

The 3 Laws of Wellbeing

Self-directed Wellbeing begins with a declaration, or it doesn't begin at all.

Self-directed wellbeing is defined as the capacity, resources and skills necessary to manage all areas of one's life without significant assistance from another person, institution, or agency. To avoid any misunderstanding, there's a similar-sounding movement called Mental Health Self-direction that focuses on helping people with mental illness or other impairments to live in a way that's demonstrably self-directed; you can learn more about that [here](#). Our topic of Self-directed Wellbeing is derived from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency's (SAMHSA) definition of recovery, which states:

“Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.”

To support this definition along with their core mission (“reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities”), SAMHSA created their **8 Dimensions of Wellness** as a holistic guide to achieve health and wellness. The SAMHSA Wellness Guide can be found [here](#), and contains enough prescriptive guidance to help individuals move towards self-sufficient independence across the following eight dimensions: emotional, physical, occupational, intellectual, financial, social, environmental, and spiritual. SAMHSA believes the eight dimensions are interconnected and, when taken together, determine how well we live our lives and how we experience joy, health and fulfillment.

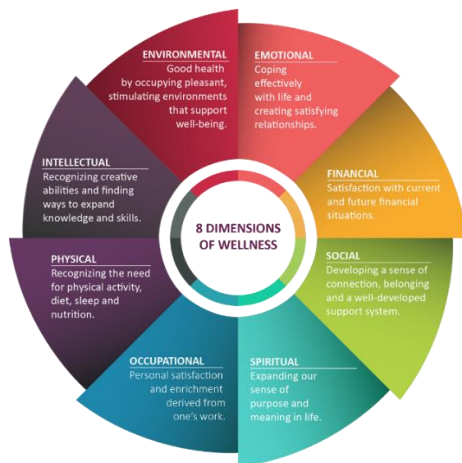


Figure 2: SAMHSA's 8 Dimensions of Wellness

It's prudent at this point to touch upon recovery goals and desired outcomes. While everyone is different and free to choose their own path, including their own definition of recovery and what specific goals or outcomes they desire, SAMHSA points to recovery as the primary objective for someone seeking freedom from the shackles of substance use or addiction disorders. Debate continues on whether sobriety, as defined by 12-step programs, is the optimal or only viable form of recovery; note SAMHSA doesn't mention sobriety as an outcome or condition of recovery. Instead, they suggest recovery is a process of change, targeting the 8 dimensions.



Figure 1: Understanding the power difference between Definition vs. Declaration

While the eight dimensions are a good bellwether to predict and measure one's progress, I believe there's a critical component missing – one that underpins all dimensions and is the primary indicator of success or failure; this is where my 3 Laws of Wellbeing surface.

These 3 Laws are immutable and apply to everything – your life, recovery, relationships, career success, and even how you describe yourself to others. Before we dig into the laws, let's establish a basis for why they exist and why they're immutable – *always*.

Abraham Lincoln said, “we are about as happy as we make up our minds to be”. That's profound and suggests we have a significant amount of control over how we feel. Henry Ford is famous for saying, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right.” Again, a suggestion that we have significant control over who we are, how we are, and ultimately, how well we do in life. I could go on, but volumes have been written about the power of positive thinking and how to use affirmations to sustain a positive mindset and maintain forward momentum. I don't need to add to an already rich body of suggestion that portends we have the final say in how our lives unfold. But I will say that faux positive thinking and forced affirmations flat-out don't work; the adage “fake it 'til you make it” is completely empty and meaningless if, at the center of your self-perception exists a version of you that can't, won't, shouldn't, and ultimately didn't because even if you had tried, you wouldn't have succeeded.



“Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right.”

Henry Ford

Figure 3: Famous Henry Ford Quote

There's no question your internal dialog is powerful and can make moving through a process of change either frictionless or terribly difficult. Doesn't it then make sense we should carefully curate our inner narrative to give ourselves the best possible chance at succeeding? If our inner dialog is naturally negative (psychologists call this a negativity bias), how then do we create a shift such that our inner voice is affirming and encouraging, and we're not faking trying to be positive? One possible way is to change our language from being definition-based to declarative – declaring our freedom from our addiction rather than just defining it – declaring our strength in recovery rather than just describing what it might look like. I personally love that our founding Fathers wrote our Declaration of Independence, not their Definition of Independence – can you see the difference? And just look at the results!

Why 3 Laws? It's interesting things frequently come in sets of three (e.g., the [Rule of Three in Writing](#)), and there's certainly precedent for three laws – take for instance [Newton's 3 Laws of Motion](#), [Asimov's 3 Laws of Robotics](#), [Zaffron and Logan's Three Laws of Performance](#), [Greene's 3 Laws of Human Nature](#), and even [Berry's 3 Laws of Thermodynamics](#).

The construction of 3 Laws in the recovery and wellbeing context also has precedent – in February 1937 a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Dr. Robert Smith, took out his prescription pad and wrote a prescription for alcoholics to recover from the disease of alcoholism. Three simple orders in six words: Trust God, Clean House, Help Others. And again, look at the results! Beyond AA’s success, Wikipedia lists more than 35 other programs derived from AA’s 12 Steps, with many more patterned-after or closely resembling the program’s approach.

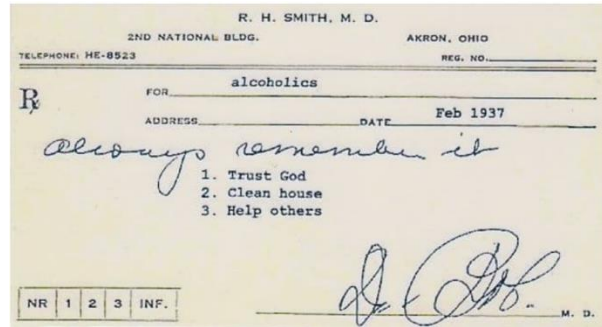


Figure 4: Dr. Robert Smith's Prescription for Alcoholism

If you’ll accept that a primary objective of a person struggling with addiction and other use disorders is recovery, and also embrace as desired outcomes the goals of improving our health and wellness, learning to live in a way that’s largely self-directed, and working to reach our fullest potential, then how do your internal & external narratives support your success or failure? When you talk to yourself about being in recovery and working towards your goals, do you describe what you want as a ‘someday-maybe’ future, or do you declare the success you want, and try to experience what it feels like to have succeeded? When you share your journey with others, do you tell them where you’d like to go (someday, maybe), or do you tell them definitively what you’re doing and where you’re going – what you’re working hard to achieve? The latter is declarative and stronger while the former is descriptive and weaker; it’s easier to describe a nirvanic future full of good intentions and happy dreams, but you’ll likely never achieve it – not while it only exists as a description of something you might get, someday. The more difficult path is to create what we want as a series of declarative statements, then generate strong language that supports the outcomes we’ll achieve. The distinction may be subtle, but it’s vital we get the language right, as one leads to success and the other to frustration and a self-perpetuating pattern of failure.

Some of us have carried the weak form of descriptive language most of our lives – either as a way to avoid responsibility, or as the natural expression of an “I can’t” internal belief that’s become so well practiced that it’s habituated into our internal self-perception and external self-expression. “Why do others succeed and I always seem to fail?” “Change for me is harder than for others.” Sound familiar? Here’s some good news – it’s possible to identify the negativity bias and begin the process of replacing our weak descriptive language with stronger and more powerful language that declares who we are and creates the life we want – the one we’ve wanted all along but has always been just beyond our grasp.

Let's now look at the 3 Immutable Laws and the role they play in supporting or destroying our efforts to be self-directed and increase our wellbeing. The 3 Immutable Laws of Wellbeing are:

- 1) *You are exactly who you think and say you are,*
- 2) *your life is exactly what you think and say it is, and*
- 3) *what you think and say is a story which can be rewritten.*

Expanding to a more practicable level, the 3 Laws tell us:

You are exactly who you think and say you are, *Be careful what you think & say! Thoughts & words have the power to create or destroy; it's paramount we choose our words deliberately and with the intent to create and sustain the reality we desire. It's also crucial we discover where our thoughts and words are sabotaging our value, esteem, self-worth, and pursuit of desired outcomes.*

What are 3 words or phrases you use frequently to describe yourself, either internally or to others?

your life is exactly what you think and say it is, and *Look closely and you'll see that your life is the sum of all your thoughts, words, decisions, & actions - or lack of. Failure to think, speak, decide or act is in fact making a decision to do nothing; life goes on whether we're engaged or not – you'll get something either way – just not what you want. This fact exposes our (ir)responsibility.*

What are 3 words or phrases you use frequently to describe your life to another person or group?

what you think and say is a story which can be rewritten. *In general, there's what happened to you, then there's the stories you made up about what happened. Fragments of our stories represent excuses and deflections we use to survive, shift blame or make sense of situations we don't understand. These fragments accumulate in the form of beliefs which drive behavior. Over time these become habituated into our default way of thinking, feeling, reacting, and responding. Revisiting our experiences to correct subtle errors in our stories is the first step in rewriting the default language of our lives – the language that creates or destroys our opportunities and potential. You are the author and creator of your life – what happens is what you think, say and believe will happen - you have agency over this! How you describe the life you want either puts you on the path to success, or defaults to a path detached from you and your control.*

Identify 3 things you want for your life that you don't yet have; does the language you're using point to you having control or does fate (chance or luck) play the primary role? Does your language infer you'll achieve your goal – it's only a matter of time - or is it squishy and only describe a someday- maybe – if all the stars align – hopeful possibility? Hope, while important, is not a strategy for your success. Do you have an actionable plan supporting your dream – or is it all just a dream?

Hocus Pocus, where's your Locus

In psychology there's a concept known as "locus of control" – an internal locus indicates you believe your thoughts, words, decisions and actions directly control what happens and how things turn out – you create your own opportunities and are responsible when they succeed or fail. An external locus puts all the power outside of you and into the hands of chance, fate, luck, and other peoples' influence – you're a victim and it's not your fault (responsibility) when bad things happen or you don't get what you wanted.

It's easy to see where your locus of control rests by examining specific events and outcomes in your life and looking closely at the language you used to describe what happened and why it turned out the way it did. It boils down to either "I did this..." or "this happened to me". That may be an oversimplification but concealed within one or the other narrative is the posture of your locus.

A good practice to expose your negativity bias and start to enact a positive linguistic shift is to look at specific situations from your past and dissect them along three lines:

- a) what did you see or expect before the event or situation began – what specific language did you use to describe the opportunity?
- b) what happened during the event or while the situation was playing out – did things unfold the way you expected, or did something shift from what you originally had in mind – did your narrative change or stay the same during the event – if things started to go sideways, how did your language drift in response?
- c) after the fact, when the situation resolved, what language did you use to describe the outcome – was it positive or negative – did you take ownership or shift the blame outside of yourself?

Looking closely at various situations and examples from your life can reveal much about whether you internalize or externalize control and ownership (responsibility). Let's now roll back to SAMHSA's 8 Dimensions and explore how language supports or sabotages forward progress.

Declaring your Self-directed Wellbeing

In this next section I'll summarize one of the eight dimensions and present descriptive vs. declarative language to expose the difference and help you create your own declarations.

POWERFUL INSIGHT: DESCRIBING SOMETHING AS A SOMEDAY-MAYBE FUTURE, HOWEVER WELL INTENTIONED, IS UNLIKELY TO SUCCEED AS THERE'S NO WAY TO MEASURE THE JOURNEY, MILESTONES, PROGRESS, OR OUTCOMES. THIS IS WHAT MAKES DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE WEAK – THERE'S NO CLOSED-LOOP WAY TO MEASURE THE START OR FINISH AS A SERIES OF PROGRESSIVE STEPS.

INSTEAD, DECLARING YOURSELF ON A PATH LITERALLY PUTS YOU ON THE PATH WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO MOVE FORWARD IN A MEASURABLE WAY. EVEN IF YOU'RE ONLY A '1' ON A SCALE OF '1-10', YOU'RE ON A PATH WHICH CAN BE MEASURED AND YOU CAN TAKES STEPS TO MOVE TO '2'. CONTRAST THAT WITH MERELY DESCRIBING WHAT YOU WANT – THERE'S NO WAY TO MEASURE A STARTING OR ENDING POINT OR ANY PROGRESS AS YOU IMPROVE.

Let's compare and contrast descriptive and declarative language for one of SAMHSA's eight dimensions. Looking at Emotional wellness, we can create the following:

Emotional: Coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships

Descriptive Statements – Weak	Declarative Statements - Strong
<p><i>I'm going to try emotional sobriety to better control my emotional responses to people and situations.</i></p> <p><i>I will learn to cope with life's difficulties and learn to be less rigid; I will try to become more flexible as my life unfolds.</i></p> <p><i>I plan to find someone to work with me to increase my chances of success.</i></p> <p><i>I'll make goals for myself and try hard to be successful. When I'm done, I'll be a much better person.</i></p>	<p><i>I have identified specific people and situations that trigger my emotions; I'm actively practicing emotional sobriety by recognizing my strong emotions but not reacting to them with negative behaviors or judgements.</i></p> <p><i>I pay attention to see where I'm being too rigid in specific situations; I'm practicing the skills of non-judgment and letting go and learning to be more flexible.</i></p> <p><i>Using SMART goals, I'm taking specific steps to make measurable improvements in the way I respond to life's hiccups.</i></p> <p><i>I have specific SMART goals and understand how to measure progress, setbacks and success.</i></p> <p><i>I'm working with someone who knows what I'm doing and both encourages me and holds me accountable.</i></p>
<p><i>I will work to improve my relationships by being more open, honest and vulnerable.</i></p> <p><i>I'm sure people will notice my progress and be pleased.</i></p> <p><i>I'm committed to being less concealed and will try not to withdraw when I'm upset.</i></p>	<p><i>My relationships are sound and healthy – they continue to improve as I practice openness and vulnerability.</i></p> <p><i>I'm getting frequent feedback on my progress from people I trust and who already have what I want.</i></p> <p><i>I'm being held accountable for my integrity by someone who cares about me and knows what I'm doing.</i></p>

Can you see the power differential between using descriptive versus declarative language? This sometimes subtle change can mean the difference between success and failure – between experiencing hope or futility as you work your way through a challenging situation or pursuit of a goal. Below are SAMHSA’s other seven dimensions – find a situation from your own life related to one or more of these and work through the process of changing your language to be more powerful. Remember, self-directed wellbeing begins with a declaration, or it doesn’t begin at all!

2. Financial: Satisfaction with current and future financial situations
3. Environmental: Enjoying good health by occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support well-being
4. Intellectual: Recognizing creative abilities and finding ways to expand knowledge and skills
5. Occupational: Personal satisfaction and enrichment from one's work
6. Physical: Recognizing the need for physical activity, healthy foods, and sleep
7. Social: Developing a sense of connection and belonging; and having a [good] support system
8. Spiritual: Expanding one's sense of purpose and meaning in life