



JAMES STROHECKER

High-Level Wellness



What comes to mind when you hear the words “Peak Vitality”? Do you envision someone who is buzzing with so much energy that she can’t sit still? Do you think of someone who is in a perpetual state of peak performance? Or do you see someone who always seems to have all the energy he needs to live a fulfilling life, and who seems to be in a state of balance and is fully present?

Where does our energy come from? Do we get it from an outside source? Do we generate it? Or is it always present and available at the core of our being?

My personal experience is that all three are true.

Energy from Our Environment

There are some fundamental things we need to do to maintain a state of “energy homeostasis” with our physical environment. We need to bring in energy every day. If our intake of oxygen through breathing or nutrients through eating is deficient, our energy level will not be optimal; we are not doing the minimum necessary to maintain the human operating system on a physical level. Metabolically speaking, air and nutrients are two of our primary sources of energy. The quality of the energy we bring into our system through our breathing and eating is critical to sustaining our energy level.

James Strohecker, an e-health pioneer and wellness visionary, communicates fundamental principles of wellness from the world’s great traditions into mainstream cultural awareness. He is president and cofounder of HealthWorld Online (www.Healthy.net), the world’s first Internet network for wellness and complementary/alternative medicine, and cocreator of the Wellness Inventory assessment and life-balance program (www.WellPeople.com). He was cofounder of the first business-to-business Internet network for the natural products industry. He has coauthored five books, including *Natural Healing for Depression* (Perigee, 1999).

Just as important, however, is how we manage our energy throughout the day. If we expend more energy than we take in, we will likely be tired at the end of the day. Many of us push ourselves to exhaustion before we are willing to get into bed at night. We have exhausted our energy supply. And each night we attempt to regenerate our energy supply during sleep, although this regeneration is becoming increasingly difficult in our modern society. We have a hard time turning off our minds at night for a variety of reasons, and a high percentage of us are sleep deprived, unable to get a sufficient amount of sleep and “recharge our batteries” on a regular basis.

What follows is an endless loop of exhaustion and the need to stimulate our tired minds and bodies “back to our senses” so we can make it through the day. One of our favorite ways to do this is caffeine—stimulating our adrenals into overdrive to give us a burst of energy. But as we all know, that stimulation comes at a price; over time, we can exhaust our adrenal glands and then experience a sense of fatigue that never seems to leave us.

Generating Internal Energy

Many ancient disciplines focused on developing our full human potential, such as yoga, qigong, and shamanic practices from many traditions, teach us methods of generating energy and allowing our vital energy to circulate more freely throughout the body. Breathing practices are usually central to these methods. Yogic breathing practices (*pranayama*—regulation of the vital force) are becoming increasingly well known, and are commonly taught in yoga classes.

Many of these breathing practices are designed to create a balanced flow of vital energy. When our breathing rhythm becomes balanced, our mind and emotions are more centered and less reactive, our senses are calm, and our entire system becomes more relaxed. At the same time, when we reach this balance point and state of deep relaxation, we often experience a higher degree of vitality and well-being.

These disciplines also emphasize building or cultivating energy by not dissipating energy throughout the day in our daily activities. So much of our energy is dissipated through anxiety, worry, repetitive negative thinking, and the myriad actions we take based on these mental and emotional states.

Innate Energy

Do we bring in all of our energy from the outer environment or

do we maintain our own core of innate energy? These same ancient disciplines are based on the concept that innate potential energy is dormant and in need of activation.

Certain yogic traditions from India refer to *kundalini*, a Sanskrit term for our latent, potential spiritual energy, figuratively described as a coiled serpent at the base of the spine. When activated and sustained through spiritual practices, under the guidance of a master, this spiritual energy vitalizes the body, mind, and emotions and enables us to experience our potential as human beings more deeply. This can include a more profound sense of Self, deeper/heightened states of awareness/consciousness, and energy levels that can be difficult to contain, as they stretch the limits of our “human operating system” (body, mind, and emotions).

In Chinese medicine, “prenatal *qi*” is the vital force that we bring into the world when we are born. According to some experts in Chinese Medicine, we are born with enough prenatal *qi* to live for five hundred years. This prenatal *qi* is like “an energy savings account” to which we cannot make a deposit; we can use but cannot add to our store of prenatal *qi*. Considering a “normal” lifespan of one hundred years, we are using up our prenatal *qi* five times faster than is necessary, needlessly expending our core energy.

How do we keep from depleting our core innate energy, our prenatal *qi*? The answer in the ancient Chinese tradition is to generate additional internal energy to supplement your innate energy, or in the language of that tradition, cultivate postnatal *qi*. This is the *qi* or energy you can derive from the food you eat, the water you drink, and the air you breathe. The practice of qigong is a time-tested method for generating more energy (postnatal *qi*) and maintaining your energy in a healthy balance. Qigong is becoming increasingly popular worldwide. Tai chi (taiji) is one form of qigong. It reminds us that by stilling the mind, cultivating positive emotion, and developing a deeper and more balanced breathing rhythm, we not only generate and access deeper levels of energy, but we better manage our energy as well.

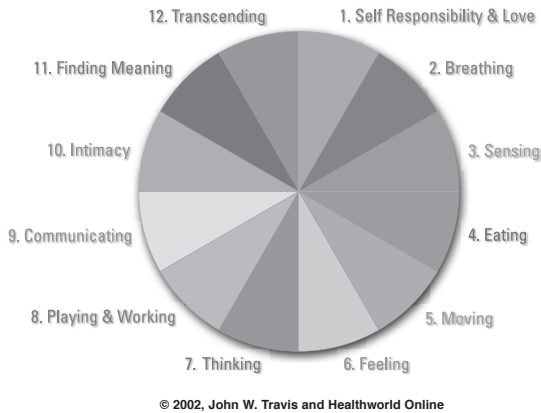
Wellness Energy System

The Wellness Energy System, envisioned in the mid-1970s by wellness pioneer John W. Travis, MD, MPH, provides an excellent model for determining our overall state of vitality, health, and well-being at any point in time and how to manage our energy. This systemic view acts as an organizing principle to bring clarity and deeper understanding to your personal life and experience.

INTRODUCTION

According to Dr. Travis, “We are energy transformers. All our life processes, including health and illness depend on how we manage energy. Putting together a person’s energy inputs and outputs we have the complete wellness energy system.” These twelve life processes are the basis of the Wellness Inventory, an online assessment and life-balance program based on Dr. Travis’s work. He created the original Wellness Inventory assessment in 1975 for his Wellness Resource Center in Mill Valley, California, the first Wellness Center in the United States.

The representation of the Wellness Energy System in the wellness wheel is like a mandala of the whole person (your whole being)—a map of your experience—your behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. You can also look at the wheel as a dynamic system of interdependent elements, each connected to, affected by, and influencing the other eleven elements. If you look at the wheel, you see the whole-person perspective and the interdependence of the twelve life processes.



This wellness model helps you appreciate your personal wellness activities, attitudes, and beliefs from the perspective of how each activity affects the whole person. It also reveals how you can bring more of yourself as a whole person—in body, mind, and spirit—to each of your wellness activities.

Assessing Your Wellness

Here is an excerpt from the Wellness Inventory for assessing yourself in three key areas of wellness. The three areas chosen are the three key energy inputs in the Wellness Energy System: Breathing, Sensing, and Eating.

In each section, ask yourself the following two questions regarding

each wellness statement. Your choices for answers are in *italics*. You don't need to write down your answers. Just pay attention to the process of contemplating each statement and your two answers.

- 1) How true is the statement for me today?

Yes /Always/Usually

Often

Sometimes/Maybe

Occasionally

No/Never/Hardly ever

- 2) How satisfied am I with my answer to the statement? (Would I prefer to have had a higher wellness score?)

Satisfied with my score

Moderately desire higher score

Strongly desire higher score

Breathing

- I use my breath as a tool for centering and increasing mental clarity on a regular basis.
- When I am feeling stressed, I take a little time to do some slow, deep breathing to calm myself and reduce my anxiety.
- I regularly practice breathing exercises to help generate internal energy.

Sensing

- I use soothing and enchanting music and sounds to create a relaxing and healing environment.
- I receive a full-body massage or other soothing touch on a regular basis to enhance my state of well-being.
- I am comfortable with solitude and silence.

Eating

- I allow myself to experience a moment of gratitude before I start eating a meal.
- I approach meals mindfully, eating slowly and chewing my food thoroughly to ensure optimal digestion, assimilation, and nourishment.

- When possible, I eat my meals in a relaxed, nurturing environment.

As this is just a mini-assessment with a few statements, we will not ask you to score or rate your responses. Simply reflect on your responses and note the increased awareness of possibilities for meaningful change in your life. That is what you can gain here.

What is common to all of the statements is that a positive response to the first question indicates a movement toward increasing your level of vitality and well-being. Answering the second question with “moderately or strongly desire a higher score” indicates willingness and motivation to change and to improve, again moving you in the direction of peak vitality or high-level wellness.

Exploring Possibilities for Greater Energy in Your Life

Where do you go from here? You have assessed yourself in three key areas of the Wellness Energy System. Did this experience awaken a sense of greater possibilities in enhancing the primary energy inputs in your life—Breathing, Sensing, and Eating? What are some of the actions and attitudes you can begin to integrate into your life to increase both the quantity and quality of energy in these three key inputs?

Breathing with Awareness

Breathing is the most fundamental of the energy inputs. There is no physiological function more vital than breathing, as it brings in life-giving oxygen, producing energy in our cells, and removes the by-product, carbon dioxide, from the body. Without breathing, life as we know it would last for but a few minutes. And, as discussed earlier, breathing practices play a central role in many ancient and modern traditions of spirituality and human development as well as energy generation. Calm, balanced breathing tends to heighten sensory awareness, promotes mental clarity, and helps support a more balanced emotional state.

There are literally thousands of breathing practices and exercises. Where do you start?

I recommend simply observing your breathing at different times during the day. Simple awareness of how you are breathing at different times and under different circumstances can go a long way toward shifting how you breathe.

- If you feel stressed or anxious, notice how you are breathing.

- If you have been on your computer for hours and are tiring, notice how you are breathing.
- When you are feeling really good, notice how you are breathing.

Most of us are totally unaware of our breathing. The idea that our breathing can influence our state of vitality and well-being is foreign to most of us; it is rarely emphasized in our culture. Yet it is such a fundamental skill that it should be taught in kindergarten and elementary school as a key life skill, a key to optimal functioning of the human operating system.

Sensing with Awareness

We take in our environment through our five senses—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. Without these sense impressions, life as we know it on Earth would not exist. The senses bring in the information that enables our mind to create its own map of reality. Yet most of us are not aware of our sensing. Like breathing, it is part of our operating system, something we do all day long without thinking. Over time, however, we can become desensitized due to sensory overload or to pain, abuse, or trauma, which can cause us to shut down. Or we become overly sensitive to sounds, light, smells, and other sensory stimuli. This can interfere with our functioning in the world and our energy level.

Again, like breathing, simple awareness of the senses is the doorway to using your senses to support your personal growth and energy levels. Here is an idea for bringing your awareness back to your senses.

Take a walk in nature, in a local park, or in your neighborhood.

On your walk on one day, focus your awareness on your sense of seeing. Survey your entire visual field. Take in everything around you. Notice the sky, the clouds, the trees, the flowers, the people, the animals, the buildings—everything around you. Are you taking in more visual input than normal? What would you normally see taking this same walk? Where is your attention normally? Is it on the environment around you, or in your thoughts?

On your walk the next day, do the same process but focus instead on your sense of hearing. Notice all of the sounds you normally filter out—people's voices, car radios, motorcycles, a distant lawnmower, a dog barking, crickets chirping, or birds singing.

A deeper sensory awareness and engagement is associated with increased learning and heightened levels of performance. As with breathing, ancient and modern transformational practices such as yoga and qigong deeply engage our senses to help generate higher levels of energy and awareness.

Eating with Awareness

We are constantly inundated with recommendations about our diet. What to eat, what to avoid—and the landscape is constantly changing. A few simple guidelines could probably be agreed on: Eat a balanced diet with the maximum of fresh whole foods when possible. Eat nutrient-dense foods. Eat organic produce when possible, to minimize your exposure to chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and other environmental contaminants. Support your local farmers and shop at farmer's markets when possible.

We rarely hear, though, about *how* we eat. What is your state of mind when you eat?

What is your emotional state? This has a big impact on what you choose to eat, how fast you eat, and how much you eat. We are told not to eat too much if we don't want to gain weight. There is another perspective, however.

The ancient science of yoga was very practical about how much to eat. The yogic texts recommend leaving your stomach one-third empty after a meal to allow for the circulation of *prana* or vital energy. Yogis noticed that when you fill your stomach to capacity, you need to divert a greater amount of energy to the process of digestion, and may actually feel heavy and lethargic—hardly the outcome one would expect from a healthy meal!

Try this experiment in awareness around eating. Chew each bite of food thoroughly, twenty to twenty-five times. At first this may seem like torture. You realize that when you are stressed, you have a tendency to chew, chew, chew, swallow, before your food has been fully masticated. Chewing is the first stage of digestion. By fully chewing your food, the next stage of digestion in the stomach is greatly facilitated and assimilation in the intestines is greatly enhanced.

In addition to improved assimilation, there is another bonus: You tend to eat less when you chew thoroughly and eat more slowly. And this may actually help you live longer! Research into longevity has shown that the two factors that have a real impact on longevity are caloric restriction (eating less) and lowering core body temperature (achieved through meditation, breathing, and deep relaxation).

There are some practices that can make it easier to eat more mindfully and more slowly. Eating, like breathing, is one of our most important activities, and one that deserves every bit of mindfulness we can bring to it. Yet we often approach eating as if it were just another one of our multitasking activities during the day. When we are able to slow down and actually sit down to enjoy a meal, and take a brief moment to feel gratitude for the food we are about to consume, it is much easier to eat more deliberately, eat less, and enjoy and appreciate what we eat much more. We also get the bonus of fully breathing between each bite and chewing. Imagine that!

Choice and Self-Responsibility

Awareness is the first step in creating lifestyle change, which is why I refer to Breathing with Awareness, Sensing with Awareness, and Eating with Awareness. With awareness, we can observe our current behavior, as well as possibilities for new behavior. The keyword here is *possibilities*.

Frequently, we do not attempt to change because we don't believe that change is an option. We have always done things the same way — that's just the way we are. As we become aware of new possibilities, we also become aware that we have *choices*. As we become aware of our choices, we see that by being self-responsible we can make the choices that are likely to bring the most benefit into our lives.

We tend to look at choices and actions as needing to be on a larger and more dramatic scale if they are to create change in our lives. I believe this is partly a cultural phenomenon and partly our belief that we need a large goal to motivate us. And we often later discover that the large changes are not sustainable and slide back into our old behaviors.

Small Steps—Creating Sustainable Lifestyle Change

A key to creating sustainable lifestyle change is to focus on small steps for continuous improvement. As a member of a highly goal-oriented society, this may seem counterintuitive to you, but this strategy of incremental change can remake the fabric of your life and lead to major lifestyle change.

Our desire to achieve a higher level of wellness and vitality is a lifelong journey composed of many small choices that present themselves every day of our lives. At first glance, this approach may seem to require a great deal of patience, but it is a highly effective strategy. Large, ambitious steps toward lifestyle change may inspire

and motivate the individual at first, but they can raise a great deal of resistance to change that may eventually sabotage any positive gains made. This constantly occurs in attempts to diet, lose weight, and maintain an exercise regimen.

Returning to the whole-person model embodied in the wellness wheel and its twelve dimensions, the small-step strategy begins to make sense. When you look at yourself as a whole person, and see how one dimension affects the others, you begin to understand the wisdom of this approach, and how powerful small steps can be in your life.

Discovering Where You Are Most Motivated to Change

When you self-assessed yourself in Breathing, Sensing, and Eating earlier, you were asked how satisfied you were with each answer. If you answered, “I strongly desire a higher score,” this typically indicates greater motivation to change. As you discover (through an assessment such as the Wellness Inventory or through self-inquiry) the areas of your life in which you are most motivated to change, you can then begin the process of creating small action steps for sustainable lifestyle change.

What might this look like in your everyday life? Here are some suggestions for action steps for breathing, sensing, and eating. See if you can come up with steps that reflect your own life and experiences.

Action Steps for Breathing

- Take a one-minute breathing break every afternoon at the same time to relax and re-center.
- Put a note on your computer or refrigerator to remind yourself: BREATHE.
- Take a moment to notice your breathing whenever you feel stressed.

Action Steps for Sensing

- Get a massage once a month.
- Take a soothing hot bath by candlelight, adding essential oils for fragrance.
- Play your favorite relaxing/healing music as you prepare to go to bed.

Action Steps for Eating

- Place a large glass of water next to your computer at the beginning of the day.
- When you sit down for a meal, take a couple of deep breaths to center and relax yourself before starting to eat.
- Make your lunch a priority and schedule a regular time to eat, just as you would schedule a business meeting.

Maintaining Positive Feeling

American culture has tended to place far more emphasis on the power of thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes in achieving goals than on the power of positive emotion. Often motivation to change is fueled by self-criticism, shame, judgment, and other limiting, negative emotions and attitudes that do not lay a solid foundation for the change process. Learning to focus on what you do want in your life, rather than on what you don't want, opens the door to new possibilities. Energy follows thought, and energy also follows emotion. The choice of where you direct your energy is yours. If you focus your energy in a negative or self-limiting direction, your energy will run in circles and dissipate. By focusing in the direction of where you want to go in your life, with positive emotion, your energy and level of vitality and inspiration can grow.

The practice of gratitude is a wonderful means of cultivating positive emotion. By beginning to practice feeling gratitude for what you currently have in your life, you free up a tremendous amount of energy that is normally dissipated in worry, anxiety, and fear. You also create a positive feeling state that is a much stronger foundation from which to begin moving toward what you want in your life. A positive feeling state, with an inspired heart and a clear mind, is the perfect starting place for moving toward creating a higher level of well-being in your life through the small choices you make on a daily basis.

High-Level Wellness and Peak Vitality as an Ongoing Orientation

If you are highly motivated to create sustainable lifestyle change and experience a higher level of vitality and well-being, you might consider engaging a wellness coach. A coach acts as your partner and helps to empower you in finding your own answers and supports you in realizing your desired goals. A good wellness coach understands

that you are the ultimate expert in your own life. By asking the appropriate questions, your coach can help you discover solutions that are right for you and keep you focused on and accountable to your wellness action plan and on the road to high-level wellness and peak vitality.

Wellness is an ongoing, lifelong journey. Every day, you can improve the quality of your life and level of personal well-being through your small lifestyle choices, as well as choices regarding your emotional responses and attitudes. You can orient yourself toward a higher level of vitality, health, and well-being, or you can live day by day, never investing in your wellness. If you choose the latter, one day you will discover that your “wellness savings account” is empty; you are exhausted, depleted, and have driven yourself to a poor state of health.

Just as we save for retirement, let’s also make regular deposits to a “wellness savings account” through life-affirming wellness practices and positive lifestyle choices. Life without energy is not the life we want. Our lives continue to blossom and develop even greater depth and meaning as we age. Choose to live well!

How Best to Utilize This Book

Using the Wellness Wheel (Wellness Energy System) as an “organizing principle,” you can see that the approaches to peak vitality from the experts in this book address one or more of the twelve key life processes. In fact, from the perspective of the Wellness Wheel, the book itself becomes a mandala for peak vitality. Look at the chapters in this book as an expression of the whole person, as well as an expression of the personal journey to higher levels of awareness and vitality.

Whether a chapter addresses the dimension of *Finding Meaning* (“Living Consistent with Your Values,” “Personal Mythology and Wellness”), the dimension of *Transcending* (“Hardwired for Bliss,” “Rituals for Rebirth”), the dimension of *Feeling* (“Breaking the Blame Box,” “Emotional Freedom Techniques”), or any of the other twelve dimensions, it can act as a gateway to the next stage of your journey to a higher level of personal well-being.

As my dear friend and associate Bobbie Burdett likes to say, “It doesn’t matter where you enter the wheel. What is important, however, is that you enter the wheel.” As each of the twelve dimensions is part of the larger whole, each is connected to the other eleven dimensions. In the same way, you can look at this book as another tool to help you reclaim your innate wholeness.

As a new awareness is awakened by reading a specific chapter, you may then find yourself drawn to another chapter and then yet another—as if you are stringing your own personal strand of pearls. You may find that the perspectives of your chosen chapters are taking you on a journey around the Wellness Wheel. Go with your own personal flow. Follow your own heart and mind. Be curious. Explore. Absorb. Integrate. Allow your new awareness to inspire positive changes in your life, changes that allow you to experience your wholeness more deeply. Wholeness is the basis of a deeper sense of well-being and vitality.

Most of all, approach the book with a sense of gratitude. There are many treasures here to explore, treasures offered by some of our greatest contemporary luminaries. Allow your curiosity and your passion to open the doors that are right for you now, at this moment in your life.

