Next, deliberately go about altering your personal environment to eliminate the obstruction, so that you can add the new positive value to your daily routine. This way, you're running things, they're not running you.

By understanding these five keys to high-level wellness, you'll be able to work toward a more customized and healthy lifestyle to suit you and your daily routine. But remember that changes to your life may also require changes to the five keys mentioned in this article, so be sure to re-evaluate your methods often.