“Much of what we think will improve our wellbeing is either misguided or just plain wrong.” So begins the new book, “Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements,” by Tom Rath and Jim Harter, Ph.D.

As Harter and Rath discovered—through a thorough review of decades of scientific research and a comprehensive global study of more than 150 countries, which gave them insights into the wellbeing of more than 98 percent of the world’s population—most people don’t know what’s good for them.

Most of us equate wellbeing with wealth and health. But that’s not the whole story, according to Rath and Harter. What really comprises wellbeing are five interconnected elements: Career Wellbeing, Social Wellbeing, Financial Wellbeing, Physical Wellbeing, and Community Wellbeing. These are the common factors of a life well-lived for people everywhere.

How to obtain them, however, is the challenge.

Working against our own best interests

We know that physical activity will improve our health, yet we skip exercising. Missing one workout won’t give us a heart attack or cause a stroke—so we let ourselves off the hook for a day.

We know that too much sugar and fried foods are bad for our health. But we grab a handful of candy or chips without even thinking. One French fry can’t cause diabetes or obesity, right?

As long as we allow short-term desires to win, it will be difficult to effect long-term behavioral change.

Similarly, we know it’s important to spend quality time with our friends and family, but when work is pressing, we don’t stop to ask a friend how he is doing.

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WALKING IS AN EASY WAY TO BE ACTIVE

A regular physical activity routine such as brisk walking helps to—
• Control body weight.
• Improve mood and symptoms of depression and anxiety.
• Reduce high cholesterol and blood pressure.
• Keep bones and muscles strong.
• Reduce risk of diseases like heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.
• Increase your life expectancy.

You just need to:
1. Get started. Get a comfortable pair of walking shoes and then keep your shoes at work or in the car. Start slowly to avoid stiff or sore muscles and joints. Walk with a friend, a group, or with your dog for at least 10 minutes at a time.

2. Fit it in. Think creatively about how you can add “steps” to your day. When possible, park farther from your office, take the stairs rather than the elevator, and walk to go shopping or to do other errands. Make it a family activity and walk together after dinner a few times a week.

3. Stick with it. Get a routine by putting it on your calendar. Set goals to increase steps, track your progress in a log, and buddy-up for encouragement. Remember that each step adds up.

4. Ramp it up. Try to walk more frequently. Walk more briskly over time. Increase the distance you walk. Each week, add a few minutes to your time.

Wellbeing

When we think about our personal finances, we often spend instead of saving. Putting money into a retirement plan would yield several times its original value later on, but spending it on an indulgent purchase is so much more appealing right now.

With so many options to satisfy ourselves in the moment, it can be difficult to make the right long-term decisions. It is, after all, in our nature to do things that will provide the most immediate reward. This is wired into our DNA for basic survival. For decades, psychologists have described increases in the ability to delay gratification as a cornerstone of human development from childhood to adulthood.

But the reality is, our short-term self still wins and gets dessert, despite objections from our long-term self that wants a healthy body and a long life. For example, when we asked more than 23,000 people about their purchasing habits, only 10 percent said that they buy candy regularly. But when we asked the same group of people later in the survey if there was a bowl of candy sitting right in front of them if they would eat some, more than 70 percent admitted they would.

As long as we allow short-term desires to win, it will be difficult to effect long-term behavioral change. However, we learned from people with the highest levels of wellbeing that there is a simple solution to this problem: If we can find short-term incentives that are consistent with our long-term objectives, it is much easier to make the right decisions in the moment.

For example, we’re more likely to skip a cheeseburger and fries not when we ponder the long-term risk of obesity or diabetes, but when we consider the short-term reality that devouring it will lead to a “high-fat hangover” that ruins the rest of the day. Or we might choose to exercise tomorrow morning because we know that just 20 minutes of activity can boost our mood for the next 12 hours.

When we can see an immediate payoff, we are more likely to change our behavior in the moment. This aligns our daily actions with our long-term interests.

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Counselor Column

3. Rather than having a weight loss goal (which is an outcome goal), create small behavioral goals. What behaviors do you want to be doing consistently in three months that will enable you to achieve the outcome goal of weight loss? Start with three or four monthly goals. An example of a behavior goal would be: I will eat five servings of fruits and vegetables six days per week.

4. Write two to four weekly or bi-weekly goals that support your monthly behavior goals. An example of a weekly goal would be: (First Week) I will eat an orange in the morning with my breakfast on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday.

5. For each goal, ask yourself how confident you are on a scale of one to 10 that you will complete this goal. If your answer is less than a six, revise the goal to make sure you are confident and that you will be successful.

Starting with small steps will help you make positive changes in your eating habits—leading to weight loss and a healthier you! Start small and know that you don’t have to be perfect. Continue to search for inspiration and enjoy the journey to be well!