Creating Positive Health: It’s More Than Risk Reduction

Craig Becker, PhD, CWP,
East Carolina University

William McPeck, MSW, CWPC, WLCP, CWWS,
Certified Worksite Wellness Program Consultant

Copyright 2013, National Wellness Institute, Inc.

No part of this document may be distributed, reproduced or posted without the express written permission of the National Wellness Institute.

National Wellness Institute
PO Box 827
Stevens Point WI 54481
nwi@nationalwellness.org

Note: The contents of this paper are presented to create discussion in the wellness industry on this topic; the contents of this paper are not to be considered an adopted standard of any kind. This does not represent the official position of the National Wellness Institute.
Creating Positive Health:  
It’s More Than Risk Reduction  
Craig Becker, PhD, CWP, East Carolina University  
William McPeck, MSW, CWPC, WLCP, CWWS, Certified Worksite Wellness Program Consultant

Wouldn’t it be great if health and wellness professionals looked for the causes of a better life and higher productivity instead of the causes of problems? It seems current health professionals have a greater focus on disease and problems than health, well-being, and success.

Today, many think of health as pictured by John Travis’ 1970s Illness–Wellness Continuum that showed early death on one side and high-level wellness on the other (Travis and Ryan, 2004). Even so, today’s approach to health and wellness is still based on what is wrong, instead of what is right. Pathogenesis, the scientific study of disease origins, has created this focus. Pathogenesis, which measures health by the incidence of problems, has guided the efforts of today’s health professionals. Success with this approach therefore becomes a return to the status quo through the avoidance or elimination of problems and/or deaths rather than the creation of desired positive outcomes beyond the absence of disease.

**Figure 1**

Instead of aiming for a return to the status quo, a focus on positive health would move us beyond the status quo toward outcomes that exceed expectations. While risk reduction and health maintenance are noble, it is time to move the focus and efforts toward positive health potential through improved physical, mental, and social capabilities.

Halbert Dunn (1961) initially introduced positive health as wellness in 1959, describing wellness as “not a relatively flat, uninteresting area of ‘unsickness’ but rather a fascinating and ever-changing panorama of life itself.” Esteemed psychologist Martin Seligman (2008) described positive health as a definable and measurable state beyond the mere absence of disease that is a combination of excellent biological, subjective, and functional status.

Evidence indicates that positive health is a relative, dynamic state consciously created by engaging in actions and thoughts in the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, vocational, and environmental areas (Becker et al., 2009). To achieve and continually improve positive health, a supportive, nurturing, and encouraging environment must be consciously and thoughtfully developed and improved continuously.
Travis’s continuum has early death and wellness on the same axis and this has created some confusion. Early Death and High Level Wellness are not opposites, but independent states. Eliminating negative conditions does not create positive conditions. For example, eliminating dissatisfaction does not create satisfaction (Herzberg, 2003) and eliminating depression does not create joy (Compton, 2005), nor does ending disease create positive health (Becker, Dolbier, Durham, Glascoff, and Adams, 2008). Positive states must be actively created with conscious effort.

To create positive states, specific efforts must be taken and the aim of these actions cannot be to just eliminate problems. To more clearly demonstrate the independence of positive and negative states, a more appropriate model would show positives and negatives on different axes. (See Figure 2.) A video presentation explaining this two-dimensional model is provided at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks5bX3XKaxA
Moving toward optimal health, the upper right quadrant, not only helps people and organizations achieve optimal well-being, it also enables them to accomplish more with lower costs. Salutogenesis (salu=health; genesis=creating/origins), introduced by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979), complements pathogenesis by providing a focus and methodological strategy for health professionals to discover and develop causes or origins of positive health. Beyond just staying well, salutogenesis works to optimize well-being through continuous and never-ending improvement (Becker, Glascoff, and Felts, 2010). Overall, salutogenesis is about how to add positive actions, opportunities, conditions, and outcomes.

Many fields now focus on movement toward positives, not just away from negatives. In psychology, Seligman (2008) helped develop positive psychology, noting it is “clear that mental health was not the mere absence of mental illness.” In business, quality management expert W. Edwards Deming (as cited in Glauser, 2008/2013) emphasized the need for business and industry to focus on creating the positive of quality and said, “The aim that I’d propose for a system is gain for everybody. . . Everybody should fare better, everybody in the system should be ahead, and his quality of life should improve.”

Like efforts to create positives in other fields, salutogenesis creates positives in health. Creating all good can be termed paneugenesis (pan=all, eu=good, genesis=creating). Four specific actions or steps should be used to promote the practice of paneugenesis so actions will work toward creating all good:

1. **Operationalize Idealized Outcome.** Determine the new desired idealized reality that ripples out to benefit everyone and everything
2. **Discover Precursors.** Discover what must happen to create the new desired reality as it is learned how the current reality is being created
3. **Optimize the Process.** Assess the new way implemented after better processes are developed as inappropriate processes are replaced and or ended
4. **Plot Progress.** Use process measures to document progress forward as the next steps to enable continuous improvement are developed

What are you waiting for? A better tomorrow for you and your organization won’t create itself. Learn more about how to use these strategies so you can “Make a Difference with Positive Health Leadership.” Attend the 38th Annual National Wellness Conference Pre-Conference program presented by Craig Becker and William McPeck, Sunday, July 14, 2013. See [http://www.nationalwellness.org/?page=PreConf_Becker](http://www.nationalwellness.org/?page=PreConf_Becker) for more details.

The author’s video presentations related to this topic are available at [http://www.youtube.com/user/BeWellr/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/BeWellr/videos).
References


