

## Workplace Well-Being

### Wellness, Struggle, and Where to Start

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Michelle Doerr, President and Founder of Anavah Consulting, LLC is a consultant, coach and facilitator making the workplace and relationships more authentic and reconnecting people with planet. In addition to her training, experience and expertise in executive leadership, facilitation, conflict resolution, and organizational development, Michelle is also a trained Wildlife Biologist and her experience in the natural resource profession and outdoor recreation aids in her understanding of the workplace needs of those that work with and for nature.

For the past several years, my partners and I have been working to create thriving workplaces in the conservation community. This starts with opening discussions around well-being in our workplaces. I give credit to the ripples created from the Minnesota Chapter of the Wildlife Society for a wellness workshop they held at the annual meeting back in 2019. They opened the door wide to begin talking about wellness in public settings. After the two leaders of the chapter expressed vulnerability in their own wellness journey, the audience jumped into all sorts of issues, including gender harassment, inclusion, accessibility, unpaid internships and more.

People want to talk about well-being in the workplace, so I am working to make those conversations more available. In this article, I provide some basics about defining wellness, its importance, the struggles we all experience, the impact of being unwell, and how to start these conversations and the first steps toward greater wellness.

## Wellness

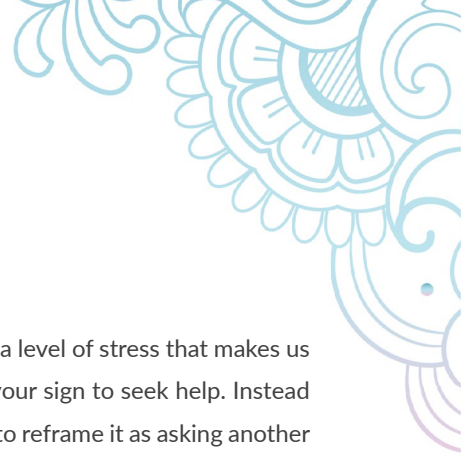
In the Sept/Oct 2020 issue of The Wildlife Professional, I wrote an article entitled *A Wellness Path for Wildlifers*. There I described a wellness model (Figure 1) I use based on the work of Dr. John Travis, Halburt Dunn and a colleague in the counseling field, John Reardon. My purpose with the article was to further open the dialogue around wellness in conservation.

**Figure 1** Wellness Model: Wellness is a Process!

### WELLNESS MODEL: WELLNESS IS A PROCESS!



Sources: John Reardon, Halburt Dunn, Dr. John Travis



I describe the wellness model in greater detail in the full article, but basically illness starts with a feeling of discouragement and, with enough self-defeating behavior, can lead to dysfunction and death. Wellness, on the other hand, starts with awareness and uses encouragement for mental, emotional, and physical improvement and growth.

If you find yourself in a state of perpetuate discouragement or self-defeat, this might be a good time to find professional help. As a coach, I tell people I might be able to help when in the discouragement stage, but beyond that, it is best to seek a counselor.

I had several counselors on my own journey to wellness. They have done much to uncover my mistaken beliefs about myself and those around me. They have helped me reframe them to be more positive and useful. The counselors I've experienced have definitely helped me improve my outlook and movement in life. I now feel like I'm living life more fully.

## Struggle is Normal

Struggle is a normal part of the human experience. If you are struggling, it doesn't mean you are broken or there is something wrong with you. We are social beings and need each other's gifts. Therefore, we were never meant to experience life on our own.

Any of the normal challenges of life like starting college, writing your thesis, a new job, changing jobs, a new boss, re-organization, moving, starting a family, divorce and more can bring on stress. Accept that stress is a normal part of life. We all need to develop tools to navigate these types of stresses.

I use yoga, biking, hiking, snowshoeing and other movement forms to ground my body and remind myself I am okay. There are also artistic practices like painting, drawing, music, and dance. Then there are mindfulness practices like meditation. The point is to face the challenge and to use some practice to settle your body or "ground" yourself back into safety.

We feel basic stresses of work and life every day. This is why it is important to care for yourself through rest, exercise, getting

outside and eating well (refuel).

However, if you are in distress – a level of stress that makes us reactive or shut down – that is your sign to seek help. Instead of thinking of this as weak, I like to reframe it as asking another to share their gifts. While we all struggle, we also all have gifts to share.

## What happens when we aren't well

Beyond being sick, many other things appear when we aren't well.<sup>1</sup> First is lack of motivation and focus which can lead to lower productivity. A sense of being overwhelmed and irritability can also show up. Those states make it hard to be present to others or the work itself. Ultimately, our brains simply aren't working at capacity because we are just trying to survive.

Psychologist Naomi Holdt posted a video on Facebook last November about "Why we are so utterly exhausted." She reminded people that on top of typical stressors, we've just all come through (and are still navigating) the traumatic event of COVID-19. Holdt said "We crawled into 2022 still carrying shock, trauma, grief, heaviness, disbelief... The memories of a surreal existence..." Further, she said, "And attempts to re-create some semblance of "normal" on steroids while disregarding that for almost two years our sympathetic nervous systems were on full alert, has left our collective mental health in tatters."

During my wellness workshops, I refer to this as "COVID-Overwhelm". Many organizations have not taken the time to process what has happened and how it has changed the way we view our lives and work. Nor, have they taken the time to talk about how to rebuild relationships and handle the mental and emotional well-being since our social interactions were ripped from us. Recovery has been exhausting, in part, because we don't talk about it and feel isolated. Wellness isn't just about individuals; it is also about being well in relationship with each other.

<sup>1</sup>For further discussion of the health impacts of stress, see information provided by the Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>

## So now what?

The US Surgeon General issued a [Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-being](#) last October with steps to improve well-being. If you aren't sure how important well-being is to your workplace, the report includes statistics that point to a serious mental health crisis in our country. More importantly, the report includes five essentials to "support workplaces as engines of well-being" (Figure 2).

- 1) Protection from Harm,
- 2) Connection & Community,
- 3) Work-life Harmony,
- 4) Mattering at Work and
- 5) Opportunity for Growth.

You see, wellbeing isn't just about physical health. Wellness is about whole beings showing up with their greatest capacity and passion for the work balanced with the rest of life. People want meaningful work where they are making a difference. Read the [report](#) and think about the area of well-being most lacking in your workplace and start there.

My partners and I do workshops related to many of the topics in the report. These include an entire *Leadership of Self* series that gets to personal growth. We also have topics like *Team Wellness*, *Creating Brave Spaces* and *Regenerative Leadership Primer* which focus on teaming, psychological safety, deep listening, emotional competence, inclusion and belonging among others. Teams need to talk about, support, and model wellness as a part of the workday. Our work is focused on moving workplaces toward a more humanistic way of being and, ultimately, toward thriving.

**Figure 2** Essentials for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being



Source: The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being, 2022. <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/workplace-well-being/index.html>

## A quick start

The simplest thing you can start tomorrow is do a check-in at the beginning of each meeting. I do a check-in poll as a part of each of my workshops that is “on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being I could use some help and 10 being I am well, thank you, how well are you today?” I tell participants to grant themselves compassion if they are on the lower end of the spectrum. This question alone might organically lead those at greater capacity to support those with less. Of course, that depends on the state of your team relationships now. Also, if you are leading the team and had planned to make an important decision, maybe it should be delayed if a good number of employees are checking in at the low end. This question helps you gauge the capacity for difficult work. We make better decisions when our minds and bodies are well.

I also use Mentimeter ([menti.com](https://www.menti.com)) which is an anonymous polling system. Another way to prioritize awareness of wellness in a live meeting might be to ask people to say or enter a word for how they are showing up today. Hearing those words or displaying them in a word-cloud will give you an idea of how people are doing. If you have the time, people could share why. I would encourage trying some different ways of checking in and even ask your employees for ideas to encourage checking in with each other.

## Open the conversation

Make it okay to talk about well-being in the workplace. In fact, consider even asking what a thriving workplace might look like and focus on what is most important to your team. A thriving workplace will involve everyone in creating it.

I ended the article *A Wellness Path for Wildlifers* with this; “Engage in honest and vulnerable conversation, acknowledge difficult emotions, and accept each other’s experiences without judgment. As we encourage each other to express our true selves, our workplaces will become more creative and innovative. Together, we can face wildlife and ecological challenges with more energy and courage.”



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