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THE WELLINGTON COLLEGE PROGRAMME FOR DEVELOPING WELL-BEING

Well-being involves living skilfully as a human and it can be learnt. Here are 10 guidelines, or skills, that help to improve well-being dramatically.

1. Relationships

Productive relationships with other people are utterly central to maintaining well-being. Relationships can be with romantic partners, family, friends or simply a confidant. It is important that any partnership is constructive. Relationships that cause conflict should be resolved or avoided. Furthermore, caring for others is a powerful antidote to depression.

In practical terms, a good partner is someone in whose company you feel that you are making progress. It is someone who you can confide in, someone you can laugh with, someone who can help you solve problems (not just absorb them) and someone with whom you can achieve positive outcomes (for example walking in the mountains, or singing in a choir).

The value of any partnership should be greater than the sum of its parts.

2. Mind...

Your mental health obviously stems from a healthy brain and there are a number of ways of maintaining this. Primarily, your brain needs ideally 8 hours sleep a day. Younger people especially teenagers, may need up to 10 hours per day: getting the right amount of sleep is not a sign of weakness and being able to get by on 4 hours per night is not a sign of strength. Avoid those things that prevent your body from shutting down to sleep naturally: caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, artificial light (TV, video games) and stress and tension (e.g. arguments) before bed. Be gentle with your mind. The brain, like any organ, needs to relax.

Ensure not only that you give the mind a rest each day (and weekend) but also that you challenge and stimulate it to keep it in peak condition.

You cannot avoid your sub-conscious mind. Past experiences are stored in the sub-conscious and affect the way we deal with life. Do not let your past experiences limit or restrict you. Some people 'self-sabotage' because they

may have been told early in life that they are not worthy of success: for example, failing to achieve your best in exams, or succeeding at music or sport because an adult told you as a child that you would never amount to anything.

3. ...and body

The mind, so important for modern life, cannot function properly if the body is not working well. Diet and exercise are vital to this. Eat five or more portions of fresh fruit and vegetables per day, and try to eat natural, rather than processed foods. Eat oily fish or an omega 3 substitute and drink plenty of water throughout the day, as dehydration can have a significant negative effect upon mental performance. Recent research has also shown that game (such as pheasant) increases selenium levels, an important ingredient to well-being.

Avoid things that poison or harm the body: e.g. excess alcohol, non-pharmaceutical or non-prescribed drugs, excess caffeine or tobacco, and too much red meat or fatty foods. Do not treat sex lightly. Distinguish hedonistic bodily pleasure, which is transitory and can be harmful from an enduring sense of well-being. Physical contact, especially hugging, has many positive benefits, but this should take place within the right kind of relationship.

Exercise is utterly essential. Try to break sweat three times a week. Research shows that exercise can be more effective as a way of overcoming unhappiness than prescribed drugs, as it causes a release of dopamine, adrenaline/epinephrine and serotonin which are the body's natural painkillers and anti-depressants. In addition to aerobic exercise such as brisk walking or jogging, try Pilates, Yoga or Tai Chi.

In addition, smile and laugh. Both have a positive physiological effect upon the body.

4. Stillness

Take time every day to be still and attempt to clear your mind. Slow your breathing down so that each breath takes about 10 seconds; think your way around your body and unlock any stress or tension that may be held in limbs, the stomach, the shoulders, the neck or the face. Use this time to imaginatively rehearse events that are important to you, focus on times when you have felt positive, or reflect spiritually: Sir Steve Redgrave credits this approach as being a significant factor in his Olympic success.

It is no accident that people who meditate daily (even if only for five minutes) report lower stress levels, fewer periods of illness and a greater willingness to tackle life's problems. Life can move at a pace that is too frenetic and we can forget to spend time being still. Being still can be part of a daily routine; the

last thing that you do before you go to bed or the first thing you do when you wake up. Many people find stillness and reflection as part of their daily prayer routine.

5. Emotional Intelligence

Being emotionally intelligent involves awareness of your own emotions and how they affect you and others around you. This will involve becoming aware of how different moods arise, what physical symptoms go with them and how you can change your mood. An emotionally intelligent person is able to respond constructively to the needs of others and help them to be emotionally balanced. It is important whilst still at school to become aware of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger and depression and learn how they operate on the body, and how to combat and channel them.

Sometimes we become emotionally unstable: it is inevitable that there will be periods of difficulty in many people's lives that are caused by stress, bereavement or a raft of other factors. At times like this, it is important to have constructive relationships (partners, families, friends) to help regain stability: this might include for a period a relationship with a professional counsellor or therapist. Emotional intelligence also involves the ability to use emotions such as jealousy or anger and turn them to positive outcomes.

6. Live in the Present

Take part in activities that involve a sense of 'flow.' This is a state where you lose track of time because you are totally immersed in what you are doing. Research has shown that people who experience 'flow' on a regular basis have heightened well-being. Examples may be things as simple as reading a book or watching a good film or even just doing the washing up. People who play sport, play musical instruments or practice religious discipline such as prayer or meditation experience 'flow' at high levels.

Alongside this, it is important to integrate thoughts and imaginings about the past, the future and your imagination into the present. Avoid being held back by past events or regrets, avoid spending time worrying about what might happen and avoid spending too much time fantasising. Research has shown that low achievers tend to spend more time engaged in fantasy. Set aside a specific amount of time to reflect on past or future events that are the cause of stress each day: avoid 'wallowing.' Being negative, or critical, is not good for you and will not endear you to other people. Instead, write down the things that you are grateful for regularly: it will help you to develop a much more positive approach to life.

7. The environment

The human body needs the natural world. All humans need an hour of broad daylight every day. Walk to work instead of driving, eat meals outside when

you can, go for walks. Many people suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder because of a lack of sunlight and experience a low mood. You can receive the required level of daylight even on a cloudy day. In addition to this, the beauty of our natural environment can be extremely effective in lifting mood.

Alter your man-made environment to make it a pleasant space to be in: tidy up, decorate, have house plants, put pictures up that inspire you in some way. Many people find that the man-made beauty of art, music, poetry or prose works in this way too.

Actively look for ways to improve the world around you. Make every human contact constructive and positive not confrontational and antagonistic. Volunteer to help people: even if it's just holding a door open or helping someone with heavy bags. Be altruistic: look for ways of making the lives of other people better; but actually do it rather than setting up a monthly direct debit.

8. Technology

Life is full of things that distract us from, and distort, real relationships. Limit the amount of time that you spend texting and emailing and have real conversations instead. Restrict the amount of television you watch; much of it gives a distorted and negative view of reality. The Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan finally allowed television in 1999, and within months the government reported increased levels of crime and social problems. Take time to enjoy conversations over meals with family and friends. Real human relationships are vital to well-being and anything that distracts us from these unproductively and for too long, and which causes us to live in a fantasy world, will reduce our sense of well-being.

The young, often referred to as 'digital natives', have never had more access to technology: iPods, mobiles, texting, computer games, the internet and television are just a few examples. It is important to learn at an early age to take charge of technology rather than being taken charge of by it. Technology should be used to enhance life, not dominate it. It is also important to remember that objects and possessions in themselves, do not contribute to well-being.

9. Challenge yourself

Set yourself challenges: learn a new language, start playing an instrument, join a sports team, learn how to dance or even how to use a chainsaw; try to get outside your comfort zone. Confront your fears and limitations. Keep stretching your own boundaries of ability and become proficient at different things: it dramatically increases self-esteem. Working hard to achieve a tough goal is immensely satisfying and has a long-lasting effect. It is a myth that talent is something you are born with: for many things, it is never too late to

learn a new skill and to become proficient at it. The adage 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' is nonsense when applied to humans.

10. Take Control

Don't live accidentally, live deliberately. Avoid being the kind of person who blames their misfortune on everything around them: take charge of the direction of your life and actively shape it by making positive choices. Don't like your job? Look for another one. Drinking too heavily? Get advice on how to stop. Not in the 1st XI? Start playing better and enjoy playing for the 4ths. And take control of the balance of your life too. Avoid taking too much on, or doing too many things badly. Rest frequently and look after your body. Fatigue is not a badge of honour. You may not always be able to change what has happened in your life: what you can certainly do is change the way you respond to it.

- Reading suggestion: 'Tuesdays With Morrie' by Mitch Albom: it shows all of this in practice.