The Wellness Project is Ahead of the Curve

The 2004-2005 activities for the AANA Wellness Initiative coordinated by project director Dirk Wales concentrated on issues that promote a balanced state of mental, spiritual, and physical well-being, and culminated in an expert panel recommendation to establish the structure for the new AANA Wellness Program. In August 2005, the Council on Public Interest in Anesthesia (CPIA) accepted the challenge of implementing the Wellness Program and developing future strategies and activities.

In the development phase of the Wellness Program, research revealed the fascinating exploration of ideas and academic study related to the emotional state of being happy and overall wellness—the “science of happiness.” Research shows that happier people are healthier, more successful, harder-working, more caring, and more socially engaged. The evolving science of happiness encompasses theories relating to positive psychology, neurobiological and chemical function, genetics, adaptation, philosophy, and religion, and it focuses on understanding the attributes of self actualization, positive emotions, and healthy character traits.

Taking Care of Our Colleagues and Ourselves

Putting into action the belief that we all need to take care of our colleagues and ourselves, the Wellness Program sponsored a wellness booth during the 2005 Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. In summarizing the wellness activities, Wales observed: “One of the most overused, hackneyed happiness sayings is that a journey of 1,000 miles begins with the first step...and that happiness is a journey, not a destination. Yet, everyday happiness suits the Wellness Program. We took our first public baby steps at the wellness booth at the Annual Meeting.”

According to Wales, he, Margie Gale, and Penny Zeigler, advisory panel members; Brent Sommer, CRNA, MPHA, wellness advocate; and members of the Peer Assistance Advisory Committee spoke with approximately 1,800 people at the meeting. “They were curious, delighted, inquiring, pleased, and surprised that we were there. Surprised in that we were unexpected, and had so much to offer. After all, the Wellness Initiative was only inaugurated a year ago, and here it was...in a booth, answering questions, offering good wishes with wellness amulets, checking stress levels with stress cards, giving away wellness greeting cards, and offering a short list of some good books to read. The Wellness Program aims to provide awareness and offer suggestions and resources to assist everyone. It’s part of the journey and taking the steps. But in all honesty, we cannot call this the first wellness milestone, because that was the meeting of the Blue Ribbon Panel of Advisors in Chicago. They made recommendations, and the AANA is running with them...milestones in the making.”

So, What Do You Have to Do to Find Happiness?

For centuries, philosophers and poets have tried to understand what happiness is, and what might contribute to an individual’s happy state of mind. In recent years, scientists have started to come up with some answers. There is a consensus in this young field that while money may not necessarily buy happiness, lack of hope and opportunity correlates strongly with unhappiness. In addition, people with active lifestyles who enjoy intellectual and physical exercise report high levels of happiness. It’s not just the money; it is being active, being creative, and experiencing a sense of competence and control of your life that contributes to the meaning in one’s life. As Aristotle explained, happiness is a way of traveling, not a destination.

Are you living a productive and meaningful life? Are you satisfied with your life? Do you work on a cause that is important to you? Are you really passionate about something, and are you bringing your personal strengths to bear on it? Do you know why you are here?

According to psychologist Martin Seligman, PhD, author of Authentic Happiness, if you answer “yes” to these questions, chances are that you are already a happy person. His findings support recent studies showing that subjective well-being depends little on such “good things” in life as...
Happiness seems to relate more directly to how you live your life with what you have. (Read more at Seligman’s website, www.authentichappiness.com.)

Ambition and desire can help us or hurt us. They help when they move us to achieve positive and worthy goals. But, unrestrained ambition and desire can become a constant source of unhappiness unless there is a balance in how one approaches life. Studies show that at some point during materialistic gains and self-fulfillment, it is necessary to find contentment and gratification in order to maintain a level of happiness.

According to researchers, gratification is derived from rising to the challenges posed by family, work, and other responsibilities or duties. But, in order to be gratified, you have to be in a receptive mode. Likewise, contentment does not result from a perfect job, perfect family or a perfect society. Instead, contentment results from feeling that you are trying your best. You recognize what your strengths are, and you are putting them to good use.

Other studies have suggested that individuals tend to gravitate around their own level of happiness. For example, the lottery winners are not much happier than the rest of the population. It seems that your internal “sensor” guides you to what makes you feel fulfilled, engaged, and meaningfully happy. You have a happiness thermostat in your mind to adjust to the “ups and downs” caused by life events.

Working as a nurse anesthetist offers a lot of opportunities and often provides a system of challenges and a sense of being in control. In taking steps to improve your own wellness quotient, consider the science of happiness. To quote Seligman, “The time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotions, building strength and virtue, and providing guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the ‘good life.’”

Happiness depends upon ourselves.

The Council for Public Interest in Anesthesia (CPIA) promotes patient safety through consumer education and practitioner risk reduction strategies. AANA Director of Practice Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP, is the primary staff member responsible for the CPIA’s activities and the Wellness Project, as well as the staffing of the AANA Peer Assistance Advisors Committee. Questions and comments may be addressed to stunajek@aana.com or (847) 655 1115.