



Connecting Health to Performance:

Defining Vital Terms | Health, Wellness and Wellbeing

Health – An individual's “state of health” – good or poor – can be defined as the absence or presence of illness. There are acute and chronic conditions and, in general, illnesses can be characterized as (1) self-limiting (e.g., common colds), (2) responsive to self-care (e.g., allergies, heartburn, minor pain) and (3) requiring medical intervention (e.g., heart disease and cancer). People are “healthy” when they are free from illness.

Wellness, as differentiated from health, is determined by: (1) levels of biometrically measured clinical risk factors likely to result in future illness if uncontrolled (e.g., blood pressure and blood glucose); (2) risky lifestyle behaviors such as sedentariness and smoking. A state of wellness is achieved chiefly through good nutrition, daily physical activity, adequate sleep, and avoidance of toxic substances like tobacco. These “markers” have been correlated repeatedly in work site studies with less functional impairment and higher productivity.

Wellbeing is the newest term in use, and essentially is “psychological fitness” characterized by the ability to perform at a high level because of intrinsic qualities, regardless of external circumstances. It includes feelings of inner satisfaction with one's life, and a sense of functioning well – even thriving or flourishing – in both work and personal life roles, rather than just “getting by” or languishing. People with a sense of wellbeing show more interest and engagement, possess more energy and confidence, and display more persistence and creativity; in short, they perform at a higher level than people who lack wellbeing and evidence psychological distress.

Measurement – Just as health professionals have accurate ways to assess health status and underlying clinical risk factors that determine wellness, psychologists have developed valid and reliable measures of wellbeing. These measures actually can assess “psychological vitality” and its impact on performance – rather than just reporting how people view different aspects of their lives, e.g., social and financial. IHPM and its Work Place Wellness Alliance now can offer an instrument – the validated 21-item *Wellbeing Questionnaire* – to provide a practical measure of wellbeing at the work place level, including its impact on productivity.