



Promoting Teacher Wellness

by JUDY BERANGER

Where would you like to be in ten years? What are you doing today to make that happen?

Likely you all visualized yourself as healthy, with a peaceful heart and in a place where you feel affirmed, valued and making a difference. Teachers are models for primary prevention and wellness. There is no question that teachers have considerable influence – not only on their students and society generally – but also on each other. People look up to teachers and teachers admire colleagues who, regardless of how busy they may be, still seem to find that extra energy and time to care for themselves. Rest assured such outstanding teachers have been very purposeful in setting goals to nurture their own health and well-being. These teachers make an ongoing commitment to focus on personal as well as professional development thus ensuring overall work/life effectiveness. The wellness component of the NLTA's Employee Assistance Program emphasizes the need for teachers to engage in behaviours that develop optimal health – both in the personal and the professional spheres of their lives.

Realistic Goals

At our workshops we are often asked to identify realistic goals that teachers might set to work towards improving or maintaining their health and well-being. Goals are often referred to as dreams with deadlines. Basic goals for people wanting to make a conscious commitment to personal and professional growth include becoming mindful of how they think about many dimensions of their life including exercise, sleep and eating well. Research tells us that thousands of Canadians suffer from illnesses and conditions that can be prevented or improved through regular physical activity. It is important to incorporate activity into our day – even if we start in small steps. The National Center for Chronic Disease and Health Promotion confirms that wellness programs, which include regular sustained exercise, have many proven benefits including: reduces feelings of depression and anxiety; helps control weight; helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles

and joints; reduces the risk of dying prematurely from heart disease; reduces the risk of developing diabetes; helps reduce blood pressure in people who already have high blood pressure; reduces the risk of developing colon cancer; and overall promotes psychological well-being. Numerous research articles confirm that when we are committed to wellness activities we can welcome improved health, quality of life and longevity.

I once heard the story of a school teacher who noticed an injured worm laboriously crawling across the floor of his classroom. The back part of the worm was dead and dried up, but was still attached to the living part by just a thin thread. As the teacher studied the strange sight of the poor worm pulling its dead part across the floor, a little girl ran in and noticed it there. Picking it up, she said, "Oh, little worm, when are you going to lose that dead part so you can really live?" There's a life lesson in this story for each of us. Are you dragging any "dead parts"? "SMART" goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) focusing on health and wellness certainly can move us to caring for the living parts!

It is critical that teachers avail themselves of ongoing health and wellness opportunities that can support and strengthen them through the myriad of challenging experiences they must face on a daily basis. It is teachers with their knowledge, experience and foresight that bring hope and inspiration to the world of tomorrow. As every experience impacts and registers itself on our body and energy system we need to focus on our response to these life events and on what we can do to remain passionate and proactive every step of the way.

Actively investing in a constant goal of supporting and/or improving teachers' overall health raises awareness of quality of life, invites ongoing participation, and provides measurable outcomes. Stressors that inevitably can lead to early onset of illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer will be reduced. Underlying these diseases are social trends that reduce physical activity, increase calorie consumption and the continued use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. Provincial Health Authorities are

great models for us with their newly established no smoking policies. Examples of school goals include:

- Promoting at least one wellness activity for teachers in each school
- Promoting policy development that encourages opportunities to integrate prevention and wellness programs for teachers
- Hosting wellness days for teachers with measurable outcomes
- Recognizing the teachers and schools who promote a culture of wellness and disease prevention in their professional environments.

What do you do for a living?

How many times do we introduce ourselves by saying our name and occupation, or have met someone who asks “What do you do for a living?” When you answer, “I am a teacher”, most people know that you are in a profession dedicated to promoting personal growth, sharing wisdom, demonstrating appreciation for students while guiding them towards their potential. EAP workshops address personal growth, bring support and provide the latest in wellness research to teachers.

Goals are about moving out of your comfort zone and applying them to the many dimensions of your life. Having mini goals for each day can be very helpful in preparing for the larger goals. Looking back and listing your past successes can instill the confidence needed to move forward. Tracking your success can be helpful as it reminds you to do daily/weekly activities that will help achieve your goals. A goal is to focus your energy on what you can do, not what you can't do. It is good to anticipate hurdles and view them as an opportunity to learn.

It is a challenge to take the time to set goals, but if we do not chart out our own journey, someone else will. It is important to be clear about goals and be certain their attainment will take you where you want to go. There is the story about a couple in their sixties walking along the beach. The man finds a bottle and on removing the cork a genie pops out and says, “I will give you each one wish.” The women said that they had been poor most of their lives and she wished for great riches. Poof! She was rich. Next the genie turned to the man. “I wish I had a wife thirty years younger than I am” and “poof” the man was 90 years old!

What is something I can do this week to focus on wellness?

There are many areas from which to choose, so let's start with something as basic and necessary as food. It is always helpful to review your food intake. Here are the facts:

- The same foods that are heart-healthy are brain-healthy, so avoid artery-clogging saturated fat and try for omega-3 fatty acids, found in foods like fish and nuts.
- Eat dark-skinned fruits and vegetables, which are particularly high in brain-healthy vitamins, E and C.
- Many research studies are reporting that eating dark-green leafy vegetables, such as spinach, improves cognitive function.
- B vitamins and folic acid, found in cereals, breads and fruits such as strawberries, are important for overall health.
- Foods such as apples, almonds, blueberries, broccoli, red beans, salmon, spinach, sweet potatoes, and vegetable juice can go a long way to helping us stay on the wellness path.

Reflection Time

Whatever you choose as an intentional start to your wellness commitment remember also the value of reflection time – time that gives us inspiration as to how we can grow and make a difference in the world. I would like to end with a thought provoking and inspiring reflection:

“People can be unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends, and some true enemies; be successful anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, others may be jealous; be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is up to you. It was never between you and them anyway.”

(adapted from Mother Teresa)

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