



Engaging Aging

Journeying to Wellness

by Sister Helen Heher, OSB

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“Our long years of life afford us the opportunity to appreciate both the beauty of God’s greatest gift to us, the gift of life, as well as the fragility of the human spirit.”

*Pope Benedict XVI
 September 18, 2010*

Acceptance, trust, freedom, funds, and creativity have turned an idea into an extensive wellness program at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania. Here at the Mount, home to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, we provide a full range of services for all our sisters including those needing assisted and skilled care. It is hard to remember that just twenty years ago, our concept of wellness centered on a garden level room filled with exercise machines.

Inspiration

In 1992, prompted by a personal desire to learn alternative ways to cope with the effects of psoriatic arthritis, I attended the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, PA. In the midst of learning experientially about the progressive concept of mind-body-spirit connections, I had a transformative moment. I can still see myself in that bedroom, looking out the window on a winter day, when I realized that the mind-body-spirit-soul linkage could be the design core of a health program for the whole community. I imagined the petals of a flower, each representing holistic dimensions of ourselves. If one aspect weakened, the others could help to compensate and heal. The faculty enthusiastically affirmed my thinking, and with the blessing of the community, the wellness program began to take shape.

Sister Helen Heher, OSB

Sister Helen has been a member of the Benedictine Sisters, Erie, Pennsylvania, since 1962. She is a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist and currently serves as Director of Wellness Services for Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie. Sister’s background includes ministry in the fields of education, art, program design, and administration of children’s camp programs. Sister Helen interned at Brad-

ford Woods, Indiana University’s learning and outdoor education center for children and adults. Her studies have focused on the integration of stress management, exercise, diet, and spirituality. Currently, Sister Helen is researching the relationship between aging and cognitive decline and the influence of activity on brain plasticity.

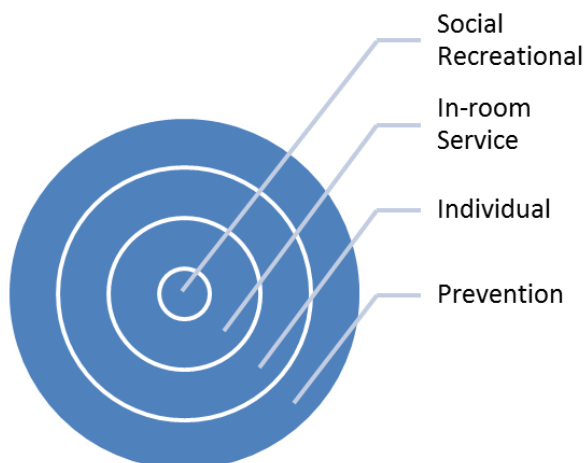


Journeying to Wellness, continued

Implementation

In 1993, incorporating our exercise bikes and my new vision of the flower, Petals-Pedals Wellness Program was launched at the Mount. It proposed a plan of holistic wellness integrating minds, bodies, spirits, and souls. As we began to clarify what we actually could do to enhance our well-being, care was taken to ensure that each sister would be an agent of her own wellness. Start-up activities were wide-reaching: establishing a resident team; organizing an office, fitness area, and lending library; conducting assessments; and writing grants, policies and procedures. I also returned to college to become credentialed in therapeutic recreation.

Over time, the program continued to develop as I began applying the professional knowledge I was acquiring. The model morphed from the petals of the flower, focusing on mind-body-spirit-soul as areas of wellness, to include a process design of concentric circles. This named four plans that would facilitate a transition from just maintaining status quo to proactively preventing ill health.



Process design for wellness program at Mount St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA

Social Recreational Plan In the parlance of recreational therapy, this is also referred to as the diversional plan. The premise is that recreation, such as

games, tournaments, crafts, music, and movies, will distract a person from her current malady. This has value, but I think recreational therapy is capable of so much more. As an idea person, I love the challenge of moving the therapy beyond entertainment to become a part of healing. What makes this level successful for us is working to ensure that everything we offer is age-appropriate, respectful of a sister's personal dignity, and encourages intellectual challenge and spiritual depth. As you might imagine, this takes both creativity and research, but it is possible.

In-room Service Plan This includes periodic assistance with activities of daily living, examples of which are clarification of schedules, hygiene, laundry, transportation, food, conversation, and prayer. Twenty years ago, this plan was activated for the occasional sister who did not want to relocate to the infirmary for a time limited recovery from illness. Now, we have an entire wing of sisters in need of such services. Key to success is coordination and collaboration with nursing and support staff, always keeping the sister included in planning and decision making as much as possible.



Sister Veronica Byer (left) and Sister Helen Heher (right)

Individual Plan This is the essence of most therapeutic recreation services, especially in institutional settings. It provides for the development of a tailor-

Journeying to Wellness, continued

made program for individuals as well as for an intentional small group. The plan usually centers on diet, stress, fitness, social and spiritual needs. A wonderful example of this level is our newly formed “This and That Group.” Responding to a request from one of our members, Sister Rita Zattosky, I work with her to plan the content for the group’s self-organized weekly gatherings. Each two hour session includes some combination of exercise, conversation about



Sister Andrea Weidle (left) and Sister Rita Zattosky, who started the “This and That Group” at Mount St. Benedict Monastery.

world events, reading from a spiritual book, viewing a DVD, and refreshments. Enlisting the services of public transportation for elders, we enjoyed a recent trip to the zoo that was a special treat for all. Again, the challenge is to let the needs and desires of the sisters guide the programming choices.



Prevention Plan This plan takes the wellness program to its broadest reaches, encompassing the entire community in educational offerings. Topics have included guided imagery, weight training, lifestyle changes, vegetarian cuisine, psychoneuroimmunology, and spirituality. I would encourage you to research the availability of resources in your local area. I’ve found professionals from every imaginable discipline to be very generous with their time and talents in response to my invitations. Often, they are quite impressed with the community and excited at the prospect of continued collaboration.

Inspiration

In the last couple of years, inspiration for developing wellness services has shown itself in the form of unexpected requests and new situations. For example, through other contacts, I was requested to work with students who are court mandated to perform community service. I decided that once they became accustomed to being in the monastery with us, I would try to match their skills and interests with the needs of the sisters. As a result, wonderful relationships have formed and we’ve been privileged to witness the transformation of lives, both theirs and ours.



Members of the self-organizing “This and That Group” gather for an afternoon session. Pictured above, from left to right, Erie Benedictines, Sister Mary Bernadette Ladner, Sister Rita Pruchniewski, Sister Phyllis Weaver, and Sister Mary Louis Eichenlaub.

Journeying to Wellness, continued

In another instance, I was invited to speak on wellness at our 2011 summer community days, "Learning, Leisure, and Legislation." My style of planning is to cast a wide net, so I quickly started to surface themes. One idea focused on an organizational plan to extend the influence of wellness in the Mount's various departments. It sounded good on first consideration, but something was missing. Standing at the sink, brushing my teeth, it came to me: "Play to your strengths," I said, "and my strength is dramatization." And so it began. Presenting not from a podium but from a hospital bed, I staged an interactive theatre in the round. With humor and drama, I shared seven principles of wellness I'd written just for us, grounded in our life as a community. I think the thirty minutes of fun had more impact than another plan for re-organizing offices.

Inspiration is like breathing to me. I believe our wellness program thrives because it exists in a welcoming community, respectful of and nourishing for creative spirits. New ideas are just waiting to be found. A few of the projects I'm investigating for the future include a focus on slowing the process of mild cognitive impairment; shaping life stories as a way of preserving the past and enlivening the present; exercise stations apropos of sisters' abilities; and developing the Live Oak Institute's community model principles that encourage each member to contribute to the whole. As you can see, wellness has no limits.

My closing advice is to put yourself, your strengths, ideas and confidence in the center of your current model of wellness. Then, push the edges to develop something that reaches for that outer rim of health. Doesn't that sound like some kind of wonderful?

Sister Helen Heher, (pictured in bed) and Sister Marian Pasternak offering a dramatization of seven wellness principles during summer community days at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, Erie, Pennsylvania.

Seven Principles of Wellness by Sister Helen Heher, OSB

1. In every challenge, find a way to participate. Give what is left.
2. Everything we need is right around us, if only we can find it.
3. One is relevant at any age.
4. We heal each other by the timber of our voice and the content of our message. Kindness heals.
5. Enter into the mind of the other. Suspend reason.
6. Only eat if someone is feeding you. Feed others.
7. You know you're lost if you're going in circles. Look for angels.



Resources for Review

BOOKS

Clair, A. & Memmott, J. (2008). *Therapeutic Uses of Music with Older Adults*. American Music Therapy Association: Silver Spring, MD.

Griffin, Emilie. (2012). *Green Leaves for Later Years: The Spiritual Path of Wisdom*. IVP Books.

Lindahl, Kay. (2002). *The Sacred Art of Listening: Forty Reflections for Cultivating a Spiritual Practice*. Skylight Paths Publishing.

Rohr, Richard. (2011). *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Jossey-Bass.

ARTICLES

Concotelli, J. (2008) Activities for Living Well: Whole-person Wellness. *Assisted Living Consult*, September-October. <http://www.assistedlivingconsult.com/issues/04-05/alc910-Activities-923b.pdf>

Ferebee-Eckman, T. (2008). Dance for Older Adults: A Fun Approach to Exercise. *Journal on Active Aging*, 7(4).

Lichter, David A. (2013) Studies Show Spiritual Care Linked to Better Health Outcomes. *Health Progress*, March-April.

Montague, Jan. (2007). Whole-person Wellness for Vital Living: A Five Part Series on Senior Wellness. *Experience, A Newsletter for the American Senior Fitness Association*. See also www.seniorfitness.net

Montague, Jan & Frank, Barbara. (2007). Creating Whole Person Wellness. *Assisted Living Consult*, July-August. See also [http://www.lec.org/newsAndEvents/documents/](http://www.lec.org/newsAndEvents/documents/CreatingWholePersonWellnessfinalfinal.pdf)

[CreatingWholePersonWellnessfinalfinal.pdf](http://www.lec.org/newsAndEvents/documents/CreatingWholePersonWellnessfinalfinal.pdf)

Ray, O. (2004). How the Mind Hurts and Heals the Body. *American Psychologist*, 59(1).

Silf, Margaret. (2012). Whiskey's Wisdom. *America Magazine*, October 8. <http://americamagazine.org/issue/5153/columns/whiskeys-wisdom>

Sipe, C. (2008). On-line Learning for the 50-plus Adult. *Journal on Active Aging*, 7(1).

Talone, Patricia. (2013). Prayer for Solace, Support and Encouragement. *Health Progress*, March, April.

MISCELLANEOUS

www.localharvest.org is a website that helps identify sources of sustainably grown food in your area. It includes a newsletter and recipes that help you to take advantage of homemade foods.

www.seniorfitness.net is a website for the American Senior Fitness Association. It offers free access to their newsletter, *Experience*.

**“Books
are the quietest
and most constant of friends;
they are
the most accessible
and wisest of counselors,
and
the most patient
of teachers.”
Charles William Eliot**

From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D. Psychologist



The ancient Greek physician, Hippocrates, is considered the father of western medicine. Refusing to accept healing as a result of magic, he mandated objective observation and logical reasoning as paths to diagnoses. It could be said that he moved medicine into the realm of science. With a new sense of order and

knowledge, the art of healing gradually became grounded in a biomedical model. Health became defined as the absence of disease. Physicians worked to bring the many complex physiological systems of the body into balance. The patients only had to do as they were told.

It wasn't until 1977 that another scientific paradigm would emerge in western medicine. George Engel, an American psychiatrist, challenged biomedicine to consider that in order to understand disease, it was necessary to move beyond the biological sciences. One also had to consider the psychological and sociological influences involved. This complex interplay, called the biopsychosocial model, would lead to a more holistic understanding of both health and illness while also influencing health care delivery. Health no longer had to be limited to a static point of balance, but could be seen as a continuum of wellness. Variables such as faith, attitude, locus of control, and social support became opportunities to tap the mind-body-spirit-soul connection. People became empowered as agents of their own wellness.

This enhanced sense of participation in our health also brings with it responsibilities. We need to have the courage to periodically take an honest look at ourselves to assess our state of wellness. In general, we're pretty good at monitoring our spiritual life. But what about extending the boundaries to examine the

interplay of mind-body-spirit with soul? The recent decision by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI to step aside from the papacy for reasons of declining strength is a wonderful model for us to follow. His courage and humility to examine his health and act upon his limitations empowered the whole Church. Imagine the contribution we can make to our communities by tending our wellness in a conscious, deliberate way.

The series of questions that follow invite you to spend some time in an intentional consideration of where you stand on the continuum of wellness. As spring approaches, maybe this can be the first sweep of cleaning to put things in fresh order. Be well!

- How would you characterize your current state of physical well-being? What do you notice about your diet, weight changes, exercise activities, and sleep patterns? When is the last time you've had a physician review your medications?
- Over the past several months, have you experienced any significant changes in your usual routines? In general, how would you characterize your coping patterns and stress management skills?
- What is your level of participation in community living? On any given day, how much time do you spend time with others aside from the usual meal times? How many times have you gone outside in the past week? What are you doing to reach out to others? Where do you find sources of support?
- What do you do for leisure? What new things have you learned in the past month? What makes your life meaningful?
- How has your spiritual life changed in the past year? Is there something not currently available to you that might be helpful in deepening your spiritual life? How can you access it?
- How are you going to live the time you have left?

From the Offices of NRRO, Brother Robert Metzger, SM Associate Director for Planning and Education



In January of each year we plan the themes for the quarterly issues of *Engaging Aging*. This year we decided to try a different format for the newsletter. In the past we have had two or three articles around a central theme. This year we are going to have one longer article in

order to develop each theme more fully. We will also include some books or websites that you can use to follow up on that topic.

The theme for this issue is wellness. In addition to the article and references, we now have descriptions of several wellness programs on our website. We asked several religious institutes to send us their wellness policies and guidelines to share with other congregations. We are grateful to those who generously shared this information. We received samples from a variety of institutes: women and men, large and small, active and contemplative. They can be found at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/sample-policies.cfm>. The names of the institutes have been removed.

If you have a wellness program or policy that you are willing to share with other congregations through our website, please send it to me in Word format at RMetzger@usccb.org. We would also enjoy hearing from you about the new format for *Engaging Aging*. You can write to me at the above address or at retirement@usccb.org.

Looking ahead, the summer edition of *Engaging Aging* will focus on the role of leadership in dealing with aging issues. Brother Sean Sammon, FMS, has agreed to write the article for the issue that will be released in mid-June.

I pray that your Lenten journey may continue to be blessed as we await the Risen Lord.

Calendar

April 2013

- 1** Direct Care Assistance applications due at NRRO
- 2-4** NCDC Workshop—*Fundamentals and More*; Darien, IL
- 16-18** NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop; Dayton, OH

May 2013

- 14** NRRO webinar on spirituality for elders with Brother Mark Knightly, CSC

Announcements and Reminders

Driving Policies and Wellness Policies Available Online

Visit our website to access sample driving policies and congregational wellness policies and guidelines. Go to <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/sample-policies.cfm>.

Help NRRO Go Green

If you are not already receiving this newsletter electronically and would like to do so, please contact us at retirement@usccb.org to have your e-mail address added to our distribution list.

Help Us Keep in Touch with You

Please send changes in address, phone, e-mail or congregational leadership to NRRO c/o Tiffany Lezama (tlezama@usccb.org) so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.

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Staff

Executive Director

Sister Janice Bader, CPPS

jbader@usccb.org

Associate Director of Fund Distribution

Brother Hank Sammon, FMS, JCL

hsammon@usccb.org

Associate Director for Planning and Education

Brother Bob Metzger, SM

rmetzger@usccb.org

Program Specialist

Monica Glover

mglover@usccb.org

Administrative Assistant

Tiffany Lezama

tlezama@usccb.org