

COVID-19 Forum: Transformation of Our World and Mental Health

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: REVISITING & REFLECTING ON OUR WELL-BEING

Irina Roncaglia

English National Ballet, London, United Kingdom

received: 4.1.2021;

revised: 15.2.2021;

accepted: 3.3.2021

SUMMARY

The last nine months have been not short of challenging, overwhelming, heart-acheing individual and collective experiences which have and probably will continue to shape our ways of living for generations to come. This paper aims to provide a space in which to reflect and revisit our understanding of well-being and its implementation in light of these past few months and the continuous obstacles faced. It endeavours to offer some thoughts on how this unique time could be experienced to our advantage, and even in light of extreme pressure, stresses, and losses, how this opportunity for reflection can advise and guide our thinking and behaviours, values and beliefs, to new hopes and discovery that will hopefully provide some level of solace, inner strength and transformative growth. Through selected five pillars of well-being all discussed in turns, it aims to challenge and present alternative understanding and application of these pillars, that can hopefully continue to develop and grow as we are all exposed to new lived experiences. It concludes by inviting other colleagues and individuals in their own quest for making-sense and meaning-making of these challenging times.

Key words: COVID-19 - well-being - transformational growth - physical activity – connectedness – isolation – stress – gratitude – kindness - positive psychology

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

There are many well-being models that have been developed and which have provided a backdrop to its understanding and implementation. The World Health Organization definition of well-being emphasizes the concept and formulation as a state not purely absent of illness or ill health, but one where individuals can thrive towards physical, emotional, social, and cultural wellness (WHO 1943). Its dimensions have been debated for a while, and it is not the scope of this article to explore these further. Dodge et al. (2012) propose a simple but effective and applicable definition of well-being as *the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced*. In essence, Dodge and colleagues propose that a stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When this balance is tilted and individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa. Working on this definition proposed by Dodge et al. (2012) which centers on a state of equilibrium or balance that can be significantly affected by either life events or/and challenges, this article aims to present some reflections on five different elements or pillars each of these considered in turn and indeed covering psychological, social, and

physical human needs, on how the current Covid-19 pandemic has shaped in recent months its different conceptualization. It endeavors to offer a different perspective and understanding, on how both clinical and non-clinical practical implications can support or perhaps just challenge its implementation.

The five pillars discussed in this article are depicted in Figure I. below.



Figure 1. The Five Pillars of Well-being

These will be discussed in turn specifically in the context of what the last 9 months have perhaps guided and taught us to think about, and by reflecting on how they can help us to better cope, manage and embrace current and future challenges.

THE ART OF CONNECTING

Human beings are innately social individuals and although we have individual differences, evolutionary psychology suggest that we are driven by ultimately, be and function in togetherness (Baumeister & Leary 1995). This pandemic has placed significant restrictions on how we ultimately keep connected, socialise and feel part of a greater whole. Having to physically distanced - a preferred term than socially distanced - has also forced us having to reflect on the quality of this connection with others. It has imposed a greater awareness of why and who do we want to connect with - and keep connecting - rather than superficially be with others but really truly wishing to be elsewhere. The quality of our social interactions have acquired greater and deeper - and even longlasting - meaning. When we are connected, we are so because we want to share a moment, a thought, a fear, or even a silence that sounds true and authentic.

The art of connecting as part of our well-being, is therefore moving towards a self chosen moment or activity that really brings individuals together, and provides opportunities for self reflection, validation, empathy, togetherness and feeling of belonging. It even revalues the quality of aloneness, not as something to be feared of, or avoided, but as opportunities for appreciation of what we have and experience when we are together. Not merely when in the same room (and on our respective tablets and phones) but moments of shared experiences through language, physical space, nature (Milton 2002) and with the authentic engagement of all of our senses.

THE ART OF ENGAGING IN PHYSICAL (AND MEANINGFUL) ACTIVITY

Engaging in daily physical activity has been now more than ever - and for a while - part of the recommendations to promote not only physical but also mental and social well-being. There is a significant amount of evidence which suggest that the benefits of physical activity and participation are to be observed on multiple levels (Warburton et al. 2006). There is no doubt that physical activity helps to promote our well-being, but this article proposes, that engaging in physical activity does not and should not exclusively be promoted as an antidote to ill health whether obesity, sedentary life styles or binge eatings. In some European countries physical activity can now be part of a comprehensive package of care and rehabilitation under social prescribing and universal personalised care (NHS 2020).

Being physically engaged and active, can take very different forms, and emphasis ought to be placed on adherence and commitment, intent and enjoyment, rather than seeing it as a quantifiable or even 'must' to do task. These last few months have demonstrated how absolutely vital are our parks, our open spaces and our galleries. Dance has been embraced in its different forms from the comfort and safety of our lounges and kitchens (ODUK 2020). Our bodies are built to move. Our joints, muscles and bones need movement as much as our lungs needs oxygen. Physical activity ought to be pleasurable, and not just because movement nurture key chemicals in our brains and bodies, but because, the intrinsic enjoyment of an activity helps to nurture our motivation for it. Being active can mean different things to different people but, as long as the process and quality of the physical activity is meaningful and sustainable, it does not really matter how you move and keep active.

THE ART OF NOTICING AND OBSERVING

We are surrounded by visual information at every corner we turn. Digital information is by far based on images whether in pictures, photos, words or drawing. In a world where during pre Covid-19 everything was taking the shape of fast busy environments, speed and quantity over pace and quality, the pandemic has in part showed us how to slow-down and how perhaps appreciate in different ways what surrounds us. In the context of well-being, the ability to create a space where time to really observe and notice what shapes, create and designs our contexts has been emphasised and has given us an opportunity to really take moments of insight and even appreciation of what perhaps has for far too long been taken for granted. The art of noticing and observing whenever we allow ourselves to do so, can bring some really meaningful insight and reflection. Mindfulness practices and ways of being have seen an increase in popularity and implementation (Brown & Ryan 2003, Kabat-Zinn 1990). While meditation may not be for everyone, all of us can and ought to invest time in the art of noticing and observing with attention, purpose and focus, which can and will bring significant benefits to our well-being and health.

LEARNING (AND OWNING) NEW SKILLS

Learning, developing, growing ought to be a facet of our well-being that is life-long rather than being thought of as solely a stage of our adolescent and young adults' years (Bolhuis 2003). Lifelong learning is something that occurs all the time as individuals think and act, some of which occurs through their engagement in educational programs and institutions (Billett 2015, 2018).

Lifelong learning comprises a personal fact and practice: it is initiated and enacted by individuals, quite likely in personal-particular ways, as shaped by individuals' ontogenetic development or legacies of life histories (Billett 2003). The process is not imposed by external institutions or demands, by is internally driven by a desire for knowledge, a genuine interest in a topic or area of exploration. Learning a new skill as part of our well-being will address psychological and even social and physical human needs. It nurtures a sense of autonomy and accomplishment, and in some cases also a sense of belonging depending on the nature of the skill learnt. It helps to open our minds, engage in our emotions, and fulfil basic psychological needs.

THE ART (AND DANCE) OF GRATITUDE

When we are drowning in work and at the same time trying to manage our private lives, time becomes the new currency. The more we invest in trying to produce more, whatever more means, whether through work, activities, daily tasks or else, we gradually seem to have lost the capacity of realizing and indeed appreciating what has happened, in the continuous run towards this 'more'.

Taking stock and demonstrating as well as giving any level of gratitude to oneself and others, seem a step too far. Sometimes by the pure snowballing effect of being automatically involved in what we are doing or producing. We seem to engage our minds in automatic thinking patterns, which only helps to inflate the situations we are managing and often in a negative and spiraling way.

There is evidence that engaging in an act of kindness and gratitude, not only has health benefits for the receiver, but also for the individual engaging in the act. There is evidence on the psychology of gratitude, that suggest that showing gratefulness can lead to increased levels of well-being (Emmons & Crumpler 2000). Individual practices of gratitude can be part of their daily life (McCullough et al. 2002) be dispositional traits, they would be considered a character strength, to possess gratitude. As a trait, gratitude can be developed with practice and awareness (Seligman et al. 2004). There is a variety of ways in which gratitude can be developed and practiced. Keeping a journal is often recommended or just some personal notes which help to remind us of what we are, rather than what we have. The art of gratitude is however a step - literally a dance forward - in the way we think about gratitude. It is the conscious act of knowing - and if we do not know it, we can learn it through practicing - on how to be grateful in our everyday lives. How do I accept a compliment or a recognized achievement, how I offer feedback and comments to someone else, how do I truly listen to what has been said whether through our working relation-

ships or private encounters, how do I time and shape my responses whether these are made through written or spoken words or whether these are performed through body language and posture? How do we pause and for what reasons, and how do we make the best and most of these intervals?

The coronavirus pandemic has again, forced upon us this unique opportunity to re-evaluate how even kindness is offered (and received) and its intrinsic values, based not on mere quantity but on the quality of each act.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflections through the last nine months of the Covid-19 pandemic have been presented in this article by offering alternatives to the understanding of a well-being model and its implementation. Lessons learnt from the pandemic have provided an opportunity to revisit the meaning and significance of certain pillars of our well-being. The importance of socially connecting to other human beings, the importance of committing to a physical active lifestyle, the significance and value of noticing and observing what is arguably in front of our own eyes, the opportunity to continuously lifelong learning new skills and the ability to grow from our set backs and mistakes, and finally the importance of being kind to oneself and others with the appreciation of gratitude. These five pillars, which I consider fundamental in the process of looking after ourselves (and others), not just when affected by ill health but as key foundations for healthy, productive, meaningful and thriving living, have been revisited in light of the recent experiences brought by the pandemic.

It is hoped that these initial reflections can provide a starting point for further self reflections by others as well as further research and evidence-based practice so that we can further contribute in this opportunity to create a landscape where all learning can be shared and valued for our communities, and societies.

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

References

1. Baumeister RF & Leary MR: *The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychol Bull* 1995; 117:497-529. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497
2. Billett S: *Readiness and learning in healthcare education. Clinical Teacher* 2015; 12:367-372. doi:10.1111/tct.12477
3. Billett S: *Distinguishing lifelong learning from lifelong education. Journal of Adult Learning, Knowledge and Innovation.* 2018; 2:1-7. doi:https://doi.org/10.1556/2059.01.2017.3

4. Bolhuis S: *Towards Process-Oriented Teaching for Self-Directed Lifelong Learning: A Multidimensional Perspective*. *Learning and Instruction* 2003; 13:327–347. doi:10.1016/S0959-4752(02)00008-7
5. Brown KW & Ryan RM: *The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being* *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2003; 84:822–848
6. Dodge R Daly A Huyton J & Sanders L: *The challenge of defining wellbeing*. *International Journal of Wellbeing*. 2012; 2:222-235. doi:10.5502/ijw.v2i3.4
7. Emmons RA & Crumpler CA: *Gratitude as a human strength: Appraising the evidence*. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 2000; 19:56-69. doi:10.1521/jscp.2000.19.1.56
8. Kabat-Zinn J: *Full Catastrophe Living*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1990
9. McCullough ME Tsang J-A & Emmons RA: *Gratitude in intermediate affective terrain: Links of grateful moods to individual differences and daily emotional experience*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2004; 86:295–309
10. Milton K: *Loving nature: Towards an ecology of emotion*. London: Routledge, 2002
11. NHS: *Social Prescribing*. Accessed December 5, 2020 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/>
12. ODUK: *One dance UK*. Accessed November 28, 2020 <https://www.onedanceuk.org/resources/>
13. Seligman MEP Steen TT Park N & Peterson C: *Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions*. *American Psychologist* 2005; 60:410-421
14. Warburton DE Nicol CW & Bredin SS: *Health benefits of physical activity: the evidence*. *CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association journal = journal de l'Association medicale canadienne*. 2006; 174:801–809. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.051351>

Correspondence:

Irina Roncaglia, MA, PhD, Independent Researcher
English National Ballet
24E Grosvenor Road, W4 4EG London, United Kingdom
E-mail: irina@roncaglia.co.uk