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H O L I S T I C RECOVERY

When we asked 150 substance abuse counselors what they thought were the four behaviors accounting for the majority of chronic diseases and premature deaths, they immediately shouted out the correct answers: “Smoking! Alcohol abuse! Unhealthy diet! Not enough exercise!” But when we asked why these four behaviors were so critical to health and well-being, they had no quick answers.

The answer is that those four behaviors are fundamental processes of life: breathing, drinking, eating, and moving. If we breathe toxins, we threaten our bodies. If we drink alcohol to toxic levels, we do damage to our mind and bodies. If we eat toxins, we seriously risk our well-being. And if we don't move it, move it, move it enough, we don't move enough toxins out of our bodies.

Over 90% of all adults in the U.S. have two or more of those high risk and high cost behaviors. The majority of individuals who abuse alcohol and other drugs have all four. Individuals suffering from substance abuse or serious mental illness die from the same behaviors as most of us, but they die 10 years sooner. No wonder the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Agency (SAMHSA) has identified Holistic Recovery as the best practice for the populations the agency serves. The problem is that most substance abuse and mental health counselors and therapists do not know how to effectively and efficiently change these most damaging multiple behaviors. Furthermore, our healthcare systems do not treat those threats seriously (2012).

We once asked 35 medical directors of the largest U.S. health plans about the quantity and quality of behavior medicine that their primary care practices provided to help patients make behavior changes that would prevent or manage chronic disease.

Their answer? The quantity is typically zero, and the quality is typically awful.

But what about a fifth big threat? What is the most common condition that drives people to breathe, drink, or eat at toxic levels? Professionals typically guess stress, and they are right. But we encourage them to think of distress. Times of anxiety, depression, anger, and boredom stress abilities to cope. These times are like fevers: they signal that something is wrong with emotional, mental, or physical well-being. How do average Americans cope with different types of distress? They smoke more cigarettes, drink more alcohol, and eat more comfort and junk foods, and collapse on the couch. Why is the fifth threat—stress—so critical to our health and happiness? This behavior is also fundamental to another domain of well-being necessary for a happy life: feeling.

We need to make clear that what we call the “Big 5” are not the only behaviors that threaten health and happiness. Not enough sleep, too much sun exposure, and discontinuing prescribed medications are other examples of a seemingly endless list of behaviors that can threaten our physical and emotional health. The principles for changing behavior have been found to apply to changing more than fifty different behaviors. As a result, if one has a different (or another) behavior that needs attention, there is hope. The strategies a person can learn to address one harmful behavior may also address another behavior that he or she wishes to change.

Some Strategies Will Remove Multiple Bad Habits

The principles followed as one progresses through the Stages of Change from Precontemplation (not ready) to Contemplation (getting ready) to Preparation (ready) to Action and Maintenance

to remove one bad habit that can be used to remove multiple bad habits. By removing unhealthy habits—the great deadeners of life—people can live longer lives, fuller lives, and better lives. There isn't a need to wait for a crisis, or to hit bottom before being moved to change.

The most common presentations to professionals and public that we have been delivering across the country have been on Holistic Recovery defined by SAMHSA (2012) as the process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential. The new book, *Changing to Thrive* (Prochaska & Prochaska, 2016), includes chapters that are like mini guides to take professionals and the public through the Stages of Change for each of the Big 5 behaviors. In *Changing to Thrive* readers are taught how to change a high risk behavior, and are also shown how many more benefits than previously considered possible can come from changing a single behavior. There is guidance on how to change multiple behaviors with innovative strategies that produce the synergy allowing individuals to get back more change from their time and efforts than if they were trying to change each behavior separately.

In *Changing for Good* (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994), the model of health current at that time was defined as the absence of disease and the absence of risks for disease. With new research, it is now known that this is an incomplete model of health and humanity because it is based on what should be absent from a healthy life, not what should be present.

Elements of Happiness Few But Simple

“Happiness” is the single best word that captures the concept of well-being. Just as there are a small number of behaviors that account for high percentages of chronic disease and premature death, there are a small number of elements that account for much of the happiness in modern lives. These include:

- physical well-being;
- emotional well-being;
- financial well-being;
- social well-being; and
- purpose, which reflects a person's most valued passions.

One of our scientific and professional strategies continues to be to keep raising the bar to produce best practices with higher impacts. We and our colleagues were most surprised by the huge impact our multiple behavior change strategies had on a large population of 4,000 with an average of four risk behaviors and almost four chronic conditions. These risks included addictive, affective, energy balance, and other risks, with 70% of the group overweight or obese. We were able to reduce multiple risk behaviors in a majority of these individuals. Furthermore, their health improved significantly; their happiness improved even more; and their functioning at home and work improved.

What we were most concerned about was that the majority of the 4,000 individuals from 39 states in this project were suffering or struggling in life, with only a minority thriving.

The only time we saw such a profile in the U.S. was after the economic crash of 2008. It took the federal government 12 months and \$700 billion to help the majority to thrive again. With just a total of three 20 minute sessions per person on the phone or online we helped the majority of our participants to be thriving within six months.

Many people in need of recovery not only need help with the Big 5 risks to their health; they also need help with enhancing multiple domains of well-being. Our most prized goal for our new book is to help professionals and the public apply principles of change that can dramatically reduce suffering and struggling while increasing thriving as a special way to recover.

In the process of helping individuals remove the biggest threats to their health, we can also help them fill and fulfill their lives with what matters most to them. Twenty years ago, we could not imagine making such claims. We also could not imagine that we would be blessed with a continuing series of breakthroughs in the science and practice of behavior change. We feel fortunate to have the opportunity to share these innovations and to help others break out of chronic, high-risk behavior patterns, or bad or unhealthy habits that might be getting in the way of happiness and well-being.

Our mission has been to help as many people as possible enhance their health and well-being. If they learn how to change the behaviors that most threaten their health and happiness, they can change to thrive and can live healthier, longer, better and fuller lives.

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Dr. Janice M. Prochaska is one of the most published authors in the field of social work. She has led research and development teams for health behavior and organizational change programs as the CEO at Pro-Change Behavior Systems, Inc. from 1997–2015. Her collaborations include applying the Stages of Change model to simultaneously reducing multiple risk behaviors and enhancing multiple domains of well-being, healthy weight management in children and adults, preventing bullying, keeping individuals out of trouble with the law, and advancing careers with distinct groups such as women scientists. Dr. Prochaska, who holds an adjunct position at the University of Rhode Island, earned her master's in social work from Wayne State University and her doctorate in social work administration and policy from Boston College. In 2003, she was recognized with an achievement award for leadership in New England by the Providence Business News. She can be contacted by email at janiceprochaska@gmail.com or for more information visit www.jprochaska.com.

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