

# The heart of wellbeing

*A self-help approach to recovering, sustaining and improving wellbeing*

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and  
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## Summary

*This article outlines the development of a book and CD called **The heart of well-being: seven tools for surviving and thriving** that aids individuals to maintain and improve their wellbeing – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It describes the background to developing the resource from a healthcare training programme on values and spirituality, and provides a summary of the methodology and content with illustrative examples.*

I am a hypnotherapist, writer and trainer in holistic health and wellbeing. I have a longstanding interest in the mind-body connection, both through my work and through my own experience of chronic illness. I recently wrote *Lifting your spirits: seven tools for coping with illness* following my own treatment for cancer. As part of my journey towards wellbeing, I have just completed a companion publication *The heart of well-being: seven tools for surviving and thriving*, which is described in this article.

Jan Alcoe

Now retired from full time general practice, I have space and time to develop my interest in holistic care through teaching and writing. I am paying more attention to looking after myself and continues to learn how difficult it is to do in practice. I am chair of the BHMA and a trustee of the Janki Foundation for Global Healthcare.

Craig Brown

## Background

We were part of a core group of healthcare professionals who developed and wrote a personal and team development programme for healthcare professionals called *Values in healthcare: a spiritual approach (VIHASA)*.<sup>1</sup> Since its publication in 2004, we have been facilitating workshops for VIHASA in this country and overseas using 'spiritual tools' that include meditation, visualisation, reflection, appreciation, listening, creativity and play.<sup>2, 3</sup> These tools, and the activities and CD tracks which were designed for participants, enable individuals and teams to explore personal values and resources which they can use for learning about the self and for sustaining themselves in their home and working lives. Building on this approach, Jan went on to write a booklet for patients with serious or chronic illness, called *Lifting your spirits: seven tools for coping with illness*.<sup>4, 5</sup> This time employing the same self-learning tools as a way of coping better with difficult treatment, pain, anxiety and the challenges which illness can bring. She has now written *The heart of well-being: seven tools*

*for surviving and thriving*<sup>6</sup> which is described in this article. Craig has edited both publications.

## Introduction

Health and wellbeing are words that are difficult to tie down to a single definition.<sup>7</sup> Generally in medical and healthcare literature it is accepted that wellbeing – how a person feels – is subjective and health – what can be measured in terms of function and disease – is objective.<sup>8</sup> Most writers in this area describe dimensions that make up wellness and these include the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual and sometimes social and environmental aspects.<sup>9</sup> There is overlap and interaction between each dimension with an individual variability over time.<sup>10</sup>

In order to experience wellbeing, we can see that each of the four dimensions needs to be addressed so that we can create a balanced whole. If we are physically unwell, we can still redress the balance by enhancing our wellbeing on the emotional, mental and spiritual levels. Wellbeing is essentially about how we relate

*inwards* to ourselves and come to understand ourselves through the four dimensions. There are further aspects of wellbeing, which is how we relate *outwards* – to others, our community and our environment

When we make a change in any one dimension, it will impact on the other dimensions, either enhancing or undermining overall wellbeing, as the examples below illustrate.



Dimensions of wellbeing

*'I recently joined a choir and it's made me feel like I'm part of something again [spiritual]. The singing seems to have reduced the pain I experience from my arthritis [physical] and all the laughing we do has given me a lift [emotional]. I'm even beginning to get my head around reading music [mental]!'*

The impetus behind *The heart of well-being* was the recognition of the ways in which wellbeing gets challenged and eroded in day-to-day life. Individuals can find some days more trying than others; when they get out of bed on 'the wrong side' small hassles mount up and they lose their sense of balance and perspective. Many people suffer from work-related stress or have problems in health, relationships, family life or personal finances. Sometimes they may find themselves coping with an unexpected change or trauma, for example a redundancy, the end of a relationship, an accident or diagnosis of illness. Even positive experiences like holidays and new babies can have their stressful side.

## What is wellbeing?

When discussing health and wellbeing in some of the facilitated workshops that the authors have run for VIHASA, rather than encourage participants to define terms, they asked them to describe 'What does it feel like to be well?' This gives them an experience of wellbeing. The participants, as you might expect, gave a range of

answers, and interestingly very few of these were directly connected to physical health. These are some of the common themes:

**Energy** This word seems to provide a measure of people's degree of wellbeing. When they experience a lot of energy they feel enthusiastic, optimistic, hopeful, creative, vibrant and expectant. To have low energy is to be lethargic, tired and lacking in interest.

**Peace** This word is associated with feeling relaxed and calm; it is also about having a sense of stillness and serenity at a deeper level. In contrast, to be 'peaceless' is to feel unsettled, anxious and uneasy.

**Balance** When individuals feel 'in balance' they feel centred and grounded. There is a feeling of wholeness, clarity, and being connected which enables them to relate to others and to the world in an optimum way. To be 'out of balance' is when things do not feel right, when they are disconnected with others and themselves.

**Happiness** Happiness is described as feelings of contentment, joy, and inspiration. The opposite is to feel sad, hopeless and helpless.

## Developing *The heart of well-being* resource

In the VIHASA workshops participants were given time to explore their understanding of wellbeing through a range of reflective exercises and then to share their responses in a supportive and safe group. In addition, visualisation, meditation and creative exercises helped to expand and deepen that experience and to explore ways of enhancing self-care in their healthcare practice and other areas of their lives.

When developing *The heart of well-being* we wanted to provide a similar experience to individual readers as we had been able to provide to groups of participants in the workshops. We felt that the experience of various aspects of wellbeing would itself be a motivation to change. However, we needed to provide some instruments for change which were effective, simple and which could be readily incorporated into everyday life. We developed these as seven tools which our experience of VIHASA had shown could provide the building blocks to enhancing well-being on all levels – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual:

- 1 Relax and tune in
- 2 Use your imagination
- 3 Think positively
- 4 Be creative
- 5 Lighten up
- 6 Value yourself
- 7 Discover peace

Each tool became the basis for a section of the book providing:

- a short introduction and rationale for the significance of the tool and the benefits of using it for enhancing wellbeing

## The heart of wellbeing

- reflections from people who have practised using the tool in everyday life or during challenging times
- some activities for noticing how one feels and for practising the tool during everyday life, including ideas which only require a few minutes.

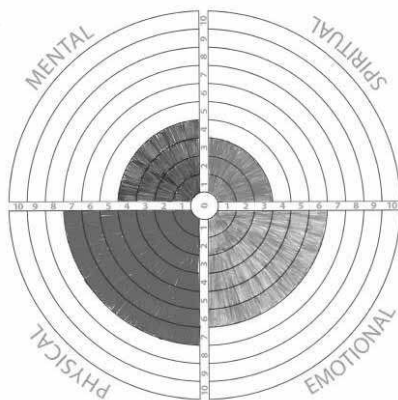
A unique aspect of the publication was the development of 7 audio tracks on CD to accompany the book, one for each tool. The tracks enable the listener to relax and begin to experience the way that different aspects of well-being feel, as a basis for lasting personal change.

## Where to begin?

One exercise we used in the VIHASA workshops was to ask individuals to score their wellbeing on a scale of 0–10. Rather than writing the result on a piece of paper, they were invited to imagine the scale of wellbeing like a length of rope across the room. This involved asking them where they think they are now on the wellbeing scale and to stand on that point, giving them a sense of how it feels to be that score, rather than just thinking about it. They were then asked to stand at a point where they would ideally like to be on this imaginary scale – again, giving them a sense of how it might feel to have optimum wellbeing.

The final question we asked was ‘what one thing do you need to do to help you move up the wellbeing scale?’ Reflecting on and discussing any changes deepened the exploration of the subject and also encouraged individuals to make positive changes.

In the introduction to *The heart of well-being* we suggest that readers complete a ‘wellbeing audit’ before using the materials, and again when they have used some of the tools. This takes the form of quickly and intuitively rating their overall sense of wellbeing from 0 (low) to 10 (high) and writing it down. They are then asked to plot ratings for each of the main dimensions of wellbeing on a ‘circle of wellbeing’, which provides them with a visual representation of their overall well-being (see below).



Circle of wellbeing

We then pose some questions for the reader to consider such as, ‘Which is my strongest dimension of wellbeing currently? How can I maintain this level of wellbeing? How can I use it to influence and enhance my wellbeing in the other dimensions?’ Most importantly, the individual is invited to construct a guiding vision of personal wellbeing, by considering what it would be like to score maximum points on all dimensions:

- What will I look like?
- What will I feel like?
- How will I think?
- How will I behave?
- What difference will it make to my life?

This vision can be developed further in a rich and compelling way through using the tool *Use your imagination* and the accompanying CD track, *House of well-being*.

## The seven tools

Enhancing wellbeing across all dimensions gives people a sense of wholeness and balance. They discover a more authentic ‘being’ within themselves which can begin to have a clearer voice in what they feel, think and do. It is this sense of wholeness which helps individuals to stay resilient in the face of everything that life brings, and discover lasting happiness. *The heart of well-being* offers seven tools which the individual can try out in order to begin to build their resilience.

The intended benefits of using these tools are:

- **Physical:**
  - enhanced physical health and immunity
  - improved vitality and sleep
- **Emotional:**
  - reduced anxiety and distress
  - ability to stand back from difficult situations and react in a more resourceful way
- **Mental:**
  - clear, positive thinking and decision-making
  - creative problem-solving to overcome barriers and difficulties
- **Spiritual:**
  - learning more about who you are and recognising your inner values and resources
  - increased contentment and a sense of connection with something ‘greater’ than yourself.

*‘The main thing I do to sustain my wellbeing is exercise [physical], particularly windsurfing. When I’m windsurfing I switch off from all the stress of studying [mental] and let go of upsets and frustrations [emotional]. I like being in the water and sometimes feel a deep connection and oneness with nature [spiritual]. I’ve met new friends through windsurfing [community] and we have formed a group to protest against pollution at sea [environmental].’*

Each tool is briefly described below:

- **Relax and tune in** *'When I relax, I can take a step back and see the wood for the trees.'*  
The *Relax and tune in* tool provides a framework for individuals to consider to what extent they are meeting their basic human needs for safety, control, fulfilment, intimacy etc, and then to learn how to deeply relax and tune in to how they are feeling at regular intervals throughout the day. Triggering the relaxation response is not only beneficial for physical health, but it enables us to maintain a sense of calm when responding to life's demands and make clear decisions about priorities and alternative courses of action. The activities and CD track *Relaxing stream* help the individual to relax deeply and to notice how they are feeling on each dimension of wellbeing.
- **Use your imagination** *'I like to picture myself performing well in difficult situations. It gives me confidence to do it for real.'*  
This tool is based on using visualisation or positive imagery to envisage how we would like to feel, think and act, and what we would like to achieve. It is about using all the senses to create a positive vision of how we would like things to be. The activities and CD track provide the user with a framework to create visualisations which can focus on handling difficult situations, improving motivation and performance, clarifying thinking, boosting immune function and other physical functions, deepening spiritual connection, or just enhancing all aspects of wellbeing.
- **Think positively** *'I appreciate who I am and expect the best in life.'*  
Learning to think positively puts us back in touch with our own strengths in the face of any challenge, enabling us to bounce back from adversity. Negative thinking is an unconscious habit which we can begin to notice when we are relaxed and tuned in. We can then challenge thoughts that are not helpful to us, thoughts like, 'I'm hopeless' or, 'Everything's terrible!' Once we get into the way of disputing these kinds of thoughts, we can begin to generate more resourceful ones. *Think positively* offers a simple model for doing this and for then noticing how energy and positive expectation follows. The accompanying CD track, *Film director*, offers a way of transforming negative thinking patterns while in a deeply relaxed state, as if they were old, out-of-date films playing on a screen. The listener can experience being their own film director, creating new, feel-good 'thought films' on the big screen!
- **Be creative** *'When I am being creative, I feel truly alive.'*  
Being creative fills us with energy and enthusiasm. It provides a way of expressing our relationship with the world and giving voice to our feelings and experience. The CD track *Creative garden* takes the listener into a

restful, dreamy state of consciousness, providing an experience of creativity and also of problem-solving which can be taken back into work or leisure. A range of creative activities are suggested, from mind mapping to messy play and poetry which the individual can dip into as a way of stimulating the creative process.

- **Lighten up** *'When I laugh, everything seems easier.'*  
In addition to activities which promote smiling, laughter and spontaneity, this section of *The heart of well-being* contains a CD track called *Snow play*. This provides the listener with an experience of what it is like as a child to wake up and discover it has snowed – rediscovering a child's sense of wonder, joy, freedom and the sense of camaraderie between friends, as the child joins their friends to play in a snowy scene.
- **Value yourself** *'When I nurture myself, I begin to grow in confidence and self-respect.'*  
*Value yourself* provides an opportunity to get back in touch with personal values and strengths and to identify sources of support. It provides a framework for a self-care plan which an individual can use to identify ways in which they can look after, treat and support themselves on all dimensions of well-being. The CD track *Hidden treasures* provides an experience of re-discovering strengths and qualities, and letting go of unwanted, old emotions.
- **Discover peace** *'When I tap into the silence inside myself, I feel I can handle anything.'*  
*Discover peace* provides a range of different ways of accessing a still, peaceful place within, from absorbing the mind in quiet activity to observing nature. The CD track *A peaceful place* provides the listener with an opportunity to create a place in their mind which can engender peaceful thoughts and feelings.  
*'Since I began to recover from depression, I've taken up embroidery. I find I get totally absorbed in the process – the colours of the threads, the shapes and textures which begin to form. I then begin to feel a real sense of quiet and stillness inside, which leaves me feeling I can cope with life.'*

## Making changes

The final section of *The heart of well-being* encourages the reader to go back to their original ratings of wellbeing and to reflect on any improvements which might have occurred as a result of using any of the tools. They are then invited to develop an achievable plan for enhancing wellbeing further by signing up to three realistic changes they would like to make. For each change, they are asked to consider the following questions:

- how will it look and feel and what difference will it make?
- how will I do it?
- when will I do it?

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- what support will I need to do it and to overcome any obstacles in the way?

Committing to and achieving some small steps can provide the self-confidence and positive feelings to take further steps and to make further use of the wellbeing tools in different areas of life. Above all, encouraging the individual to continue visualising themselves in a state of optimum wellbeing provides the unconscious template for these changes to take place.

## Conclusion

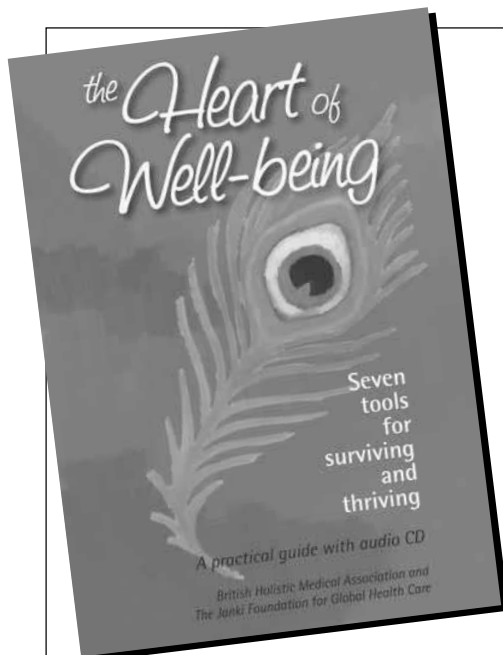
The evaluation from participants attending VIHASA workshops has been very positive as it encouraged them to make changes to improve their wellbeing. We, in turn, felt inspired to reach a wider audience by producing a practical, self-help resource for sustaining and improving wellbeing.

Improving health and wellbeing is a goal of many governments' healthcare services. Often health promotion information focuses on physical health and uses alarmist and fearful messages to persuade people to change their behaviour. We feel that wellbeing – which is a wider, subjective experience – should be promoted by first giving people an experience of what it feels like to have optimum wellbeing and then encouraging change by using positive, life-enhancing tools. Hopefully *The heart of well-being*

meets these objectives in a simple, low cost and effective way. This approach of empowering people to choose and take responsibility for making improvements in their well-being can bring about profound and lasting changes.

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by Jan Alcoe

  
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