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The Dimensions of Wellness Every Runner Should Know

Yes, physical health is important, but it's just one of eight pillars important for living well.

BY [JENNY MCCOY](#) PUBLISHED: JAN 14, 2025 9:50 AM EST



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You run regularly, eat a [balanced diet](#), and stay on top of your [hydration](#). You're crushing this whole healthy lifestyle thing, right? Yes... but with an asterisk.

See, those *are* commendable habits, but they make up just one piece of the wellness pie: your physical health. If you want to feel and age your absolute best, it's important to look at the bigger picture. This includes prioritizing seven (yup, seven!) other aspects of health: intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental.

This concept, known as the [dimensions of wellness](#) or the [wellness wheel](#), takes a holistic, balanced approach to wellbeing. As a 2017 paper published in the *Canadian Veterinary Journal* puts it: "Attention must be given to all the dimensions, as neglect of any one over time will adversely affect the others, and ultimately one's health, well-being, and quality of life."

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[Harlan Austin](#), Ph.D., principal sport psychologist with Premier Sport Psychology, says this concept comes up often in his work, especially with [ultrarunners](#) and triathletes. "The amount of time that they have to put into the training component for these super long races sometimes can really take up a lot of their life," he tells *Runner's World*. "And when the scale gets tipped so far in one direction, we can definitely run the risk of burnout, or just not having enough space or time in our lives for those other aspects of wellness that certainly help make a well-rounded person."

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To help you better understand the dimensions of wellness—including what they are, how to define them for yourself, and how to balance them in a way that works for you, especially as a dedicated runner—we chatted with three experts. Here's all you need to know.

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The 8 Dimensions of Wellness

There are eight dimensions of wellness, or aspects of holistic healthy living. The [University of New Hampshire](#) defines each of them:

1. **Physical:** Taking care of what your body needs to function well, including exercise, [diet](#), hydration, [sleep](#), and hygiene. Running, of course, falls into this bucket, as does your nutrition and [recovery](#) routine.
2. **Intellectual:** Stimulating your brain and also allowing it to rest in a way that cultivates critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity.
3. **Emotional:** Showing self-compassion and acceptance toward all the [emotions](#) you feel.
4. **Environmental:** Respecting the planet, as well as helping to create and enjoy safe, accessible, and sustainable places.
5. **Financial:** Meeting your basic needs and managing your [money](#) well in the short and long-term.
6. **Occupational:** Holding a job that supports your [goals](#) and professional growth.
7. **Social:** Developing and maintaining meaningful [relationships](#).
8. **Spiritual:** Living out your values and finding a sense of purpose.

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How to Define Your Personal Wellness Dimensions

The dimensions will look different for everyone. For example, someone's social wellness might entail spending time with just their immediate family, while another person's might involve regularly getting together with their 20-member run crew. Or, one person's spiritual wellness could mean going to mass every day, while someone else's may center on volunteering at their local library once a quarter.

The point is, there are no set guidelines for how these dimensions look in your life. And the dimensions will likely evolve over time. Your definition of occupational wellness, for example, may look a lot different at age 20 than it does at age 50—and that's perfectly okay.

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“The most important thing is awareness,” Austin says. This involves understanding what *you* value at this time in your life, so you can prioritize accordingly. If you're not sure what this looks like, journaling is a great way to find answers, he continues. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a [specific journaling worksheet](#) focused on defining the eight dimensions of wellness for yourself (see pages 7 to 22).

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How to Know If You're Out of Balance

When you're out of balance with your dimensions, you'll likely have symptoms, which can include feeling overwhelmed, stressed, exhausted or burned out, [Gary Small](#), M.D., chair of psychiatry at Hackensack University Medical Center and author of [The](#)

[Longevity Bible](#), tells *Runner's World*. You may also feel unfulfilled or have a general sense of dissatisfaction with your life, Austin adds.

“We all go through periods where we struggle—that's part of life,” [Jamie Swanson](#), D.O., a geriatrician with Jefferson Health, tells *Runner's World*. “But our day-to-day grind shouldn't be such a struggle.” If it is, that's likely a sign something is off.

You can also try this reflection exercise: Write down a list of all your values (another way to think of the “dimensions”) and then map out how much time you actually devote toward each in a day or week.

“When we see it visually, and we realize that so much of our lives are being spent in certain areas and there are others that we think are important, but it's a really small slice, that visual reminder can help us say, *Okay, well, what can I do to make some adjustments here?*” Austin explains.

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Tips to Finding More Balance in All Wellness Dimensions

Just like there is no set definition of what these dimensions must look like in your life, there's also no rule for how to split your time amongst them. “It's easy to fall into the idea of balance being this 50/50 split, where I can spend time at work and turn it off, and the other half I'm spending in these other dimensions,” Eiron Sanchez, licensed clinical social worker and athletic counselor with [Premier Sport Psychology](#), tells *Runner's World*. “But for some it's 70/30, for some it's 90/10.” There's no right or wrong, he explains, but rather it's about finding a balance that works for *you*.

For the busy runner who, by virtue of their [training](#), has to spend a lot of time on the physical aspect of wellness, Austin suggests using a “microdosing” strategy to hit on these other dimensions. Basically, find small ways to create balance. For example, foster social wellness by sending an intentional text to a friend while you do your cooldown [stretches](#). Or, listen to a podcast while you run to feed your intellectual wellness, Austin says.

To that end, finding activities that support wellness in multiple dimensions can be a great way to achieve balance. The cool thing about **running** is that “it’s a sport that lends itself to interacting with other people,” Swanson says, which makes it easy to tick several wellness boxes at once.

Small gives the example of going on a **walk** or run with a friend: “The physical exercise will increase your endorphins and lift your **mood**. It will get your brain to produce proteins that help the connections between your neurons and so strengthen your cognitive health,” he explains. “The conversation will further fortify those neural networks. And if your friend is at all empathic, you can talk about what’s bothering you, and it will help you reduce stress.”

Keep in mind that balancing all eight dimensions doesn’t need to be something you strive to achieve on a daily basis. “It’s not a perfect world, and I may not get everything in today or even tomorrow,” Small says. If your weekends are filled with friends and runs while your weekdays are filled with work and family, your dimensions of wellness may be in balance in the big picture, if not daily.

Again, your focus on each individual wellness dimensions will vary based on what’s going on with your life, says Small. For example, an **overuse injury** may limit the amount of time you’re able to devote to the physical aspect of wellness for a few weeks. Or, the loss of a loved one may mean you need to take a step back from occupational wellness and focus more on your emotional, social, and spiritual needs.

“It’s a moving target when it comes to achieving wellness as we age,” Small says. That’s why having a mindset of **resilience** and flexibility is “critically important” to living a full, satisfied life.

On the whole though, you’ll know you’ve struck a good balance when you feel like you’re “moving toward the next best version” of yourself, Austin says. Finding equilibrium will not only improve your health, but also help you **become a better runner**, because focusing on all eight dimensions of wellness will reduce your risk of **overtraining** and allow running to be a sustainable force in your life, Sanchez says.

Plus, accomplishments in one dimension—for example, learning to play the guitar for intellectual wellness—can teach you skills like patience and perseverance which will carry over into sport, Sanchez adds. Simply put, there’s a lot to gain if running isn’t the sole focus of your life, but rather an integrated piece of the bigger wellness pie.

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Jenny is a Boulder, Colorado-based health and fitness journalist. She's been freelancing for *Runner's World* since 2015 and especially loves to write human interest profiles, in-depth service pieces and stories that explore the intersection of exercise and mental health. Her work has also been published by *SELF*, *Men's Journal*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*, among other outlets. When she's not running or writing, Jenny enjoys coaching youth swimming, rereading *Harry Potter*, and buying too many houseplants.

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