



Introduction

Wellness Overload

The two biggest sellers in any bookstore are the cookbooks and the diet books. The cookbooks tell you how to prepare the food and the diet books tell you how not to eat any of it.

—ANDY ROONEY

Diet anxiety. Millions of people have it. Are you one of them? You feel the pressure to look good, feel good—and not succumb to an early death from cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, or any of the other cataclysmic diseases just waiting to strike those who don't follow the latest diet or spend a month's worth of paychecks on the latest piece of exercise equipment.

Can you relate?

Perhaps you've tried to buy a book on "wellness," thinking it's time to join the rest of the world and finally get healthy, get fit, and get in shape! So there you are, surveying the "health" section of your local bookstore, trying to find a really simple-to-understand and easy-to-practice book on wellness. But you are inundated by a hundred "health" books, seventy "diet" books, fifty diet-recipe books, and another twenty-five exercise-diet-health-recipe books (many of them with matching videos).

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On TV, the Internet, and via any of twenty or more health-related magazines, you're barraged with information on similar topics—diets from Atkins to the Zone, supplements from aloe to zinc, alternative therapies from acupuncture to yoga, as well as spas and other “wellness centers” that promise the moon for the right price.

Many Americans feel overwhelmed by the constant barrage of information regarding what to eat, what not to eat, how to exercise, and how to avoid contracting disease. Rather than “health information,” we are constantly bombarded with “ill-health information” that is focused more on what's going to kill us than on positive ways to look better and feel better. What a comfort it would be to learn that we can improve not only our health but also our well-being in substantial ways—without all of the stress. We can—but we don't necessarily need to join a gym, buy a new weight-lifting machine, or even commit to the newest crazy diet. We can dramatically improve our health with simple, inexpensive, and enjoyable activities—many of which we're doing already! It is possible to live a wonderful and healthy life... simply.

This book is designed to help you relax and not become overly stressed by the news reports that would pressure you into expensive or difficult activities that you *must* do in order to save your health. Our desire is to cut through the barrage of wellness approaches, diet plans, and workout infomercials to embrace the simple patterns of health that will bring the greatest long-term results—a life characterized by wholeness, happiness, and peace. We want to motivate you to move from feeling overloaded by wellness ideas to the realization that you *can* live a simple, happy, and healthy life.

WHAT IS WELLNESS?

Of course, it is assumed that you want to be healthy. We all want to be well. But very few of us have stopped to think through the question, *What is wellness, anyway?* And, *Is wellness really attainable for the average person?* We believe wellness *is* attainable for you, which is why we want to present the material in this book in a way that is

understandable, reachable, and even fun for you to pursue. Let's face it, very few of us will ever have the body of Brad Pitt or the beauty of Jennifer Aniston, but it is possible to reach a state of wellness that is just right for you, the wholeness for which you were created. And you do not have to eat tofu for the rest of your life or spend \$1,000 on the latest Ab Buster machine to do it.

Most people probably think of wellness in primarily physical terms—in which case good nutrition, hydration, clean air, exercise, and rest are the main issues. Some would add in a mental factor, as in the “mind-body connection,” and emphasize that true wellness is only possible when a person is healthy in both body and mind. But we would add that spiritual health is also essential.

In fact, we think that true wellness involves *four* arenas of life: body, mind, spirit, and social relationships. This is because we are all persons with bodies, minds, and spirits who live in the context of relationships—whether we are speaking of one-on-one friendships or our relationship to the entire human race.

Our basis for making this statement is our Judeo-Christian perspective. You will find many of the health-producing practices promoted in this book in the teachings of Moses and the Old Testament prophets and by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. The Old Testament word for *wellness* is *shalom*, which is often translated “peace” even though its much broader meaning is “whole.” The New Testament word is *soteria*, which is often translated “salvation.” This word is best understood in the context of healing, health, and wellness. As you conclude this book, you will discover the inner peace and self-acceptance that you seek. Follow the simple principles found in this book, and your health and wellness will improve in amazing ways.

YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR WELLNESS!

Our goal is to help you improve your overall sense of wellness by reinforcing the health-enhancing habits you already practice and by

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showing you how to improve in areas that need it—some of which you might not have even considered to be related to wellness.

For example, what does laughter or a good sense of humor have to do with wellness? Or how might recreation or relaxation, anxiety or bitterness play a part? Gratitude, a sense of direction and purpose, or appreciation of beauty—can these really contribute to your overall health in the same way that good nutrition does? Or how do volunteering in your community, generosity, and intimate friendships help you become *and stay* healthy... regardless of how much you weigh?

This is not another diet-exercise-recipe book, but it *is* a “recipe” for wellness, with multiple points to ponder and actions to pursue. It can help you make immediate improvements to your health and wellness, as well as act as a springboard for lifelong changes that will improve your quality of life over time. From exercise to volunteering, you will learn the best and simplest solutions established by science, espoused by experts, and endorsed by Scripture to help lead you to patterns of health in your life. Here are some of the topics we will cover:

- Spiritual health
- A good night’s sleep
- Exercise
- Laughter
- Music
- Playtime
- Healthy relationships

Improvement in your overall sense of wellness does not have to be as complicated or as expensive as you might have been led to believe by all those ads and articles. You can improve your life and wellness by placing your focus back on the things that many of us have forgotten—the simple things in life: a good book, a hearty belly laugh, a favorite song, even a long nap on a Sunday afternoon. Practicing wellness may be easier than you ever expected.

OUR CREDIBILITY AND CREDENTIALS

Almost all of what we will say is supported by modern scientific evidence. Where appropriate, we will summarize pertinent studies and cite them so that you can look them up on your own. Altogether we have been involved with more than two dozen books and scores of articles, most of them in the arena of spirituality and health. Harold has been practicing medicine for more than twenty years and is on the faculty at Duke University as professor of psychiatry and associate professor of medicine. He is codirector and founder of the Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health at Duke University. He is the editor-in-chief of both the *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* and *Science & Theology News*. His research on religion, health, and ethical issues in medicine has been highlighted in *Reader's Digest*, *Prevention Magazine*, *McCall's*, *Time*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and many other popular national periodicals. Some of his latest books are *The Healing Power of Faith: Science Explores Medicine's Last Great Frontier*, *The Healing Connection*, and *New Light on Depression*, which he coauthored with Dave.

Dave holds a doctorate in personal wholeness from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and has been in the ministry since 1974. He has edited Christian medical magazines since 1990—most recently, Focus on the Family's *Physician* magazine (2000–2002) and, since 1992, *Today's Christian Doctor* for the Christian Medical & Dental Associations. He has written extensively in the field of renewal and the journey from brokenness toward wholeness. His most recent involvements include health education.

We offer this brief review of our credentials not to impress anybody, but to let you know that we are in touch with the latest scientific data and other information that you need to know in order to understand how you can have health without the hype, wellness without overload. In terms of the “voices” we'll use, when we say “we,” it means we agree on a particular topic. When we disagree, or just

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wish to express our personal viewpoints, we will make that clear by designating who is speaking.

One thing we *do* agree upon is that we want to help you experience an increased sense of wellness as a result of reading this book and implementing its concepts. But keep in mind, as you read, that there is no such thing as *perfect* wellness. Wellness is dynamic and uniquely defined by each individual. It changes with age, time, and sometimes with circumstances, as in situations when someone may have a terminal illness yet still have a profound sense of wellness that defies human logic. Your sense of wellness will be uniquely your own, and we are here to help you find it.

ESTABLISHING YOUR OWN BASELINE

Because your own wellness can really only be defined for *you*, we would like you to have a baseline idea of how well you are before you get too far into the text. To do so, we have created the “wellness quiz” that appears here and again at the end of the book. A baseline is usually a measurement or score determined at the beginning of a process—for example, a process of medical treatment, which gives the people involved a way of tracking progress as the process continues.

To use this quiz most effectively, before you answer the questions, estimate on a scale of 100 your current overall level of wellness (your wellness quotient). Write that number where asked in the questionnaire. Then answer the questions, compute the results, and see how your total compares with your estimate. After you have read the book and implemented the wellness-enhancing suggestions found in its pages, you will have an opportunity to take the same quiz again and see how your wellness quotient has changed.

We encourage you to read through each chapter at a rate that works best for you in order to absorb and apply the principles to your own life. Read it with a view toward your own wellness, and do not compare yourself with anyone else who may seem to “have it all together.” No one, not even those hard bodies and fitness gurus on

TV, will ever experience *perfect* wellness this side of heaven. But that gives us something to look forward to when we get there!

In the meantime, we do believe that there are ways that everyone can improve their wellness quotient in the areas of the body, mind, spirit, and relationships. This is what we want for you as you read through the pages of this book—a new and renewed sense of personal wellness and contentment with who you are and were created to be.

WELLNESS QUIZ

Your wellness quotient estimate: _____

Before you begin the questionnaire, estimate your current wellness quotient (your current overall level of wellness) on a scale of 100, and write it on the line above. Then compare it to the total after you answer the questions.

Answer the questions below before you start reading the book. Enter one number for each question, using the scale of 1-5 below in terms of the degree to which a statement is true of you. If something is *never true*, just leave it blank or enter a zero. After answering all the questions, add your score. The total is your current “wellness quotient.” See note below regarding our view of how to understand and use this score.

- 1 *Not usually true*
- 2 *Sometimes true*
- 3 *Maybe/can't decide*
- 4 *Usually true of me*
- 5 *Always true*

1. I enjoy a good laugh or good humor. _____
2. I exercise my mind by engaging in creative activity or problem solving. _____
3. I try to manage my stress instead of letting it manage me. _____

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4. I get enough sleep and exercise. _____
5. I eat and drink healthy things, do not use tobacco, and use alcohol in moderation or not at all. _____
6. I avoid fad diets. _____
7. I try to keep my living environment as healthy as possible. _____
8. I monitor my health via various means, including regular medical and dental checkups. _____
9. I have at least one friend in whom I can confide. _____
10. I am satisfied with what I have and am thankful for it. _____
11. I find pleasure (or a sense of satisfaction) in my work. _____
12. I value my family relationships and try to protect them through faithfulness and reconciliation. _____
13. I have a sense of purpose, direction, and meaning in life. _____
14. I am a generous and kind person, concerned for those in need (humans and/or animals). _____
15. I work with others to achieve more cooperatively than we might achieve individually. _____
16. I am a happy and optimistic person, savoring life in the present tense. _____
17. My faith in God brings a sense of peace and helps me during times of adversity. _____
18. I engage in religious activities such as prayer, Bible study, devotional reading, or worship. _____
19. I have accepted my own mortality—knowing that I will someday die. _____

20. I have hope, not only in the present tense, but also a hope of eternal life when this life is over. _____

Total: My wellness quotient today is: _____

Date: ____ / ____ / ____

This is not a scientific questionnaire, just twenty questions related to wellness. We have observed that people with a score of less than 70 realize that there is room for improvement, and we hope the information in this book will help them make those changes. People with scores of 70–80 have a healthy level of perceived wellness, though there is still room for improvement. People with scores of 80–90 are likely enjoying optimum wellness, while they are also most likely lifelong learners and pursuers of good health. Scores higher than 90 suggest that the individuals involved might benefit by closely reexamining the areas they scored as always true of them, with a view toward whether or not their perception is overly optimistic. Sometimes a trusted friend who knows you well can help with this.



Chapter 1

Laugh Yourself Healthy

Maintaining a Good Sense of Humor

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.

—PROVERBS 17:22, KJV

A man takes his Rottweiler to the vet. “My dog is cross-eyed. Is there anything you can do for him?” “Well,” says the vet, “let’s have a look at him.” So he picks the dog up and examines his eyes, then checks his teeth. Finally, he says, “I’m going to have to put him down.” “What? Because he’s cross-eyed?” “No, because he’s really heavy.”

Are you laughing yet? We certainly hope so, because a good belly laugh is one of the best things you can do for yourself—physically, emotionally, socially, and even spiritually.

One of the simplest ways to improve your quality of life immediately is to laugh. A sense of humor is essential to wellness, and it may even contribute to longevity. As the saying goes, “He who laughs, lasts!” Since the time of Solomon, and surely before, humans have known that “laughter is good medicine.” Let’s take a look at some of the greatest benefits laughter can bring into our lives.

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PHYSICAL BENEFITS

In 1979, Norman Cousins, then editor of the *Saturday Review*, published his book *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*, which remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than forty weeks. The book describes the author's miraculous recovery from a normally incurable, totally debilitating, and extremely painful disease. "In a sense," he wrote, "I was coming unstuck. I had considerable difficulty in moving my limbs and even in turning over in bed. Nodules appeared on my body, gravel-like substances under the skin, indicating the systemic nature of the disease. At the low point of my illness, my jaws were almost locked."

How did Norman Cousins recover from such a devastating disease? He laughed. And that's no joke! After taking himself off all prescriptions except intravenous vitamin C, he *laughed his way back to health* by watching episodes of *Candid Camera* provided by his friend Allen Funt, viewing old Marx Brothers films, and having his nurse read to him from books of humor during the late night hours. "I made the joyous discovery," he wrote, "that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep."¹

Norman Cousins, who died in 1990, spent the last years of his life as a faculty member of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine, teaching doctors-in-the-making about what Walter B. Cannon had called the "wisdom of the body." This wisdom was also a favorite theme of our late friend and mentor, Dr. Paul Brand, coauthor of *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* and *In His Image*. Surely, the ability of our bodies to maintain health and to heal themselves when necessary, given proper nutrition and other things they need—including positive emotions arising from laughter—is a gift from God, the author of the body's wisdom, as well as the inventor of laughter.

The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle, or sneeze. Humor can cause a domino effect of laugh-

ter, which brings numerous positive physical effects to the human body. Here are just a few:

Muscle relaxation

The next time you have a good belly laugh, notice how your muscles behave. When you are laughing, the muscles that are not participating in the laughter immediately relax. And as soon as you finish laughing, those muscles that were participating in the laughter relax, too. According to Dr. Paul E. McGhee, research suggests that muscle relaxation almost inevitably results from a good belly laugh. One study that Dr. McGhee cited even showed that people using a biofeedback apparatus were able to relax their muscles more quickly after watching funny cartoons than after looking at beautiful scenery.²

Activation of the immune system and reduction of stress

This may seem obvious, but laughter is a great stress reliever, and the research seems to prove it. Dr. Lee Berk and Dr. Stanley Tan demonstrated in a 1996 study that after exposure to humor that caused “large doses of mirthful laughter,” the immune system kicked into overdrive for at least twenty-four hours, protecting the person from common colds, germs, or other bacteria that might otherwise have made him sick. In addition, there was a drastic reduction of at least four stress-causing hormones in the bodies of these “laughter participants.”³

Pain reduction

In one study published by the *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, patients were told one-liners before painful medication was administered and after surgery. The results suggested that those who were exposed to humor perceived less pain when compared with patients who did not receive a “dose” of humor as part of their therapy.⁴ According to Dr. Paul McGhee, in another study of thirty-five patients in a rehabilitation hospital, 74 percent agreed with the statement, “Sometimes laughing works as well as a pain pill.”⁵ These patients had such conditions as traumatic brain injury, spinal cord

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injury, arthritis, limb amputations, and a range of other neurological or musculoskeletal disorders—so they knew what pain meant, and it meant something when they said that laughter helped. Perhaps Groucho Marx was right when he said, “A clown is like an aspirin, only he works twice as fast.”

Cardiorespiratory exercise

Laughter also provides an excellent source of cardiac exercise. The next time you are having a good belly laugh, put your hand over your heart when you finally stop laughing. You will notice that your heart is racing, even after just fifteen to twenty seconds of laughter, and it will remain elevated for three to five minutes. This has caused some physicians to refer to laughter as “internal jogging.” You can give your heart a good workout several times a day just by laughing! One physician noted that his patients who said they laugh regularly have lower resting heart rates.⁶

According to Dr. Paul McGhee, recent research indicates that laughter also lowers blood pressure. As your heart beats more rapidly during laughter, it pumps more blood through your system, producing the familiar flushed cheeks. Not surprisingly, blood pressure increases during laughter, with larger increases corresponding to more intense and longer lasting laughs. If this were sustained for hours or days, it might be harmful. But when laughter stops, blood pressure drops back down to its baseline, and many times, below its usual baseline.⁷

Laughter also gives our bodies a good workout. It is great for your diaphragm as well as your abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg, and back muscles. It massages your abdominal organs, tones your intestinal functioning, and strengthens the muscles that hold the abdominal organs in place. Not only does laughter give your midsection a workout, but it can also benefit digestion and absorption functioning, as well. It is estimated that hearty laughter can burn Calories equivalent to several minutes on the rowing machine or an exercise bike.⁸

Authors' Note: For the remainder of this book, whenever we refer to the word Calorie within the context of energy released, we capital-

ize it. Calorie (or kilocalorie) is used to measure the amount of heat needed to change the temperature of 1 kg of water from 14.5C to 15.5C. It is commonly used in metabolic studies and in reference to human nutrition.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Movie star Kevin Costner once made this profound statement, “Life’s better when it’s fun. Boy, that’s deep, isn’t it?”⁹ Kevin Costner was on to something! The benefits of laughter make life “better” all around—not just physically, but psychologically and emotionally as well.

Humor is a powerful emotional medicine that can lower stress, dissolve anger, and unite families in troubled times. Our mood is elevated when we look for humor, even in difficult and frustrating situations. Laughing at the situation and at ourselves helps to reveal that small things are not always the earth-shattering events they seem to be at the time. Looking at a problem from a different perspective can make it seem less formidable and can even help us to find a solution we might not have otherwise seen. Laughter helps us to connect with others and feel less alone.

In psychological terms, laughter helps us to cope not just with work- or stress-related situations, but also with other negative emotional states such as anger, frustration, a sense of helplessness, sadness or depression, embarrassment, shame, or inadequacy. The ability to step back and laugh at yourself or the situation can blow away all of those dark clouds pretty fast.

SOCIOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Dr. Tom Evans once stated, “Laughter is great. Psychologically, sociologically, it’s a wonderful tool. It builds trust. It breaks ice. It brings us together. It reaffirms our humanness. Look for opportunities to laugh at yourself or with other people. You have the opportunity to respond with anger or with humor when frustrating situations come your way. Humor is a much better choice for your health!”¹⁰

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Would you rather spend the next three hours with a sourpuss or with someone with a vibrant sense of humor? If you answered, “Sourpuss,” then you are in dire need of a good dose of Gary Larson’s *Far Side* cartoons. By the way, which one is your favorite? Dave’s favorite is the one in which one deer comments on the bull’s-eye birthmark on the chest of the other deer, “Bummer of a birthmark, Hal.”

In terms of your relationships with other people, nobody is perfect—not you, your spouse, your family members, your friends, your colleagues at work—so the right kind of humor at the right time can help defuse tensions when they arise. If you want to test this, slap on a rubber clown’s nose the next time someone tries to pick an argument with you, and just see what happens!

In group settings, humor helps people relax and contribute. Sometimes it even “greases the skids” for open and honest communication in situations where group participants might otherwise feel uncomfortable saying how they really feel. Humor helps others to open up, just as the bartender in the Old West did to a horse that came into the saloon by asking, “Why the long face?”

SPIRITUAL BENEFITS

Unfortunately, many people think that most Christians live in fear that someone, somewhere, is having a good time. But this perception should not be true of believers in Jesus, who frequently laughed and expressed a sense of humor. A healthy, wholesome sense of humor is a reflection of the “joy of the Lord.” In fact, the Bible contains a wide variety of humor, and Jesus often expressed a sense of humor, as traced thoroughly by author Leslie Flynn in his book *Serve Him With Mirth*. “I found humor in approximately sixty of the sixty-six books of the Bible,” wrote Flynn. He found biblical examples of wit, satire, irony, ridicule, play on words, and other forms of humor employed by prophets, apostles, and some of them even by Jesus Himself.¹¹ Laughter can sometimes be a sign of our faith; even in the tough times, we can laugh in the face of adversity because we know that God is in control.

In his article “The Winsome Witness,” Chuck Swindoll writes, “If

you ask me, I think it is often just as sacred to laugh as it is to pray.” He gives examples of famous Christian theologians and preachers such as Luther and Spurgeon who loved to laugh. Spurgeon, he says, “infected people with cheer germs. Those who caught the disease found their load lighter and their Christianity brighter.”¹²

Without doubt, modern believers do well when they strive to lighten the loads of their fellow human beings through spreading “cheer germs” in the name of Jesus. Good humor and the laughter that goes with it enhance wellness—physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually.

So, how can you make laughter a greater part of your life? Here are a few ideas for brightening the world around you through humor and laughter:

- Spend time with people who help you to laugh. In a family setting, try having a “joke night” often.
- Watch or read humor on television or in movies, plays, books, or comic strips.
- Don’t sweat the small stuff. Try using a humorous calendar, such as a Far Side calendar by Gary Larson, on your desk to help keep things in perspective.
- When work is getting to you, take a laugh break instead of a coffee break. Take some time out to read jokes on the Internet or listen to a comedy CD in your car.
- Keep a file of good jokes handy in case of a “humor emergency”!
- Visit humorous Web sites on the Internet. Keep the best Web sites bookmarked for later. One such site is <http://jokes.christiansunite.com>, but there are others. It’s a matter of your own taste in humor!
- Share what you find with others, and very soon you’ll be forming a comedy club of your own!

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So, what's *your* plan? Write it out here.

My Plan

Three things I will do today to make laughter a part of my life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Three things I will do within the next three months to make laughter a part of my life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Three things I will do within the next six months to make laughter a part of my life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Today's date: _____ / _____ / _____