

Winter Wellness

Many people find winter to be a challenging time: the days get shorter, less sunlight, the weather gets colder, and the holidays can create stress. We are coming to the end of the year, but it looks likely that the additional difficulties of the 2020 pandemic will be with us for some time to come. This will continue to limit in-person connections and disrupt holiday traditions and routines. **If ever we needed to plan for our winter wellness, this is the year!**

The Wellness Institute has created an updated version of our [Winter Wellness Planner](#) for 2020-2021. In it, you will find several activities to think through how best to support your social, emotional, and physical wellness.

This issue also offers thoughts on creating a gratitude practice. Thanksgiving and New Year's Day are natural times to reflect on what we have done, what we are grateful for, and what we might want to do differently in the months to come. Gratitude is a part of some recovery programs that enhance recovery.

You can use the self-assessment on page 2 of this issue to reflect on what you do to support your spiritual wellness and whether there are areas that you might want to strengthen or improve. Since we are living through a pandemic, we have included an article on building your immune system (see page 3), which is an important part of staying physically well these days!

As always, we are grateful for you, our readers, whose appreciation and suggestions help us share useful ideas for you and others you care about. We look forward to continuing to share **Words of Wellness** in 2021!

Gratitude

*the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return **kindness***

Throughout history, many have described gratitude as a virtue that contributes to a sense of peace and well-being. Gratitude is a state of mind that arises when you affirm a good thing in your life that comes from outside yourself, or when you notice and relish little pleasures. Gratitude is a virtue that can be cultivated as a regular practice, much like meditation or yoga. The inclination to feel grateful is an attitude that can be developed.

Research on gratitude is showing health benefits as well. **Thankfulness** is linked to effective coping with life's challenges and stressors. People who practice gratitude tend to be optimistic and to have healthy habits such as exercising, eating well, and arranging for needed medical care and screenings. These habits, in turn, help us recover more quickly from illness and can impact blood pressure and our immune function. Gratitude can positively impact mental health, increase energy, and strengthen one's belief that goodness exists, even during times of suffering and doubt. Gratitude can protect us from destructive emotions like jealousy and bitterness. Its healing nature may explain why gratitude reduces lifetime risk for depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. Cultivating this positive outlook can bolster wellness.



Spiritual Wellness

Spiritual wellness occurs when we have meaning and purpose and a sense of balance and peace. For many, spiritual wellness comes from religious faith, traditions, and community. For others, spiritual wellness comes from spending time in nature, with family, and with others in activities that transcend our individuality, such as making music or helping others. During the holidays, there are many traditions, related rituals, and activities that can strengthen our spiritual wellness.

SCORING KEY

- ✓ 30 to 40 points: Excellent! You are clearly doing a lot for your spiritual wellness!
- ✓ 15 to 29 points: You're doing great, though you might want to look over the items again and see where there are areas that you want to strengthen.
- ✓ 0 to 14 points: Review your responses to see if there is one area where you may want to strengthen. Consider one small thing you could do. Build on what you already do well.

Spiritual Wellness Self-Assessment

Spiritual wellness involves having meaning and purpose and a sense of balance and peace.

Rate each item below using this scale: **4** If the item is **Always True** for you

3 If the item is **Sometimes True** for you

2 If the item is **Rarely True** for you

1 If the item is **Never True** for you

___ I can name my own personal values and beliefs about life.

___ When I get depressed or frustrated, I draw on my beliefs and values to give me direction.

___ I reflect quietly each day.

___ Life is meaningful for me and I feel a sense of purpose in life.

___ I try to learn about others' beliefs and values, especially those that are different from my own.

___ I feel positive about life.

___ I feel gratitude for the good things in my life.

___ I read or listen to inspiring messages.

___ I participate in spiritual activities with others—either in an informal social setting or with a formal group.

___ I have role models who serve as guides for me.

Total Score (out of a possible 40): _____

Build Your Immune System

The **immune system** provides protection against infection and disease by attacking “invaders” to the body. When working well, the immune system correctly recognizes bacteria and viruses and disarms them. This process includes some symptoms that you recognize as signs of sickness, like a fever, which makes the body too warm for the germs to survive. A **healthy immune system** is effective in fighting infections, but you also need a strong and healthy body to bounce back quickly after your immune system does its work.

Of course, the best thing is to prevent infection and disease in the first place, so remember to wash your hands often and do all the things that help prevent transmitting disease to others. Getting a flu shot and other recommended vaccinations will teach your body about the “invaders” so it can recognize them.

Changes in your **environment** may help, too. For example, dry indoor air is friendly to viruses. During the winter, keep your household humidity around 40%-50%. If you don’t have a way of measuring humidity, pay attention to how you feel—do you wake up with a dry nose and throat? Is your skin parched? Also, notice if you have a lot of static electricity. In addition to keeping your home and workspace at the right humidity, be sure to drink plenty of water to keep hydrated.

Most importantly, **take care of yourself!** The same recommendations for overall physical health and wellness also keep your immune system healthy and give you the energy and strength to quickly recover if and when you get sick.

Sleep should be a top priority. Getting enough sleep is critical to mental and physical health. Cutting your sleep time will make you more likely to develop a cold, as researchers have shown, and may make you more susceptible to other infections as well.

So, keep a regular sleep schedule, turn off your electronics at least 30 minutes before bed, and keep the bedroom cool at night. Morning exposure to natural sunlight helps set your body clock, so spending time each day outdoors is great, especially in a park or other green space.

Exercise and a healthy diet are always central to good health. Physical activity on most days of the week is recommended. Start with whatever you enjoy and do what you can. Increase the length and intensity over time, but don’t overdo it. Consider walking outside, which can give a double benefit!

If you are looking for guidance on how to eat, the Mediterranean diet is well-supported, with its emphasis on vegetables and fruits, with healthy fats from olive oil and nuts. An adapted version, called the MIND diet, specifically targets brain health and has some research support, but further study is ongoing. Some experts suggest that a Vitamin D supplement may help reduce the chance of getting a respiratory infection, but check with your healthcare provider first, to see if it’s right for you.

Finally—keep your mind and spirit balanced by connecting with family, friends, and colleagues. Social connections have many benefits. So, keep up that virtual contact while using protective measures when getting together in person.



Share wellness
with your family
and friends!

8 Dimensions of Wellness

Remember to attend to all 8 dimensions of wellness throughout the winter holiday season.

Physical: Plan to get outdoors to get fresh air and walk when you can. Enjoy holiday food, but plan walks and move your body often. Remember to create a regular time that you wake up and go to sleep. Be sure to keep medical appointments, and screenings. Wash your hands often and practice safe social distancing.

Emotional: Set time to plan fun and relaxing activities that help you recharge and express your feelings.

Spiritual: Plan time to take part in rituals and activities that align with your traditions. Learn about the traditions of others. Set time to reach out and give to others who may need support.

Social: Connecting with people you care about can make YOU feel good. Talk to friends and family! Share memories and both fun and uplifting stories.

Intellectual: Talk with others about things that are intellectually stimulating. Plan activities that allow you to share what you know as well as allow you to learn from others.

Occupational: Plan time to take part in activities that have meaning. Set time to do activities so you can recharge.

Financial: Holiday shopping can be tempting. Set time aside to look at your budget. Stick to your budget so you can take care of your needs. Be careful not to overspend.

Environmental: Being in a clean, safe, and supportive environment is so beneficial. Decorate your living or working space with items that are festive and uplifting. Get outside to get fresh air. Take a walk outside so you can enjoy the sights and sounds of the season.

References and Resources

The *Spiritual Wellness Self-Assessment* is from our [Wellness Inventory](#). For more on gratitude, see:

- the work of Robert Emmons at <https://emmons.faculty.ucdavis.edu/>
- the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence at <https://www.ycei.org/>
- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gratitude-tips_b_4084278

To learn more about the immune system

- Tips (Liz Meszaros, April 2020): <https://www.mdlinx.com/article/how-to-boost-your-immune-system-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/6GxvKGdUM347AWRCTr4UAb>
- <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/research/immune-system-overview>
- The National Institute on Occupational Safety and Health (part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) recommends humidity between 30% and 60% as part of their guidelines for indoor environmental quality.
- Sheldon Cohen & associates demonstrated how factors such as loneliness, stress, and sleep affect how likely someone is to the likelihood of getting the common cold. Their research on how sleep affects getting a cold is reported in Prather, A. A. et al. (2015). Behaviorally assessed sleep and susceptibility to the common cold. *Sleep*, 38(9), 1353-1359.
- Two hours outdoors each week is a minimum target, according to White, M. P. et al. (2019). Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing. *Scientific Reports (Nature.com)*, 9, 77730.
- Mediterranean diet: <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/nutrition-basics/mediterranean-diet>
- For a summary of the MIND diet, see <https://www.nutritionletter.tufts.edu/healthy-eating/antioxidants/mind-diet-for-better-brain-aging> and refer to the easy-to-read chart at <https://www.canadianliving.com/health/prevention-and-recovery/article/mind-diet-a-new-way-to-prevent-alzheimer-s>
- Benefits of Vitamin D: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/vitamin-d/>
- AARP has many resources on keeping your brain healthy (<https://www.aarp.org/health/brain-health/>) as does the Alzheimer's Association (https://www.alz.org/help-support/brain_health). It's never too soon to think about how to stay healthy through a long life!

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