Paths Connecting Mind, Body and Spirit

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Wellness is often defined as the connection of mind, body, and spirit. It is often viewed as the optimal integration of mental, emotional and behavioral abilities that enhance resilience and support our beliefs and values.

Experts define the human spirit as “that which reflects the essential core of an individual.” It is the deepest part of ourselves and said to have the capacities for autonomy, self-awareness, and creativity, as well as the ability to love and be loved.\(^1\) The mind represents our cognitive functioning and capacities. The spirit is a special element of depth which motivates and energizes us.

The growing body of work in neuroscience is finding that the distinction of body, mind and spirit are blurred terms that we use to try and make sense of the complexity of human well-being. The research also shows that ethereal things such as thoughts and feelings tie all three of these domains together as our thoughts stimulate deep beliefs and are expressed viscerally in the body.\(^2\)

The mind, body, spirit connection emphasizes the need for creating balance, wholeness and coherence in our lives. Without such integration the human body struggles to maintain optimal well-being.

Contemplation
Contemplation is one way to maintain the connections to our human spirit. Contemplation means to consider something with attention. This can refer to thinking, journaling, reading, writing, walking, or whatever allows us to focus our attention on one aspect of our environment or life. It is a way of getting in touch with and strengthening our human spirit and resilience.\(^1,2\)

Life is about change and change can be overwhelming. Any shifts in our comfortable existence may cause stress and anxiety in our lives. Feelings of stress are caused by the instinct to protect and defend ourselves. Any type of change, good and bad, can make us feel out of control. It is how we react to these challenges that can create serious adverse effects. Do we cope with ease, or do we collapse into feelings of helplessness?

There are many paths to being aware, intent, and mindful of our inner thoughts and external surroundings. Such activities as reading, journaling, listening to music, performing music, prayer and meditation, walking, running, sailing, and talking with family and friends can support and strengthen our spirit.

Meditation
Meditation is an ancient practice experienced by people from many different traditions and philosophies. In recent years, articles about meditation have appeared in magazines such as Time and Newsweek, talking about the many positive benefits, including dealing with stress and improving well-being. Meditation has also been shown to help cope with medical conditions such as pain, heart disease, and cancer and even to help increase immunity.

Meditation research has found that focused walking meditations are highly efficient at reducing anxiety and elicits the relaxation response. This effect has significant long term health benefits, including lowering blood pressure and breathing rates, reduced incidents of chronic pain, reduction of insomnia, improved fertility. To those in deep sorrow, walking the labyrinth gives solace and peace. Regular meditative practice leads to easier concentration and a sense of control and efficiency in one’s life. It is a road to self-knowledge, creating balance and harmony. It is a tool for problem solving, relieving stress, and anxiety.\(^3\)

Although breathing meditation is often practiced while sitting, we can also practice walking meditation. Active meditations are meditation in action. They use the physical, mental and emotional experience of movement to increase awareness. In active meditation we notice the parts of our body that touch the ground and subtle aspects of body movement. Common active meditations include yoga and martial arts, such as tai chi and chi gong.

Guided meditations and visualizations are often led by a soothing, calming voice. Visualization is often used to focus on achieving goals, especially in sports. Meditative visualization is intended to calm and quiet the body and mind. Scenes from nature are often used in guided meditations.

Walking the Labyrinth
Walking the labyrinth is a wonderful meditation for practicing mindfulness, relaxation and contemplation, while enjoying our external environment. It brings our awareness into the present moment and us connects to nature.

Labyrinths have been around for over 4,000 years and have been an integral part of many cultures such as Native American, Greek, Celtic and Mayan. The Hopi called the labyrinth the symbol for “mother earth” and equated it with the Kiva. Like Stonehenge and
the pyramids, they are magical geometric forms that define sacred space. 4

Many labyrinths exist today in churches and parks to provide people with a meditative way to relieve stress. Labyrinths can now also be found in retreat centers, hospitals, prisons, parks, airports and community centers. There are around 2,000 permanent labyrinths in the United States alone. 4

Mazes and labyrinths both have ancient origins and are often confused. Both have become popular in contemporary culture, but, their objectives and strategies are different.

A labyrinth is not a maze. A maze is like a puzzle to be solved. It has twists, turns and blind alleys. It is a left brain task that requires logical, sequential, analytical activity to find the correct path into the maze and out. Mazes create challenges through forked routes and dead ends. In a maze, the goal is to find one’s way through the confusion of multiple paths to an exit, often with the added objective of finding the shortest or quickest route.

A labyrinth is an ancient, geometric pattern that has a single path that leads into the center and out again. Labyrinths were originally based on a circle, the ancient symbol for healing, unity and wholeness. Walking the labyrinth involves the right brain, the creative and intuitive mind and can be calming and balancing. It is a cyclic path of unity and wholeness, and as long as one persists, can take us where we wish to go. With a labyrinth there is only one choice to be made. The choice is to enter or not.

The walls of a maze are usually high enough to prevent visualization of the paths and exit. It is easy to feel lost in a maze, but a maze also offers challenges and thrills that the labyrinth does not. The labyrinth design contributes to a calming and thought provoking experience. The labyrinth walls serve to define the path, are low, and do not block the view of the destination. Interestingly, mazes are said to be run, whereas labyrinths are walked.

From a business prospective, labyrinths and mazes are used in team-building programs and experiences, during transitions, to reduce stress, to increase and enhance communication, and to resolve conflicts. Recently, labyrinths have been incorporated in healing gardens and have become popular landscape elements in cancer treatment centers. 5

Throughout history gardens have been used to aid in the recovery process. Evolving interest in complementary and alternative therapies, which emphasizes healing the whole person, has launched a variety of research studies and revived gardens with labyrinths and mazes as a component of healing. A relaxing garden has been shown to aid in relaxation and meditative states that tend to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, slow heart rate and breathing, and provide an overall calming effect. 3, 5

The labyrinth is a spiritual tool that has many applications in various settings. It reduces stress, quiets the mind and opens the heart. It is a walking meditation. There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth. The process is open to our creativity and provides time for reflection. 9

Walking a labyrinth is a gift we can give to ourselves. The turns of the labyrinth are thought to balance the two hemispheres of the brain, resulting in physical and emotional healing. A labyrinth journey can lead to discovery, insight, peacefulness, happiness, connectedness, and well-being.

As Einstein once noted, the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. In today’s busy world, we have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift. It is up to each of us to take time and listen to the still voice within ourselves and discover a path to our own true spirit.

**References**