

# CHAPTER 1

## LIVING WELL WITH A DISABILITY

### INTRODUCTION

This manual is a guide to living well. Most people in our society struggle with building a healthy lifestyle, which includes eating a balanced diet, increasing physical activity, increasing stress-reducing leisure activity, and preventing specific health problems. Many health problems can be prevented by developing healthy habits, and people generally feel better if they have a healthy lifestyle. In this manual "living well" has two different meanings — developing healthy living habits, and doing the things you enjoy. These two meanings are connected.

**The healthier you are, the more you are able to do.**

You will be empowered to do the things you want to do if you:

- Prevent health problems or keep them under control.
- Are in good physical condition.
- Have good relationships with people.
- Rarely feel depressed.

The connection between our health and what we are able to do in our daily lives is simple and obvious to many people, but we often forget that simple connection.

At one time or another, most of us learned what we need to know to live well, yet most of us don't practice these skills consistently. Why is this? If living well comes from applying and using skills we have already learned, why don't we do it?

**Health is a means to an end, not the end itself.**

People generally practice the skills that lead to better health when they feel it is important for them to do so. They pay attention to health behaviors when they are clear about the connection between their health and meaningful goals. People who have disabilities are no different from anyone else when it comes to practicing and applying skills of healthy living — most everyone puts off changing behaviors that lead to better health.

So, how is your health? Even if you have an ongoing or chronic health problem, you can still be healthy. Some

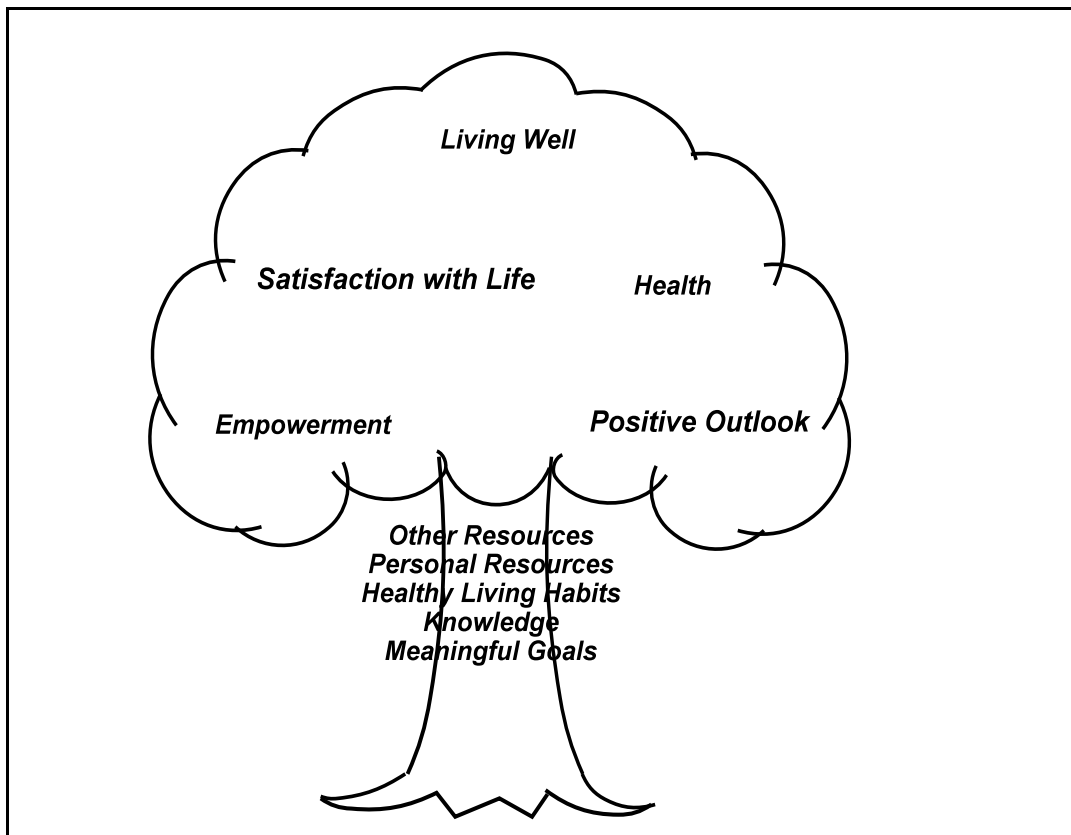
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people think about health as something you either have or don't have. In fact, almost everyone could be healthier at any given time. Even people we call "healthy" could be healthier. In the same way, people with "health problems" can also be healthier. This workshop can help you improve your health to achieve your goals. It won't give you all the answers, but it will get you started.

**People practice and develop skills for living well when they have important, meaningful goals they are pursuing.**

The Tree of Living Well (shown below) symbolizes how you can develop a healthy lifestyle and increase the ability you already have to meet your goals. The trunk of the tree supports the entire tree. It is made up of the meaningful goals you have, together with the knowledge, healthy living habits and personal resources which can help you meet your goals. The branches grow out of the trunk. These branches include empowerment, positive outlook, health and satisfaction with life.



The foundation of this workshop is the belief that people *will* use skills for "living well" when they have meaningful goals.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the importance of pursuing life goals is a cornerstone of the workshop.

- What are your dreams, desires, and goals?
- Which of your goals have you met and which goals are you still working on?
- Are there goals you once had that you have since forgotten or given up?

**Pursuing goals makes it easier to practice healthy living habits ... and healthy living habits make it easier to pursue goals.**

Becoming as healthy as possible is one key to realizing your goals. Over the past 20 years, researchers have learned techniques people can use to become healthy and stay healthy. As a person with a disability, you know your physical condition affects your life. Spasticity or chronic pain can slow one's progress toward achieving goals. Managing such conditions can be a challenge. However, developing healthy living habits can help you manage health conditions so you can progress toward your goals.

**Healthy living habits won't cure all of society's problems.**

Healthy habits are within your personal control most of the time. Generally, you can decide what foods you eat and the amount of exercise you get. However, whether you can do all the things you want to do is sometimes beyond your control. For example, you may not have access to recreation facilities in your community. These kinds of barriers are *systems* problems. Systems problems are social and environmental barriers that keep people with disabilities from fully participating in their communities. Systems problems can be solved when groups of people in a community work together to solve them. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other acts were signed into law to address these systems issues.

Unfortunately, solutions to systems problems can be slow to occur. Even with laws such as the ADA, it will take years and a lot of advocacy before all public places are made accessible, and it may take even longer for attitudes toward people with disabilities to change. The ADA and the continuing efforts of disability-rights advocates will make the future a more accessible one. Ideally, one day people with

disabilities will have all the opportunities that non-disabled people have. Until then, we have to live in today's world. That means we must either meet the challenges of today or wait for things to change.

It's been said that time flies whether you're having fun or not and, like many people, you probably don't want to wait around for things to change. Given the opportunity, you probably would prefer to take things into your own hands in order to get what you want. This workshop grew from the idea that as long as systems problems exist, one needs to use every available tool to assist in overcoming barriers. The more prepared you are to meet the demands of your environment, the more successful you are likely to be. This workshop is designed to help you strengthen the skills you already have so that you can live well. This will include helping you maximize the health of both your body and mind.

Developing a healthy lifestyle and pursuing goals is like taking a trip. To make a successful journey you need the resources to make the trip and a plan to get there. This workshop is designed to help you develop both the resources and the plans to pursue and achieve important life goals. It is our hope that focusing on goals will help you develop resources both within and outside yourself.

### **This workbook has ten chapters**

- The first two chapters of this workbook focus on goal-setting and problem-solving. These chapters include detailed information about planning a path to reach goals. You already have skills for setting goals and solving problems, and these sessions will build on those skills.
- The next seven chapters of the workbook focus on how to live a healthy lifestyle by developing resources both within yourself and through relationships with other people. Techniques will be presented which can help you manage depression, communicate your needs clearly, seek information about preventing secondary health conditions (such as pressure sores and pain), eat well, be physically active, and advocate for your needs. The techniques offered are tools you can use to achieve your goals.
- The workbook concludes with a discussion of ways to continue and maintain your healthy lifestyle

As you make your way through the workbook you will complete a variety of worksheets that will show you how to reach your goals in a step-by-step fashion. Worksheets are helpful organizational tools, and you are encouraged to use them. For your convenience, blank copies of all the worksheets are located in Appendix A of this manual.

Throughout this workshop, we will use examples from the lives of several fictitious people to illustrate what we're doing. Among these people are fictional characters who have a variety of different disabilities, attitudes and needs. We are using them to help you see how to apply workshop ideas to life problems.

"Living well with a disability" means developing healthy living habits so that you can do the things you want to do. It's a matter of self-empowerment. Don't let your body hold you back. By paying attention to your health and pursuing your goals, you can live your dreams!

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1. The idea presented here comes from a medical sociologist named Aaron Antonovsky, who wrote a book called *Unraveling the Mystery of Health*.