



David B. King
Psychology

Brighter Paths to Wellbeing: An Integrative Model of Human Intelligence and Health

In 1983, Howard Gardner introduced his theory of multiple intelligences, suggesting that a single construct (e.g., IQ) was far too limiting to describe all mental capacities possessed by human beings. While he was neither the first nor the last to suggest such an idea, his theory sparked critical debate regarding additional intelligences. Today, the study of human intelligence remains highly controversial, and many interpretations of this complex psychological construct have been

proposed. A holistic perspective would maintain four general classes of intelligence: (1) bodily or physical intelligence (awareness of bodily processes, physical mastery, etc.), (2) rational intelligence or IQ (linguistic, mathematical, and spatial abilities), (3) emotional intelligence (awareness of emotions, emotional control, social abilities, etc.), and (4) spiritual intelligence (critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion).

All of these ability sets or “intelligences” function in different ways within various domains of our daily lives. Depending on an individual’s potential, each class of intelligence acts as a tool kit for living, providing unique means of decision-making, reasoning, problem-solving, and adaptability. With regard to our health and wellbeing, it is suggested that each intelligence plays a critical role in illness and injury prevention, detection, and management (including treatment and recovery). This proposition is supported by current research which has observed positive relationships between health and each class of human intelligence.

Bodily or physical intelligence plays the most fundamental role in our health. This is essentially the “mind-body” connection often discussed in popular media, as it is the awareness of, control over, and mastery of one’s physical body. Bodily intelligence functions in a number of ways, allowing us to detect physical signs and symptoms of disorder, avoiding injury via awareness of physical limits, and compensating for injury. It further contributes to the prevention of injury and illness by means of exercise, fitness, and relaxation.

“Health is a large word. It embraces not the body only, but the mind and spirit as well...” – James H. West



Both longitudinal and concurrent studies have revealed very high correlations between positive health and higher IQ, suggesting that the role of rational intelligence in our health should not be underestimated. The prevention of illness and injury by means of living a healthy lifestyle depends largely on this ability set, which involves logic and scientific learning. Logical reasoning and problem-solving further contribute to the capacity to self-diagnose and judge when it is appropriate to seek expert advice. It has also been suggested that adherence to treatment plans and medication regimens relies heavily on IQ, perhaps depending on one's ability to understand their purpose and function.

Positive correlations have also been observed between health and emotional intelligence. The role of emotional intelligence in our health and wellbeing is far more internal, in so much that it depends on emotional processes related to injury and illness. Nevertheless, it is our emotional ability set which contributes significantly to our management of stress, and it is the avoidance of the by-products of stress (e.g., anxiety, depression, fatigue) which contributes positively to our health. Emotional intelligence also functions in the detection of injury and illness via the perception of emotional manifestations of underlying conditions.

Spiritual intelligence plays a similar role in the prevention and detection of injury and illness. Not only does it provide unique means of stress management, but it also functions in the perception of spiritual shifts (i.e., changes on a holistic level) related to underlying physical or mental conditions. It is in the management of illness and injury, however, that the full potential of a spiritual ability set can be observed. It is during this stage that the interpretation of an injury or illness first occurs. It is also in this stage that meaning and purpose are extracted from the event and context for the experience is created within one's life.

What we are left with is a model of health in which each class of human intelligence plays a critical and necessary role at all stages, from the prevention of illness and injury to their detection and management. It is currently suggested, however, that there exists an

additional stage beyond health management, in which only a spiritual intelligence can function: illness and injury interpretation. Although interpretation is one aspect of health management, it continues beyond typical recovery – beyond physical and mental healing. It is in this final stage that meaning and purpose continue to be extracted from the health-related event or experience.

The story of Jacqui Saburido provides us with a prime example of this health interpretation stage. At the age of 20, Jacqui was the victim of a drunk-driving accident, suffering third degree burns to over 60% of her body. Permanently disfigured, Jacqui has since made the following statement: "Even if it means sitting here in front of a camera with no ears, no nose, no eyebrows, no hair, I'll do this a thousand times if it will help someone make a wise decision. I also think some of us who are strong have to go through things that help us make choices for those who are weaker."

A number of aspects of spiritual intelligence are at work here. Jacqui is clearly attempting to interpret the event within the context of her life. She is also extracting purpose and meaning from the event, two critical and ongoing steps in her recovery. Although spiritual intelligence plays a crucial role in all aspects of health, it is argued that spiritual capacities lead to unique outcomes that the other intelligences simply cannot produce: interpretation, meaning, and purpose. Issues of meaning and purpose must be addressed in crises of health, by both individuals and the institution as a whole, if full recovery is the ultimate goal. As James H. West stated, "Health is a large word. It embraces not the body only, but the mind and spirit as well; and not today's pain or pleasure alone, but the whole being and outlook of a man." ■

Email D. King at davidking2@trentu.ca for cited references.

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