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Physical activity in wellness communities:

Wisdom from ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Award winners

For a research team, immersive experiences at three award-winning communities revealed how physical activity programs can integrate all the dimensions of wellness

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How might a holistic, integrated understanding of wellness shape activity programming in senior living communities? The International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) defines wellness through seven dimensions that include the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, vocational and environmental dimensions.¹ When applying these dimensions to wellness programming, it is easy to think of them in compartmentalized ways—a fitness class for the physical, a guest lecture for the intellectual, an outreach activity for the vocational and so on. But what happens when wellness is understood through an

integrative lens, where physical activity is experienced in a supportive and educative environment?

Might engagement in activities, such as a group fitness class that targets strength or cardiovascular conditioning, also enhance social connections, positive emotions, concentration and intellectual engagement? Might that engagement also promote a deeper, more profound sense of the world?

Not everyone thinks of physical activity in an integrated way. For some, it is a chore, something we must do to meet a health-related goal. Our research with residents who experience physical activity in wellness-oriented communities² shows that moving with others has the potential to be so much more than a purely physical endeavor.

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A walking group spends time together as they explore the trails around Splendido at Rancho Vistoso in Tucson, Arizona [via Facebook]. Image courtesy of Mather Splendido at Rancho Vistoso

Physical activity in wellness communities: Wisdom from ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Award winners *Continued from page 30*



Cardio drumming fosters fun and fitness at Sunnyside in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Image courtesy of Sunnyside Communities

Under the umbrella of a partnership development grant with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) between our InterActive for Life (IA4L) research team and Colin Milner, CEO of ICAA, we set out to learn about physical activity programs offered by winners of the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award, one of the ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards. Our study design was based on weeklong immersive visits to the three communities below:

- Mather Splendido at Rancho Vistoso in Tucson, Arizona³
- Sunnyside Communities in Harrisonburg, Virginia⁴
- Tapestry at Victoria Harbour (now Victoria Harbour by Chartwell) in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada⁵

Members of the research team could experience programmed physical activity firsthand, alongside residents. Participants were then invited to talk about their physical activity experiences with a focus on describing what they liked and why they joined in physical activity programs.

We gained much wisdom from engaging with residents in these communities. We learned

what it means to be physically literate in later life,⁶ how we may avoid ageism in physical activity programming,⁷ and how movement joy may be purposefully promoted.⁸

In this article, we draw attention to *Physical Activity in Wellness Communities*, one of two YouTube videos we created for the ICAA Foundation for Wellness Certificate course [Ed. See “Resources” on page 34 for access details]. This video is a research-informed reflection on how movement wellness is felt and shared, actively and interactively.⁹ More than the written word, this video depicts holistic wellness through residents’ experiences of physical activity, illustrating how moving in a supportive and educative environment enhances the following:

- physical vitality
- emotional expression
- intellectual stimulation
- social connection
- spiritual reflection
- vocational purpose
- environmental resonance²

We see how the seven ICAA-endorsed dimensions of wellness overlap. Emotional and social bonds form through activities involving good humor; intellectual curiosity

is sparked by learning new movement patterns; spiritual and environmental wellness are highlighted when residents express gratitude for the active spaces afforded them and particularly for the more nature-based places. Our goal in sharing the following reflections is to help those who design, deliver and evaluate wellness programs in senior living communities better cater to holistic well-being.

The dimensions of wellness in motion

When viewing the seven dimensions of wellness through the lens of physical activity, we may understand how more than one dimension may be experienced simultaneously. Table 1 on page 33 summarizes how residents in wellness-oriented senior living described the dimensions of wellness in relation to physical activity participation. We will then refer to physical activity examples showcased in the accompanying YouTube video, to show how wellness dimensions may be combined and integrated through physical activity engagement.

Integrated dimensions of wellness

Residents’ voices in the *Physical Activity in Wellness Communities* video make visible how the seven dimensions are experienced in practice [Ed. Learn how to access this video in the “Resources” sidebar on page 34].

Physical wellness is often the most visible focus of organized classes. However, when residents move together (i.e., side by side, stretching, balancing, coordinating their motions), physical activity becomes a lived expression of wellness fostered and felt in community. Instructor-led movement can be done in a way that is inclusive, responsive and adaptive, allowing participants to gain confidence in what their bodies can do and to experience vitality as ease of motion rather than exertion. In the wellness video, for example, when IA4L researcher Rebecca invites a resident to move with her, she asks:

“Would you like to follow me in a hand dance? We could maybe start there, and

Wellness Dimensions as Expressed in Physical Activity

Seven dimensions of wellness as experienced through physical activity		
Dimension of wellness	ICAA definition ¹	As expressed in residents' lived experiences
Physical	Recognizing the need for physical activity, healthy foods and sleep to maintain strength, flexibility and balance.	Movement enhances coordination, stability and vitality.
Social	Developing and maintaining positive relationships and effective communication within one's community.	Group participation, shared laughter and mutual encouragement cultivate belonging.
Emotional	Being aware of and managing feelings, optimism, and enthusiasm for life.	Expressions of joy and optimism strengthen confidence and resilience.
Intellectual	Engaging in stimulating activities that expand knowledge and skills while challenging the mind.	Learning why movements matter stimulates curiosity and sustained engagement.
Spiritual	Seeking meaning and purpose in human existence and aligning actions with personal values.	Attentive movement evokes gratitude, presence, and a felt connection with the world.
Vocational	Using individual talents and skills to gain purpose, satisfaction and enrichment through work or volunteer activity.	Contributing skills and initiative through peer-teaching, organizing or supporting physical activity sessions nurtures purpose, fulfillment, and belonging within the community.
Environmental	Understanding the impact of our surroundings and creating spaces that support health and harmony with nature.	Engagement with nature and supportive communal spaces nurtures comfort and inspiration.

Table 1. Wellness Dimensions as Expressed in Physical Activity.

then just build the confidence, build the comfort...we might start with our feet, or other things might start happening, or it could just stay here."

This interaction shows that although movement involves bodily competence, and confidence, it may be led in a way where *social* and *emotional* dimensions of wellness are felt.⁸

Relationships (*social wellness*) deepen through being physically active with others. Shared movement serves as moments of connection and expression through which residents connect socioemotionally with one another. Interacting with a variety of residents and instructors nurtures an ever-evolving sense of belonging, as one resident reflected, "I've gotten to know the people in that class quite well over the two years." She describes how a dance introduced during a lecture by a fellow resident from New Zealand found its way into their physical activity programming. She says that "we just did this Māori Haka...it's supposed to be a welcoming dance, but it's also a war dance...and we started to do it at

every exercise class." Through synchronized movement, chanting and collective rhythm, social bonds take form, and in some cases, develop into enduring friendships. What began as something they learned from a resident in a lecture—the *intellectual* and *vocational* wellness dimensions—became a ritual in their physical activity class that had *physical*, *social*, *environmental* and *spiritual* implications.

Cognitive engagement (*intellectual wellness*) is embedded in physical activity by inviting participants to think through movement as they move. When asked about coordination challenges, one participant notes, "I would like to see more brain-challenging exercises...where you have to do different things with different sides of your body." When queried about whether she enjoys the challenge, she responds, "I think it is necessary. I do enjoy it, yes."

Intellectual stimulation is valued because problem-solving within movement allows residents to appreciate how their bodies respond, adapt, and learn new patterns. Par-

ticipants do not merely follow instructions; they learn, interpret, and find personal relevance in the physical activities. Residents express positive emotions in being physically challenged and understanding why they move.

Movement extends beyond studio walls; it creates opportunities for *environmental* and *spiritual* wellness. Physical activity programming has the potential to connect residents to both built and natural spaces. This relationship with the natural environment is exemplified by a resident that describes her walk to the beach as follows:

"Once I hit the 72 steps and walk down to the beach, I stop and I'm just concentrating on the rocks, sun, surf and mountains. It brings me into another world. I'm just transposed into heaven. It's my happy place."

The surrounding environment becomes more than a backdrop or measured setting;

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movement becomes contemplative through sensory attention to the textures underfoot, the sounds of the waves and the warmth of sunlight. Movement is then an enhanced environmental engagement that fosters spiritual wellness. The body attunes to its surroundings, and spiritual awareness is felt through movement itself as a direct, lived sensing of being part of the seascape.

The resident's account highlights how attention, breath, and cognitive awareness create a tangible sense of joyful attunement to that which transcends her own being—that is, an experience that integrates the *spiritual, environmental, emotional* and *intellectual* dimensions of wellness.

Taking part in and leading physical activity sessions provides opportunities for residents to contribute to their community (*vocational wellness*). When residents take on physical-activity leadership roles, they discover renewed purpose as one resident shared about being asked to lead her peers in their daily routine when the instructor was away: “Our instructor asked me if I would take over class [while she was away]. I said, sure. I’m up for a challenge! She gave me the list of exercises and how many times to do [them], I approached it with, how can I make this mine?”

In taking initiative and stepping forward, residents may shift from being participants to cocreators. This applies not only to peer-led activity but taking on leadership roles that enhance a sense of community, such as showing up early to set up the room. These leadership engagements affirm a vocational sensibility of wellness that also draws upon *intellectual, social* and *emotional* dimensions.

What the *Physical Activity in Wellness Communities* video showcased is how different physical activity scenarios—chair dancing, walking in nature, leading peers in exercises, experiencing activities that require coordination and intellectual engagement—integrated several dimensions of wellness at any one time [Ed. For video details, see “Resources” on this page]. As we

turn our attention to future conceptions of integrating holistic wellness through physical activity, we illustrate how one exemplar of lifting weights in an inclusive and welcoming class may speak to all seven dimensions. The scenario below is inspired by real-life interactions observed across all three of the award-winning wellness communities.

Seven dimensions as lived in a Strength & Balance class

Imagine a morning Strength & Balance class in a senior living community. Resistance bands hang neatly along the wall. Dumbbells of varying weights are lined along a side rack beside a few medicine balls and balance pads. Some residents take on *vocational* roles by arriving early and setting up chairs, spacing them generously in a semicircle so everyone can see both the instructor and one another. Other residents distribute the weights. Another adjusts the lighting.

The room fills gradually with conversation: “Did you see Terry yesterday?” or “Where were you on Monday? We missed you.” There is a hum of familiarity as people settle in with *social* and *emotional* check-ins. The instructor greets each person by name and casually asks, “How’s the shoulder today?” or “Did you play pickleball yesterday afternoon?”

Before the first movement begins, participants are invited to check in with their *physical* sense of awareness and choose a weight that feels right, with the reminder that sitting, standing, pausing or modifying is always acceptable.

The class opens with a seated warm-up. Feet press firmly into the floor. Shoulders roll. Spines lengthen. When the instructor jokes, “Let’s see if everything is awake yet,” laughter ripples across the room. The energy shifts from arrival to engagement. The strength work unfolds in purposeful sequences: sit-to-stands from the chair, supported squats, overhead presses, alternating arm patterns. The instructor encourages intellectual engagement by explaining why each movement matters—pressing through

the heels supports getting out of a chair, rotating the torso improves balance when reaching for something on a shelf. Someone nods and adds, “That helps when I’m getting out of the car.”

The *environment* subtly supports everything unfolding within it. Natural daylight

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Resources

Internet

Function2Flow: The InterActive for Life Project

<https://function2flow.ca/the-interactive-for-life-project/>

Function2Flow: Community Action Resources

<https://function2flow.ca/what-is-the-ia4l-icaa-partnership-project/community-action-resources/ia4l-resources/>

International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)

www.icaa.cc

ICAA Education certificate courses

www.icaa.cc/certificate/overview.htm

ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards (ICAA NuStep Beacon and Pinnacle Awards)

<https://beaconaward.icaa.cc>

NuStep, LLC

www.nustep.com

Multimedia

Rebecca Lloyd & the Interactive4Life Project. (2025, September 9). *Physical Activity in Wellness Communities* [Video]. YouTube. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbGoj6lnkFA>

Physical activity in wellness communities: Wisdom from ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Award winners *Continued from page 34*



A kayaker from Tapestry at Victoria Harbour (now a Chartwell property) paddles in the waters off British Columbia's capital. Image courtesy of The Interactive for Life Project

reflects off mirrors. Chairs are stable and thoughtfully spaced. Equipment is accessible. Movements practiced in class are intentionally linked to everyday contexts: stepping over curbs, carrying laundry, checking blind spots while driving. Here, *physical wellness* is more than a measure of strength; it represents functional independence. After a set of sit-to-stands, a resident quietly notices that these movements felt steadier than last week. Another realizes she no longer needs both hands to brace herself. Improvements are not celebrated through numbers alone, but through lived changes such as standing taller, walking more confidently or feeling less hesitant in daily life.

Signs of *social connection* are constant. When someone struggles with a repetition, a resident will whisper: "You've got this!" When a wall-sit lasts longer than expected, exaggerated groans turn into shared laughter. The effort is collective. The class is a reliable gathering point, where absence is noticed and presence matters.

Cognitive engagement is woven into the way movements are performed with awareness and options for enhancing complexity. The instructor introduces a coordination challenge: alternating L-shape arm raises with a knee up. "Opposite arm, opposite leg," she cues. Brows furrow. A few people lose

the rhythm. One person chimes out, "That one really makes you think!" They all laugh before trying again. The challenge is not intimidating; it is stimulating.

An atmosphere of safety shapes the *emotional* tone. A participant returning after surgery chooses lighter weights and moves at a slower pace. No one comments on what she "should" be doing. Instead, she is welcomed back warmly. She thinks to herself, "It feels good just to be here again." Compared to the sadness felt just a few days ago, a steadfast feeling of *spiritual renewal* spreads while a sense of gratitude and uplift unfolds as she moves with her peers once again.

The class ends with a shared feeling of physical fatigue and uplift echoed in spontaneous applause. Smiles linger as chairs are stacked and weights returned. As residents make their way to leave, one waits by the door reminding each participant about tomorrow's walking club and next week's kayaking outing, extending the social connection well beyond the designated exercise period. Observing this sustained communal energy reveals how physical activity classes act as a conduit for holistic wellness, enabling wellness program providers to reimagine standard fitness offerings as integrative community experiences.

Wellness programming applications

The Strength & Balance class example illustrates how the seven dimensions of wellness can be experienced simultaneously within a single activity. For wellness program designers, directors and leaders, this integrative perspective is essential. A physical activity class is never "just" strength training. Its design, tone, leadership, and relational dynamics determine whether it cultivates only muscle engagement or whole-person wellness.

The following Wellness Assessment Tool for Physical Activity Programs (see Table 2) was designed to encourage wellness providers to shift from asking if residents are exercising to asking instead how all seven dimensions of wellness are cultivated

within a physical activity. The assessment prompts function as a design lens that invites integration of relational, cognitive, environmental and purpose-driven elements to intentionally integrate wellness dimensions in physical activity programs.

Incorporating the prompts from this assessment tool into program planning encourages a fundamental shift in how senior living communities conceptualize movement. When program directors and instructors intentionally design activities with these overlapping dimensions in mind, the exercise environment transforms into a space of profound communal connection and ongoing personal development. Moving with this integrated awareness ensures that physical activity programming honors the complexity of the aging experience, allowing older adults to engage in movement as a meaningful expression of holistic, interactive and communal living. 

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Rebecca J. Lloyd, PhD, is a full professor and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Canada (SSHRC)-funded researcher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. She researches movement awareness in professional practices with a Function2Flow interdisciplinary motion-sensing consciousness. Her areas of expertise include phenomenological methodologies, active-aging education, physical education, teacher education, partnered

A Wellness Assessment Tool for Physical Activity Programs

Physical	
	How does the activity support functional strength, balance, coordination or mobility relevant to daily living?
	Are modifications available to accommodate varying abilities while maintaining appropriate challenge?
Social	
	How does the activity create opportunities for interaction, eye contact, shared effort or group rhythm?
	Is there space for conversation, ritual, or shared tradition to develop over time?
Emotional	
	Is the environment psychologically safe, allowing residents to adapt movements without judgment?
	Are encouragement, humor and positive reinforcement intentionally cultivated?
Intellectual	
	Are participants invited to understand the purpose behind movements?
	Are coordination challenges or problem-solving elements incorporated to stimulate cognitive engagement?
Spiritual	
	Does the activity create moments of presence, reflection or alignment with personal values (e.g., vitality, gratitude, perseverance)?
	Are there opportunities for connection with meaning through movement?
Vocational	
	Are residents given opportunities to contribute (e.g., leading warm-ups, assisting with setup, mentoring peers or codesigning sessions)?
	Is resident initiative recognized and affirmed?
Environmental	
	Is the physical space arranged to support accessibility, comfort and inclusion?
	Are movements connected intentionally to everyday environments or natural settings?

Table 2. A Wellness Assessment Tool for Physical Activity Programs.¹⁰

practices, pedagogy, and dance. See <https://function2flow.ca> for methodology, physical activity and active-aging research and resources.

Stephen Smith, PhD, is full professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. His scholarly work focuses on pedagogical practices in K-12 schooling and the relational dynamics of effective health promotion and healthcare. His earlier writings explored gesture theory and its applications to physical education, health education, and teacher education. More recent writings are concerned with the cultivation of somatic sensibilities in keeping with the Function2Flow model that he and Dr. Rebecca Lloyd developed. Their current SSHRC-funded research project draws upon Smith's experiences in a variety of games and sports, as well as in flow and martial arts. His passion for riding and training horses extends the range of partnered practices for becoming "inter-active for life."

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