

Ask an Expert: Five Factors that Determine Your Sense of Well-being



If someone asks how you are doing, do you respond with the typical *fine* or *pretty good*? Or are you tempted to give a list of complaints? John Paul Murphy, former Utah State University Extension 4-H specialist, had a standard answer to that question, whether he was dealing with a personal health issue or was actually having a good day. His response? "I'm terrific! But things are looking up!"

Martin Seligman, a leading professor and pioneer in the world of positive psychology, explains that our well-being, or how we are doing, is heavily influenced by five factors. These factors are outlined in, "Strong Parents, Stable Children: Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families," a curriculum sponsored, in part, by USU Extension.

1. Positive Emotion. This includes feelings of happiness, peace, love, connectedness, hope and gratitude. The important part is to enjoy yourself in the moment, such as when reading a good book, spending time with family and friends or eating a bowl of your favorite ice cream. Doing fun and enjoyable things is important in life and it makes us feel better inside.

2. Engagement. Has time ever slipped away while doing something you love? Seligman refers to this as "flow." Doing something that brings you to a state of flow can enhance your well-being. These are activities that make you feel fulfilled like playing with your children, playing a musical instrument or using your talents to create something.

3. Relationships. Positive relationships are at the core of our well-being. People who have positive, meaningful relationships with others are happier than those who

do not have these close bonds. Keep in mind that such relationships take time and effort to maintain.

4. Meaning. Meaning comes from belonging to or participating in a cause that is higher than ourselves. Most of us want to believe we are living and working for a greater purpose. For some, the greater purpose may be tied to spirituality or religion; for others, it is raising a family, involvement in a charity, participating in humanitarian efforts or mentoring a young person.

5. Accomplishment/Achievement. Setting our sights on something and dedicating time and attention to bettering ourselves is good for us. This includes working hard at a skill, achieving a goal or winning a game or competition. Well-being is tied to the steps taken to achieve the goal, not just on the end goal alone.

To foster this sense of well-being in your children, consider applying "Make Time for 9!" in your relationships with them, also taken from the "Strong Parents, Stable Children" curriculum.

* 9 Meaningful – and Safe – Touches. Children need physical contact every day to feel connected to their parents or other caring adults. Physical contact between parents and children helps create strong attachment, builds trust and is calming.

* 9 Minutes Matter. Children need quality time, not just quantity time. Busy families will especially need to make each available minute count. Some important times parents can impact their child are:

- The first three minutes after children wake up and see you.

- The first three minutes after coming home from school or an activity.

- The last three minutes of the day before they go to bed (reading time, debriefing, snuggling, etc.). No single interaction requires much time, but it is important to slow down, look children in the eyes and talk or ask each other questions.

* 9 Minutes of Conversation. Depending on age, this could be 9 straight minutes or a minute here and there. Babies need a lot of contact with their parents, including face-to-face time and talking. It is no less important to interact with teens and keep communication lines open.

Achieving a happy life full of meaning takes conscious effort. Choose and implement some, or all, of the above

factors to positively affect your sense of well-being and that of your children.

By Kathleen Riggs, Utah State University
Extension professor, Iron County,
435-586-8132, kathleen.riggs@usu.edu