

Is It Really Wellness?

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I am a strong believer in the power of language. Language isn't just about "words" - it's also about the personal meanings that we derive from those words. As we all realize, saying what you mean may not be the same as meaning what you say. Add to this the idea that "the meaning of words" and "what it translates to in pop culture" are oftentimes two totally different entities.

I bring this up today because of a great example of this phenomenon - the word "wellness". If we look at the literal meaning of "wellness", here is what we'd find (*italic emphasis is mine*):

- "an approach to healthcare that emphasizes preventing illness and prolonging life, as opposed to emphasizing treating diseases"(1);
- "the condition of good physical and mental health, especially when maintained by proper diet, exercise, and habits" (2); and
- "the quality or state of being in good health especially as an actively sought goal" (3).

What I have come to experience as "wellness" in the health care world simply doesn't match these definitions. Frankly, this is a word that has become overused and trendy.

A true "wellness" program is all about the client - not the provider. It is about understanding motivators, self-image, limiters, self-responsibility, and lifestyle. It is inherently about learning - and education - and how to accomplish this effectively. Wellness parallels the words of Confucius -

"If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day -

If you teach man how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."

And, as Bob Pike would say in his courses on adult education training techniques, "learning has not occurred unless behavior has changed". Adults don't tend to learn by being told to do something - they learn by doing.

In many ways, the goal of a wellness program is to make the provider expendable. In other words, if the client is learning, and behavior (i.e. lifestyle) is changing, then the need for the instructor/provider lessens with time. If the provider is effectively fostering true self-care, then the provider's role should become one of "mentor" and not of "fixer".

Unfortunately, I don't think this is what wellness has come to mean over time.

How much actual teaching goes on in the health care world these days? How many providers profess to being "wellness-oriented" yet fail to take the time to understand how adults learn and what motivates them in the process? It comes back to "telling" someone to do something ("you must do these things to be healthy") as opposed to understanding the person's motivators ("This is why I would feel a reason to become healthy"). These are not one and the same - they vary in language and personal meaning. As has been said for many years, "you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink". The provider can foster a good learning environment, but it ultimately involves a choice by the client. But if the provider continues to "hold on" to the client, regardless of the lack of choice made by the client (and regardless of the potential financial benefit of doing so), they are essentially enabling this behavior - which is, in my understanding, an enmeshed and codependent world that cannot be reflective of a "well" lifestyle.

Wellness involves making choices to foster self-responsibility and self-actualization. It involves competent self-care. It involves personal growth, learning, and transformation. We all have the necessary mechanisms and personal power to transform ourselves. The client has the capacity to "find their voice" ... but just as importantly, the provider has the capacity to "inspire others to find that voice". For both, it is the true path to wellness - and greatness.

Sources:

1. Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Retrieved June 26, 2007, from Dictionary.com website:
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wellness>
2. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.
3. Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary.

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