

# The Pillars of Human Health: A Holistic Perspective on Well-Being Beyond the Biological

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## Introduction

After more than 32 years working full-time as a clinical neuropsychologist, I have had the privilege of witnessing and contributing to the evolution of healthcare in both its scientific rigor and its understanding of human well-being. Over the decades, the focus of research and clinical practice has progressively zoomed in on the micro-levels of human health: brain chemistry, neurological mechanisms, and ever-smaller biological phenomena. While these advancements have undeniably been groundbreaking and vital to understanding disease processes, I believe the time has come to zoom out. To view human health not through the lens of reagents and data points, but through the wide-angle perspective of the lived human experience of the environments we inhabit, the relationships we nurture, and the core values that sustain us.

Health, in its broadest and truest sense, encompasses more than the mere absence of illness. It is a dynamic state of equilibrium, where mental, emotional, and physical well-being coexist harmoniously. Over the years, I have observed that what often contributes most profoundly to human health is not solely found in the laboratory, but in the way we connect with the world around us and within ourselves. My aim with this article is to explore six fundamental circumstances that, I argue, lie at the heart of human health: connecting with oneself and others, feeling compassion for animals and fellow beings, upholding justice, practicing self-discipline, cultivating lasting inner peace, and fostering personal growth. These elements, though perhaps intangible or abstract compared to biochemical markers, are just as crucial if not more so for the cultivation and maintenance of robust mental and physical health.

## Connection with Oneself, Others, Work, and the World

Connection is the foundation upon which health is built. A well-connected person experiences harmony across multiple levels: the intrapersonal, interpersonal, professional, and environmental. First, a strong connection with oneself is essential for maintaining self-awareness and emotional regulation, key components of mental health. When individuals lack this internal bond, they are prone to feelings

of emptiness, confusion, and emotional volatility. Understanding one's own emotional landscape, motivations, and needs allows for healthier coping mechanisms and fosters resilience in the face of stress. Equally important is the connection with others. Human beings are inherently social creatures, and isolation can have devastating effects on both mental and physical health. Meaningful relationships—whether with family, friends, or colleagues—offer support systems that buffer stress and increase feelings of belonging and security. Without these ties, individuals may struggle with loneliness and despair, leading to both psychological and physiological ailments. A connection with work, too, plays a significant role. Feeling a sense of purpose and contribution can enhance self-esteem and provide a source of identity. In contrast, disengagement from one's work, whether through alienation or burnout, often leads to emotional distress and health complications. Lastly, a sense of connection with the world around us, with nature and the greater ecosystem, fosters a profound sense of place and belonging. Many studies show that spending time in natural environments can reduce stress and anxiety, enhancing overall well-being.

## Compassion for Animals and Others

Compassion, particularly when directed outward to other beings—whether human or non-human—creates a powerful ripple effect on health. Compassion is more than empathy; it involves an active desire to alleviate suffering. This outward focus not only benefits those receiving compassion but also significantly impacts the mental health of the person extending it. Individuals who practice compassion tend to experience lower levels of stress and depression, alongside heightened feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction.

When we extend compassion to animals, we cultivate a sense of interconnectedness with all living beings. This reinforces the bond between humans and the natural world, promoting psychological health. Moreover, compassion bridges the gap between individuals, creating stronger social bonds and building trust. In a society often dominated by competitiveness and individualism, cultivating compassion allows for emotional healing, resilience, and a sense of shared humanity. The health of society itself improves when compassion is a guiding principle.



## Justice

Justice is fundamental to individual and collective health. A fair, just environment is one where individuals feel valued, respected, and secure. When people believe that they are treated equitably, they are more likely to thrive mentally and emotionally. On the contrary, environments characterized by systemic injustice—whether in the form of discrimination, inequality, or unfair practices—breed chronic stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, which can precipitate a host of mental and physical health problems.

For patients, feeling that they are treated justly within healthcare systems is crucial to building trust and ensuring compliance with medical recommendations. Beyond that, living in a society that upholds justice allows people to experience a sense of security and community, which is essential for both personal and societal well-being.

## Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is the ability to regulate one's behaviors, emotions, and thoughts in pursuit of long-term goals, often at the expense of immediate gratification. It serves as a key component of both mental and physical health. Individuals who practice self-discipline are generally better equipped to engage in health-promoting behaviors such as regular exercise, proper nutrition, and effective stress management. Furthermore, self-discipline enhances psychological resilience by fostering a sense of control over one's life circumstances, which is an essential buffer against anxiety and depression. However, self-discipline must be balanced. Excessive rigidity can lead to burnout or feelings of failure when perfection is not achieved, which can harm mental health. Therefore, self-discipline must be practiced with self-compassion and flexibility, allowing for moments of rest and reflection.

## Inner Peace

Inner peace is a state of enduring mental and emotional calm, regardless of external stressors. It is not the absence of challenges but the ability to maintain a centered and balanced state in the face of them. Long-term experiences of inner peace contribute to lower levels of stress hormones, improved cardiovascular health, and better immune system functioning. Inner peace is often cultivated through mindfulness, meditation, or spiritual practices. These activities foster emotional regulation, reduce rumination, and increase overall life satisfaction. In a fast-paced world where external demands are ever-present, cultivating inner peace provides individuals with a protective buffer against burnout and mental fatigue, supporting sustained mental health.

## Personal Growth

Finally, personal growth—the continuous development of one's skills, knowledge, and emotional capacity—contributes deeply to a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Individuals who are committed to personal growth are more adaptable, resilient, and optimistic in the face of challenges. Personal growth fosters self-efficacy, the belief that one can affect change in their own life, which is directly linked to better mental health outcomes.

In the therapeutic context, facilitating personal growth in clients is often the turning point in their recovery journey. When individuals can see progress in their emotional or psychological development, it fosters hope and resilience. Personal growth helps individuals to move beyond survival, toward thriving in all areas of their lives.

## Conclusion

In sum, health is more than the absence of disease; it is the presence of connection, compassion, justice, discipline, peace, and growth. These six pillars, though broad, are deeply intertwined with human health at every level. As we explore the intricate workings of the human mind and body in the minutiae of scientific research, we must not lose sight of the broader contexts in which human health is experienced and sustained. It is through these expansive and holistic dimensions that we truly come to understand what it means to be healthy. In my 32 years of clinical neuropsychological practice, I have come to realize that addressing the root causes of health and illness requires a far broader perspective than the traditional focus on symptoms and diagnoses. The six pillars of health are integral to understanding not just the challenges my clients face, but also the pathways toward healing. These pillars form the foundation of my therapeutic approach, offering both my clients and myself an expansive view of health that goes beyond the biological or pathological. By incorporating these dimensions into therapy, I engage with clients in a way that illuminates the underlying factors contributing to their conditions. We explore not just their symptoms, but their lives as a whole—how they connect with themselves and others, how much compassion they extend or receive, whether they experience justice in their personal or professional environments, and whether they feel a sense of inner peace or are constantly driven by anxiety. I also discuss with them their sense of personal growth and whether they feel capable of change. These discussions allow me to understand their health limitations from a much broader angle, revealing the deep interplay between mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

My clients have responded to this approach with tremendous appreciation. By addressing health through these six pillars, they gain an expansive insight into their lives and how various aspects of their existence contribute to both their suffering and their potential for recovery. They come to understand that health is not a static state, but an ongoing process of adaptation. This recognition empowers them to take ownership of their health, to make meaningful changes that extend beyond the immediate issue and into the larger context of their lives. Furthermore, I believe this approach should be a core part of the initial assessment for every general practitioner and psychologist. Instead of narrowly focusing on symptoms, clinicians should inquire about these broader dimensions to form a more comprehensive understanding of where the breakdowns in health are occurring. It can uncover factors that may not be immediately visible but are critical to understanding the origins of a condition. This would represent a fundamental shift in healthcare, allowing for more holistic, person-centered care that recognizes the complexity of human health.

Incorporating these six pillars into clinical practice not only provides valuable insight but also serves as a guide for patients on their journey to healing. They come to realize that health is not solely about resolving an immediate issue but involves a lifetime of balancing and adjusting to life's ever-changing demands. This approach empowers them to be active participants in their health, capable of making decisions that not only address symptoms but enhance their overall well-being. In my experience, this broadened perspective on health has transformed the therapeutic process, and I am confident it can do the same for the wider field of healthcare.

