Integrative-Sustainability: A New Model for Wellness Psychology

Clarissa E. Steffen Ed.D.
Pacific University
Integrative-Sustainability: A New Model for Wellness Psychology

**Description**

**Introduction:** Old models of sustainability tend to consider only environmental factors and ignore a radial holistic perspective. Certainly, we must consider a more dynamic point of view. As we understand that not only personality, but relationships exist on a continuum we must also consider that this continuum is not linear, but that it rotates in a radial fashion with many facets connecting, and integrating.

**Overall Arching Concepts:** Humans and all living beings do not exist in isolation; they intersect and relate in many ways and on multiple levels. Some elements maintain a consistent connection while others may experience a momentary or fleeting connection. Whether the connection is fleeting or consistent, there is a lasting impression or trace element that creates a chemical memory of the event or in some cases a deeper connection that becomes a conduit that forms a neural network. Each experience influences our being and becomes a part of who we are and what we become. It is the relational connection between these experiences, acceptance of self, and ability to adapt and maintain health and well-being that promotes sustainability. A formula for an integrative approach to developing sustainability in counseling is provided with the acknowledgment for other models that contribute to this integrative approach. This model primarily consists of the development of conscious choice, emotional intelligence, synchronous-self, and life balance in counseling.

**Keywords**
Wellness, Sustainability, Integrated Health, Resilience, Mindfulness, Choice, Empowerment

**Disciplines**
Alternative and Complementary Medicine | Community Health and Preventive Medicine | Counseling Psychology | Counselor Education | Environmental Public Health | Health and Medical Administration | Health and Physical Education | Health Psychology | Health Services Administration | International Public Health | Interprofessional Education | Medical Education | Medical Humanities | Mental and Social Health | Other Public Health | Psychiatry and Psychology | Psychology | Public Health Education and Promotion | Social Work | Theory and Philosophy

**Comments**
Integrated healthcare is growing and is now being offered in more settings. Wellness psychology has long been at the forefront of this movement. We have long understood the significance of resilience to overall health and well-being, but we must consider ways in which we can sustain adaptive change. As healthcare aligns with global efforts, more than ever in the past we will need to develop, and create models that support a worldwide view, and integrate psychology that promotes client and patient choice and empowerment.

**Rights**
Terms of use for work posted in CommonKnowledge.

This academic paper is available at CommonKnowledge: https://commons.pacificu.edu/sppfac/10
Integrative-Sustainability: A New Model for Wellness Psychology

Clare E Steffen, Ed.D., ND, CADCII, ICADC, CNHP, CMH, NCC, BCC

Introduction:

Old models of sustainability tend to consider only environmental factors and ignore a radial holistic perspective. Certainly, we must consider a more dynamic point of view. As we understand that not only personality, but relationships exit on a continuum we must also consider that this continuum in not linear, but that it rotates in a radial fashion with many facets connecting, and integrating.

Overall Arching Concepts:

Humans and all living beings do not exist in isolation; they intersect and relate in many ways and on multiple levels. Some elements maintain a consistent connection while others may experience a momentary or fleeting connection. Whether the connection is fleeting or consistent, there is a lasting impression, or trace element that creates a chemical memory of the event or in some cases a deeper connection that becomes a conduit that forms a neural network. Each experience influences our being and becomes a part of who we are and what we become. It is the relational connection between these experiences, acceptance of self, and ability to adapt and maintain health and well-being that promotes sustainability. A formula for an integrative approach to developing sustainability in counseling is provided with the acknowledgement for other models that contribute to this integrative approach. This model primarily consists of development of conscious choice, emotional intelligence, synchronous-self, and life balance in counseling.

Moving Beyond Resilience to Sustainability:

In psychology we focus on resilience but perhaps it isn’t enough to just focus our efforts on determining ways to become more resilient. Respectfully, the study of resilience has been critical in advancing our understanding of trauma. In life, loss and traumatic events occur, and it is not necessarily a one-time circumstance. When multiple losses or traumatic events occur, the individual, family, or community becomes more vulnerable. Simply being resilient to withstand these occurrences may not be enough. More importantly we need to focus on applying the principles of sustainability.

So what is sustainability? In medicine we have recognized the need to provide integrative treatment in effort to offer total wellness. The blending of various professional services as a collaborative team makes it easier for the patient to navigate the system and it offers a higher degree of support.

Psychology, counseling, and mental health services all play a significant role in connecting the patient to support services. How do we move the patient to the role of client, who exercises a higher degree of choice in utilizing mental health services? Perhaps we may need to consider the direction of positive psychology and more importantly, wellness coaching as it empowers the
individual and assumes a position of human equality at the gate. While the provider of mental health services must maintain expertise and knowledge in their ability to provide treatment, the patient must experience a high degree of trust in the healer’s ability to guide them toward wellness. The concept of being a healer, mixes model and schools of thought that do not typically occur in coaching, and although the concept exists in psychology it is not without conflict or debate.

The shift of maintaining expert skills while connecting on an emotionally available human level is a delicate art form. As this shift occurs, the patient and the mental health provider engage in an exchange of knowledge and skills that releases the patient to become more independent, self-sufficient, and free to consider informed choices that increase their level of wellness. The picture of what the terrain of wellness looks like will vary depending on the initial status, level of functioning, and skills acquired by the individual in treatment.

Consider the process below that offers insight into what will necessarily happen to bring an individual to a wellness perspective when using an integrative-sustainability model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synchronus Self</th>
<th>Calming the Distrub</th>
<th>Resilient Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Time & Place Connection  
• Work Self Connection | • Congruency  
• Adaptive Change | • Balanced Lifestyle  
• Wellness Perspective  
• Worldview |

**Integrative-Sustainability**

When working with an individual we must explore their cultural beliefs and influences to gain understanding of how they relate to time and place. It would also be beneficial to examine their connection to the roles they function in within their life and how they see the work contribution they make on a social level. Ideally, there would be synchronicity between these self-views, but if it is a source of conflict that would become part of the focus of treatment.

If there are issues of incongruence between what the individual thinks and feels and how they behave, and this results in distress, this would become a focus in treatment. Ways in which the
individual displayed an ability to adapt and change would be explored and utilized as foundation for growth.

The importance of resilience is exhibited when it occurs as a part of a dynamic and not as an isolated incident. We look for resilience in a relational manner, so that we can promote balance in mind, body, and spirit to create a wellness perspective, and lifestyle. Examining the individual’s worldview and seeking examples of universality and acceptance represent a healthy worldview that may increase functionality, even in times of distress.

**Sustainability Counseling:**

Accepting that the course of treatment is a dynamic process, and that everything is relational may allow us to return to the question of exploring integrative-sustainability. Perhaps the answers to wellness extend beyond the scientific. The realms of the spiritual and philosophical hold many solutions to the human condition. If we want to examine sustainability, we must consider how to go beyond healing and motivate others to *thrive*. Understanding how to motivate another human being is a complex process, and is another example of why we must hold a radial versus a linear view of the continuum. This model is limited by graphic representation, but offers a foundational view of how we might build sustainability.

In assisting our clients in their ability to develop new and healthy choices, we promote adaptation and change in thinking. These changes in thought impact emotional functioning and are geared to increase cognitive flexibility and emotional resilience. Introducing the concepts of
mindfulness and wellness practices offer a broader view. The influences of neuroscience and brain-behavior relationships provide us an opportunity to delve deeper into understanding functioning, accurately direct skills development, and treatment outcomes. When the client actively participates in treatment, they learn in a manner that may increase their ability to transfer and generalize what has been learned. When this occurs, and when supports are put in place to maintain new learning and skill rehearsal, these changes stand a better chance of maintaining and sustaining.

The process of applying the integrative-sustainability model in counseling is ongoing and dynamic. See the model below and consider that each of the elements of sustainability counseling would be independently and holistically explored during each phase of treatment to create an integrative approach.

### Ongoing Information and Relational Process

**Choice and Sustainability:**

This discussion on integrative-sustainability may be the first of many to follow. In part, the solution lies in moving choice from an *automatic* to a *conscious level*, but isn’t the human being more than the sum total of the choices they make? Constructivist views might have us believe that we are deterministically stuck and will reside from which we came and never have the opportunity to transcend that existence, but there are many examples in life that disprove that...
thought process and support resilience. What lies beyond resilience if not sustainability, than what?

Existentially, we seek to understand our purpose and meaning in life. The bigger question of why do we exist becomes replaced by *how do we maintain existence and sustain life* at the highest level of functioning possible for each individual? The remedy to despair and hopeless is *choice*. Having the skills and ability to create healthy choice will allow us to experience freedom and to experience self-empowerment.

**Sustainable Choice Model**

Choice, like resilience has been explored by psychologist and is often linked to learning, but perhaps we need to expand the concept to fully explore all that choice encompasses. If we return to the original premise that everything in life is relational, than this would also apply to the choices we make. Dividing choice into four quadrants provides a self-organization tool that can be shared with clients.

Life, is defined by our relationship to self and others and the manner in which we make a contribution via work or our personal/intimate, or social relationships. Health is viewed holistically (mind, body, and spirit). Conscious intelligence is devised of knowing, intuiting, and monitoring and regulating the use of our thoughts and feelings. Love connects to the other quadrants and is the force that drives us to function by connecting us to self, others, and the social contribution we make through the work we do or the roles we play in life. The four quadrants create a functional force and life balance that is movable and dynamic or interactive.
Strengths-Based Triad:

It is recommended that the counselor who utilizes integrative-sustainability apply a strength-based model that promotes dynamic functioning, a focus of well-being, and positive planning with the client. The idea behind this is to involve the client in their own healing process to encourage the development of a wellness perspective and promote any necessary lifestyle changes to maintain and sustain wellness. Elements of traditional or evidence-based models, westernized medicine blended with holistic and spiritual models are combined to create this integrative approach to creating sustainability for your client.

### Strength-Based Triad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamic Functioning</th>
<th>Focus of Well-Being</th>
<th>Positive Planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Promotion of Social &amp; Emotional Intelligence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Healthy Mental Status and Mind-Body-Spirit Connection</strong></td>
<td><strong>Grounding to Earthly Elements and Tree of Life</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Process</td>
<td>• Medical and Mental Health Diagnostic Management</td>
<td>• Faith &amp; Healing Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Psycho-Education</td>
<td>• Cultural Acceptance &amp; Inclusion</td>
<td>• Healthy Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cognitive-Behavioral Input</td>
<td>• Gender Orientation Equality</td>
<td>• Community Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Healthy Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Transition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Dynamic Functioning:

The body of literature on social and emotional intelligence is met with controversy, but yet it persists and has many supporters internationally. What it has accomplished is a way in which the lay person can understand cognition and examine ways in which they may understand their thinking, label their feelings and monitor and regulate emotions in a developing healthy relationships. Bringing this to your clients by offering psycho-educational services that teach the tenets of social and emotional intelligence are considered beneficial.

Cognitive-Behavioral theory (CBT) has provided many tools for clients to track and learn how their thinking effects mood and functioning. Utilizing this approach and any of the new versions of CBT, such as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), Acceptance-Commitment Therapy (ACT), or the like, expand their thinking and skills set, and can be applied as a way to analyze relationships for their degree of health.

### Focus of Well-Being:

Generally, medical treatment when combined with psychological services involve a mental status exam. Significant information can be gathered in this process, but it is also important to incorporate holistic thinking when examining the client. In the event that the client is given a
mental health diagnosis, it is critical that they be provided the necessary tools to manage their condition and go beyond seeing themselves as their diagnosis, but rather as it being one element of their total being. It is crucial that we incorporate, include, and appreciate their cultural identity and take an inclusive approach in treatment. Respectfully, including the client’s gender orientation and identity adds another element of the wellness identity, and is simply a part of the total picture.

**Positive Planning:**

Having intent and a mindful approach is the starting position, but it must be followed up with planning and action. Without this in place, we are doing an injustice because we miss the opportunity to access skills, strengths, and aspects of resilience that support sustainability. Having a flexible plan can contribute to feelings and thoughts of confidence that support healthy choice. Considering the individual’s spiritual, religious, or earth spirit beliefs provides another facet to counseling. The tree of life is found in many circles and can be used as a symbolic way to connect to becoming grounded. If another symbol has more meaning or significance to the client, this image can be used in replacement of the tree of life. What is important is that there be personal meaning and relevance in the symbol and that it is a visual or mental image that is committed in memory and represents life balance and wellness.

The ultimate outcome of any therapy or counseling is healthy self-empowerment, connecting to a healthy community to avoid isolation, and the ability to adapt and transition with flexibility and ease. Having a self-directed plan that promotes life balance, wellness, and sustains healthy functioning would allow the client to terminate treatment and function independently.

**Summary:**

At this point, this position on integrative-sustainability is merely theoretical. There are a number of components of the theory that are evidence-based and supported scientifically. The place in which the subjective meets the objective is where this theory fits. The split between these views seem arbitrary when one considers a radial perspective. There is room for both to coexist in an integrative model of wellness. Collectively, what comes before influences what follows or happens next. The universal consciousness or essence remains a part of the greater spectrum of life. We are united and thus, the well-being or illness of one impacts that of another. In universal love, we support the dignity or integrity of each living being. The continuum expands and creates a centrifugal force of well-being. We mindfully attract wellness when we couple intention with action. Resilience is extremely important and not to be ignored, but perhaps we can offer a next step that will allow clients to claim total wellness and sustain it for life.
References:

