



The Wellness Councils of America Presents...  
**A WELCOA Expert Interview**

# Seeking Wellness

Wellness Pioneer Don Ardell, PhD speaks out  
on the state of wellness in the United States today.



**Don Ardell, PhD**  
Wellness Center Director,  
Seek Wellness.com

*In this exclusive interview, wellness pioneer Don Ardell, PhD sat down with WELCOA President David Hunnicutt, PhD to talk about the evolution of wellness since its early days in the 1970s. In their conversation, Drs. Hunnicutt and Ardell explore the state of wellness in the United States today, where wellness is falling short, and what the field should focus on in the 21st Century.*

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VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT [WWW.WELCOA.ORG](http://WWW.WELCOA.ORG).



## ABOUT THE WELLNESS COUNCILS OF AMERICA

The Wellness Councils of America is one of North America's most trusted voices on the topic of worksite wellness. With over a decade of experience, WELCOA is widely recognized and highly regarded for its innovative approach to worksite wellness.

Indeed, through their internationally recognized "Well Workplace" awards initiative, WELCOA has helped hundreds of companies transform their corporate cultures and improve the health and well-being of their most valuable asset—their employees.

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# Topics Covered

- Q1:** How did you get religion in the area of health and wellness?
- Q2:** There are a number of definitions for wellness, Don. How do you define the concept?
- Q3:** In the early days, did you experience any resistance or animosity to the wellness concept?
- Q4:** In general, do you think the wellness philosophy is something that resonates with Americans right now?
- Q5:** Do you believe that wellness, as a discipline, is where it needs to be?
- Q6:** What's your take on the overall health status of Americans?
- Q7:** Given—as you say—the ghastly state of American health, are you optimistic about the future health and wellness of the American people?
- Q8:** What practical advice would you offer wellness practitioners for maximizing the wellness concept in their organizations?
- Q9:** Tell us about the wellness practices in your life.

## FEATURED RESOURCE:

### SeekWellness.com

SeekWellness.com is a website designed to encourage, empower, and support healthcare consumers to improve their level of wellness by providing information, services and products, all chosen with the consumer's best interests in mind. Read the sidebar to learn more.



# Seeking Wellness

Wellness Pioneer Don Ardell, PhD speaks out on the state of wellness in the United States today.

In this exclusive interview, wellness pioneer Don Ardell, PhD sat down with WELCOA President David Hunnicutt, PhD to talk about the evolution of wellness since its early days in the 1970s. In their conversation, Drs. Hunnicutt and Ardell explore the state of wellness in the United States today, where wellness is falling short, and what the field should focus on in the 21st Century.

**Don Ardell, PhD**  
**Wellness Center Director,**  
**SeekWellness.com**

Don's first book, *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs, and Disease*, published in 1977 helped spark the wellness move-



ment. Since then, Don has written 15 additional books relating to obtaining higher levels of wellness. Don has also written and produced more than 60 editions of a provocative quarterly newsletter called the *Ardell Wellness Report*, as well as a weekly electronic self-management newsletter; both of which are now a part of the SeekWellness.com Wellness Center.

Don has degrees from George Washington University, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Stanford University and The Union Institute in Ohio. Don has also been a member of the board of trustees of the National Wellness Institute for eight years. Contact Don at [donaldardell@seek-wellness.com](mailto:donaldardell@seek-wellness.com)

## Q1: How did you get religion in the area of health and wellness?

**ARDELL:** I deny it. It never happened. I swear to God—I'm innocent. I never got religion in the area of wellness or any other area. I am religion-free, and I want to keep wellness that way, too.

Seriously though, I came to understand wellness in the early 1970s. I was the executive director of the largest health-planning agency in America—the San Francisco Bay Area Comprehensive Health Planning Agency. In my last year-and-a-half there, I experienced a number of personal changes like becoming unmarried, for instance. I happened to meet a number of people who knew much more about health than I did. Even though I'd been an athlete and a runner all my life, I didn't know much about the broader area of prevention. I was an urban planner and a jock learning about various healing modalities and holistic health—a good portion of what I now consider flaky. But much of what I learned then emphasized a fundamental point I tried to incorporate into the health planning agency: namely that modern medicine

is a wonderful thing, but there are two problems—people expect too much of it and too little of themselves.

The whole idea is staying well in the first place. I thought, "Wow, we're spending all these resources—which, by the way, were plentiful in our agency—in medical politics and battles over hospital beds, new hospital wings and the like." We were literally fighting all the time over the expansion of the medical system, and we could because—by law—we had a two-fold mission: to coordinate medical facilities, manpower and resources and to promote the health status of the population. Well, guess what we—and just about every other health-planning agency, were ignoring? You guessed it—promoting the health status of the population.

Our agencies weren't doing anything—zero—in the prevention and wellness area unless you considered saving money by preventing duplication of medical facilities, services and manpower in making people healthy. I think anyone would have a hard time making the case that our efforts were preventive in nature—moreover, we weren't even all that successful at preventing duplication to begin with. So, rather than focusing on the medical system, I wanted



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WELLNESS IS A MINDSET, A PREDISPOSITION TO ADOPT  
A SERIES OF KEY PRINCIPLES IN A NUMBER OF  
LIFE AREAS THAT LEAD TO HIGH LEVELS OF WELL-BEING  
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**David Hunnicutt, PhD**  
**President,**  
**Wellness Councils of America**

David Hunnicutt, PhD, was named President of WELCOA in 1995. Under Dr. Hunnicutt's guidance, WELCOA routinely distributes millions of publications each year to its corporate membership of over 2,500 companies, and over 700 Well Workplaces. These publications are designed to increase quality of life, enhance employee productivity and improve personal health, and well-being.



Known for his pragmatic approach and strong background in organizational development and corporate leadership, Dr. Hunnicutt is widely recognized as a national wellness advocate. By dedicating his professional energies to advancing the cause of corporate wellness, Dr. Hunnicutt consults with hundreds of organizations each year including Merrill Lynch, Caterpillar, and the United Nations to help them link health promotion objectives to business outcomes.

to focus on the determinants of health, especially lifestyle and environment. These areas presented a much greater payoff for a minimal investment, especially when you compared it to our current efforts.

Anyway, I became so excited about wellness and prevention that I did two things. I decided that promoting healthy lifestyles is exactly what I wanted to do with my life. And second, I learned that I couldn't do what I truly wanted in the health-planning agency. In fact, I really wasn't doing my job. I was a wild-eyed, long-haired crazy California boy promoting healthy lifestyles, and ignoring the medical facilities portion of my job—or at least some people thought so.

**Q2: There are a number of definitions for wellness, Don. How do you define the concept?**

**ARDELL:** Wellness is, first and foremost, a choice to assume responsibility for the quality of your life. It begins with a conscious decision to shape a healthy lifestyle. Wellness is a mindset, a predisposition to adopt a series of key principles in a number of life areas that lead to high levels of well-being and life satisfaction. This mind-

set protects you against the temptation of blaming someone else, making excuses, shirking accountability, whining or wetting your pants in the face of adversity—I threw that in to help you remember this explanation. Wellness is an alternative to dependency on doctors and drugs, to complacency, to mediocrity and to self-pity, boredom and slothfulness.

Many wellness promoters, myself included, see wellness as a philosophy that embraces numerous principles for good health. The areas most closely affected by your wellness commitments include self-responsibility, exercise and fitness, nutrition, stress management, critical thinking, meaning and purpose or spirituality, emotional intelligence, humor and play and effective relationships.

**Q3: In the early days, did you experience any resistance or animosity to the wellness concept?**

**ARDELL:** I've never felt any negativity or animosity in my promotion of wellness. Never. Though I have run into people who held misconceptions about wellness. For example, I'd go into a town and someone would say, "Watch out for doctor so-and-so; he doesn't like this wellness idea." My standard response was, "I bet the good doctor actually has no problem whatsoever with wellness." Inevitably I'd hear, "No really. He's not at all happy that we've brought you into town." So I'd arrange a meeting with the doctor and soon discover the doctor was under the impression wellness was an alternative to cancer treatments. I'd say there was confusion, not anger. People often mistook wellness for New Age craziness.

As soon as I was able to clarify that the wellness I was promoting had nothing to do with New Age craziness and strange healing techniques, people had no problem with wellness whatsoever. Who's going to take a stand against personal responsibility,



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IT’S NOT PRIMARILY ABOUT GETTING OVER DISEASE—

YOU CAN LIVE A WELLNESS LIFESTYLE WHILE YOU’RE SICK.

IT’S ALSO NOT NECESSARILY ABOUT LIVING A LONGER LIFE

WITH LESS ILLNESS OR FASTER RECOVERY FROM AN INJURY

OR A DISEASE. THESE ARE FRINGE BENEFITS.”

# SEEK WELLNESS.COM

Founded by Don Ardell in 2001, SeekWellness.com is a website designed to encourage, empower, and support healthcare consumers to improve their level of wellness by providing information, services and products, all chosen with the consumer’s best interests in mind. Don founded SeekWellness.com on the idea that people have to take responsibility for improving their health and achieving wellness.

To this end, SeekWellness.com offers a library of more than 1000 essays in 16 different wellness skill areas. You’ll also find various interviews with leaders in the field of health and wellness, success stories, feature articles, book reviews and much, much more.

In addition to Don’s wellness center, you’ll find other wellness centers on SeekWellness.com that offer tools by which employees can make better judgments about when to see their healthcare providers or when to take over-the-counter medications versus prescriptions in various situations.

Be sure to check out SeekWellness.com. It’s a great resource for employers and employees seeking wellness in its fullest sense.



personal fitness or a positive approach to enjoying life? Nobody. The ultimate goal of wellness is greater satisfaction. It’s not primarily about getting over disease—you can live a wellness lifestyle while you’re sick. It’s also not necessarily about living a longer life with less illness or faster recovery from an injury or a disease. These are fringe benefits. Wellness is about a conscious decision to pursue advanced states of physical and psychological well-being because it’s a richer way to live; wellness is its own reward. We’re all going to die someday, but while we’re here, we can live happily ever after.

## **Q4: In general, do you think the wellness philosophy is something that resonates with Americans right now?**

**ARDELL:** Not at all. I don’t know why, but very few people get wellness. It just doesn’t seem all that complicated, but that’s not how people understand it. For example, when you look at most, if not all, corporate wellness programs, they’re actually risk reduction programs—not wellness programs.

## **Q5: Do you believe that wellness, as a discipline, is where it needs to be?**

**ARDELL:** I honestly don’t think we’re anywhere in terms of wellness. I think we’re back where we were in 1977 except for those few people who get wellness and are enthusiastic about it, not only as promoters but also as people who just live and enjoy it. I also don’t see us getting where we need to be anytime soon, but that’s OK. We’re only talking about 30 years; that’s nothing in terms of a major movement like wellness. We’ve basically spent the last 30 years practicing. For me personally, my ideas about wellness are much sharper and more in-depth than they were 30 years ago.



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To fully address the question of being where we need to be, I think it's important to first address what we think wellness ought to be about. And basically, I want wellness to be about living in a manner so as to enjoy good health and a satisfying, challenging life. I believe the highest returns come from service beyond self, that is, adopting some cause or passion that serves others. Mental health experts often advise reaching out, contributing to the larger good as the surest path to meaning and purpose in life. Such an orientation, as a complement to sound personal wellness, constitutes a wellness mindset that I think would make health promotion more attractive, effective and consequential.

Moreover, an aspect of wellness that has never taken root at the workplace entails the promotion of certain freedoms, freedom of and from religion, freedom to change one's religion, freedom of speech and freedom of action. Surely there are others, but given all the strife in the world, these freedoms seem a good starting point beyond self-advancement, though it also facilitates self-advancement. Beyond personal health, such a focus will round out the picture of a truly healthy person.

I also believe wellness promoters should seek to diminish qualities that inhibit human potential, such as a victim mentality, a tendency to indulge in self-pity or other self-defeating tendencies that have become too manifest in our society.

I believe wellness ought to promote core values that include:

A commitment to common decencies that include altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness and responsibility. These moral principles are embraced because their consequences have been tested and desirable.

- Reason and scientific explanations as the best guide to understanding the universe and solving problems, and a strong resistance to supernatural explanations.
- An open, pluralistic and democratic society.
- Opposition to authoritarian elites, repressive majorities and divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation or ethnicity.
- Separation of church and state.
- Resistance to discrimination and intolerance.
- Support for the disadvantaged and the handicapped in order that they might best help themselves.
- Respect for the environment and a desire to safeguard other species.
- Enjoyment of life here and now and the development of talents to the fullest.
- A lifelong quest for added meaning and purpose, and the cultivation of moral excellence.
- Respect for the right to privacy—meaning that mature adults should be free to fulfill their aspirations, including some of which aren't shared by others including sexual preferences, reproductive freedom, access to basic medical care and the right to die in a manner and time of one's choosing.
- Skepticism toward untested claims to knowledge accompanied by openness to novel ideas.



- A preference for optimism over pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in place of dogma, joy rather than guilt, tolerance in the place of fear, compassion over selfishness and reason over unverifiable/ritual faith.
- An enduring commitment to being the best and noble human a person is capable of being.

"...I URGE PEOPLE NOT TO BE NORMAL. A NORMAL LIFESTYLE IS HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH. MOST "NORMAL" PEOPLE ARE OVERSTRESSED, OVERWEIGHT—ABOUT 64 PERCENT—UNDERFIT AND HAVE GIVEN IN TO POOR DIETS. IN ADDITION, MOST "NORMAL" PEOPLE AREN'T HAVING ALL THAT MUCH FUN LIVING..."

**Q6: What's your take on the overall health status of Americans?**

**ARDELL:** It's ghastly! That's why I urge people not to be normal. A normal lifestyle is hazardous to your health. Most "normal" people are overstressed, overweight—about 64 percent—underfit and have given in to poor diets. In addition, most "normal" people aren't having all that much fun living—most normals aren't seeking added meaning and purpose in their lives. So people definitely don't want to be normal given the low state that passes for normalcy.

I'm also strongly against moderation. We've been conditioned our entire lives to do things in moderation. Unfortunately, exceptional advances in life don't stem from a moderate approach. Sure, moderation is good with respect to alcohol, sugar, fat consumption and other risky pleasures that can be harmful if poorly managed. On the other hand, why be moderate about the pursuit of selected passions? Lance Armstrong never won a Tour de France by training or racing moderately. People need to be immoderate in the development of their gifts and talents—be as splendid as possible in carefully chosen areas of life.

**Q7: Given—as you say—the ghastly state of American health, are you optimistic about the future health and wellness of the American people?**

**ARDELL:** I choose to be. What's the gain or advantage in not looking on the bright side of life? Part of a wellness lifestyle—as Halbert L. Dunn, the originator of the phrase, defined it—is being an optimistic, positive person. Some people call it adaptivism. So I choose to be optimistic about the future. I wouldn't have as much fun doing what I do and I certainly wouldn't be as enthusiastic about it if I had a dark view that we're doomed and there's no hope. I've convinced myself that the future is bright.

Additionally, with organizations like the Wellness Councils of America or National Wellness behind the movement, wellness will really take off for a vast number of people. If we had just a doubling of the people who truly understand wellness, people who enjoy and live it, it would truly make an extraordinary difference. It's certainly not going to change the world, but it surely would change the lives of countless people.

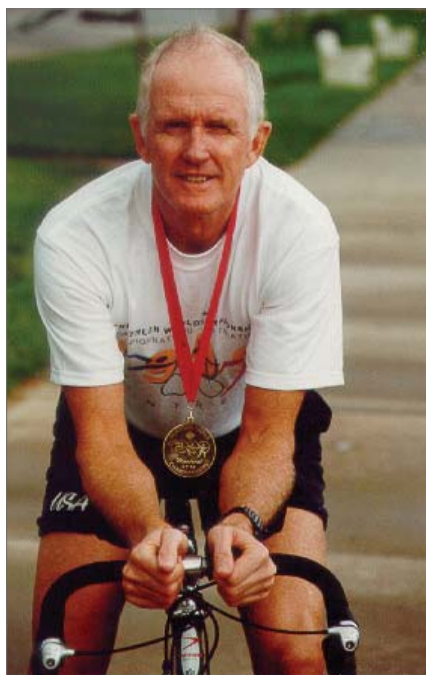


## Q8: What practical advice would you offer wellness practitioners for maximizing the wellness concept in their organizations?

**ARDELL:** I would encourage practitioners to take a look at how others have interpreted, defined and promoted the wellness concept and to think about their natural constituencies, special talents, what they enjoy doing most, and how they will make a good living while growing in a positive and healthful way. Practitioners should then develop and continually refine a list of the 10 most important things to tell people about living well. For me, my list currently includes:

1. Recognizing that advice can come from many sources, but ultimately, you must make the unique decisions for designing and maintaining quality for your health, leisure, and wellness choices.
2. It is difficult to be well and focused on excellence in lifestyle if you can't express your talents and passions in some manner, so find ways to do that.
3. Come to terms with the fact that change is inevitable and happening at a faster pace than ever before. This will enable you to deal more effectively with its manifestations.
4. Your lifestyle choices, including your attitudes, beliefs, emotional responses and actions will have a far greater impact on your health, work and wellness performance than any and all doctors who do or could service you, the economy, the environment, your income level, your age, your retirement plan or your luck.
5. Wellness is too important to be pursued grimly. Whatever your choices, make sure you're having fun.

6. Modern medicine is a wonderful thing, but there are two problems: people expect too much of it and too little of themselves.
7. Balance is a good thing and a working goal but there are times when you have to put it aside to pursue a passion over time, a heroic quest or other short-term goal that takes too much time and energy to permit the maintenance of balance. Be flexible.
8. It's better to take up healthy practices than to give up unhealthy habits, at least initially when trying to enhance the quality of your lifestyle. For example, you are better advised to take up a satisfying activity like vigorous walking before you attempt to quit smoking.
9. Lifestyle quality is seldom achieved by accident—you have to make a choice to live and work this way.
10. It's never too late to start a wellness lifestyle. Even if you are 100 or older.



*Don was one of 10 Americans given the Healthy America Fitness Leaders Award in 1991 by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.*

## Q9: Tell us about the wellness practices in your life.

**ARDELL:** I'm experiencing a fortunate life loaded with qualities I associate with wellness—this is actually the idea behind one of my favorite books titled, *A Fortunate Life*, which is an autobiographical account of the life of A.B. Facey, an Aussie Battler. Anyway, I do almost everything I advocate. I say "almost" so I don't encourage people to check up on me. So, I do almost everything I advocate in terms of living in a fashion consistent with 16 skill areas in my three-dimensional model of wellness—physical, mental, and meaning or purpose. Bottom line, I eat wisely, most of the time. I'm very fit, I found work I love, my social life is terrific, my girlfriend with whom I have lived blissfully for six years



still likes me, I get to utilize my talents everyday and I run fast for an old guy. I also enjoy music, literature and participating in the battle to save the world from cult leaders, though I admit I'm losing badly so far.

Last year, I ran for mayor of Tampa as "the oldest, fittest, fastest and prettiest of all the candidates" on a "well city" platform based on four themes: functional, free, fit

and fun. It was great fun and, except for the fact I didn't get as many votes as the others, I "won" in every sense. In other words, I had more fun than the others, I spent less—almost next to nothing—made fewer enemies, and produced more ideas than my four competitors combined—55 widely read policy positions. I urge other wellness promoters to run for office—all our cities need better candidates.



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*This interview was conducted on 04/30/04.*