



# Healthier Planet, Healthier People:

*Inspiring Sustainability Habits*

Written by Beth Shepard



Well-being is more well-rounded than ever before. Instead of the traditional focus on physical health, many wellness programs have broadened their scope of services to address mental/emotional, social, financial, career, and spiritual well-being as well as quality of life.

We recommend including another dimension, just as critical: *sustainability*. Every other aspect of our health, happiness, safety, and welfare unequivocally depends on our blue planet thriving... and right now, it's not. But we can change that.



## For Impact, Act Now

The science is excruciatingly clear: Earth's health affects us *now*, not just in the far-off future. Physicians Michael Soman and Mark Vossler put it this way: *Increasingly, the iconic photo that defines climate change has changed from the polar bear on a shrinking ice floe to a child wheezing for breath in a hospital emergency room.*<sup>1</sup> It's a real, right-now problem... but we still have a (short) window of time — and the power — to turn things around.





**T**he COVID-19 crisis has heightened awareness of the human impact on our global environment and a fast-growing interest in taking action. More than ever, all generations feel a sense of urgency about living more gently on the planet and lessening the effects of climate change. We want to do our part, **but many aren't sure exactly what to do.** *What better goal than helping people adopt eco-friendly habits in tandem with other health-promoting behaviors?*

Solving ecological problems requires a massive effort that goes far beyond sustainable practices at the individual and workplace level. But well-being, healthcare, and sustainability professionals are in a prime position to make a meaningful dent, maybe even sparking a ripple effect. Getting your population fired up — and offering practical ways to take action — can lead to deeper community involvement and change for good on a larger scale.

In this paper, you'll learn how helping people embrace sustainability habits — while cultivating a stronger connection to nature — fosters environmental well-being, a higher level of personal thriving, and better performance.





# *Interdependent* **Well-Being**

What does sustainability have to do with employee, member, and client well-being? Everything. In an *American Journal of Health Promotion* webinar, Dr. David Katz summed it up well: *There are no healthy people on a ruined, ravaged planet.*<sup>2</sup>



No aspect of our lives is untouched by environmental degradation:

- Consequences of climate change — from natural disasters, temperature, air quality, and water-related illness to vector-borne diseases and more — are already having negative consequences for human health.<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- Environmental problems and climate-related events like extreme heat, floods, fires, and hurricanes have an adverse effect on mental health — leading to stress, depression, anxiety, trauma, and other impairments.<sup>6</sup>
- Economic consequences are staggering, with climate-linked disasters costing North America \$415 billion (2016-2019).
- Scientists warn that continued deforestation, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure growth increase the likelihood of future pandemics.<sup>7</sup>
- Biodiversity, vital for human and societal well-being, is in jeopardy — extinction rates are accelerating, with 1 million plant and animal species currently in danger of disappearing forever, many within decades.<sup>8</sup>

The outlook is more hopeful if we all do our part, moving forward with our best efforts and a sense of shared purpose. We need eco-friendly ways of living and working as well as more closeness to the natural world. Because human and environmental well-being is *inextricably linked*, acting now can help protect the planet, deepen a connection with nature, enhance health, and save money.

A few examples:

- Plant-based diets are linked to better mental and physical well-being<sup>9,10,11</sup> plus prevention and improved management of chronic conditions.<sup>12,13</sup> Eating less meat and other animal-based food reduces the toll of agriculture on water supply, forested land, ecosystems, and climate.<sup>14</sup>
- Active commuting (biking or walking) decreases carbon emissions and augments physical and mental well-being. Using public transportation increases physical activity, too;<sup>15</sup> both reduce fuel and parking costs.
- Spending time in nature offers remarkable benefits: improved heart health, relaxation, and mood;<sup>16</sup> enhanced self-esteem<sup>17</sup> and body image;<sup>18</sup> and higher overall levels of well-being.<sup>19,20,21</sup>
- Clean energy use reduces air pollution and its health burdens related to fine particulate matter, which is estimated globally to cause 4.5 million excess deaths/year.<sup>22</sup>

As health and well-being practitioners, we can use what we know about behavior change to make sustainable living more appealing, convenient, and actionable.<sup>23</sup> Together, we can make a significant difference by endorsing habits that help protect natural resources and all life on the planet.

*“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”*

*—Dr. Jane Goodall, DBE*





# Sustainable Business: Bring On the Green



*"The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the reverse."*

— Herman E. Daly,

*former World Bank  
Senior Economist*

"Sustainable businesses are redefining the corporate ecosystem by designing models that create value for all stakeholders, including employees, shareholders, supply chains, civil society, and the planet."

—Tensie Whelan and Carly Fink,  
*Harvard Business Review*<sup>24</sup>

Forward-thinking organizations know that sustainable practices are essential to remaining viable and thriving. Those that act — making them a strategic priority built into all aspects of business — are more profitable and more resilient to climate-related disruptions.<sup>25</sup> They're also viewed more positively by employees and communities:

- Industry is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions; by doing business in a way that protects the environment, all sectors can substantially lessen the burden of climate change and conserve natural resources. Sustainability is increasingly seen as a key element of Corporate Social Responsibility.
- Investors track ESG (environmental, social, governance) indicators to inform investment decisions because sustainably run businesses are lower risk, more resilient, and more profitable.<sup>26</sup>
- Eco-conscious consumers vote with their wallets, purchasing more from companies with sustainable product lines and business practices and less from those without discernable eco-friendly priorities.<sup>27</sup>

- Employees feel proud and are more motivated and engaged when they're part of a caring organization.<sup>28</sup>
- Researchers found 57% of global consumers polled are *willing to change their shopping habits to reduce environmental impact*; and 40% will *pay more for sustainable brands in step with their personal values*.<sup>29</sup>

Protecting and preserving the natural environment for future generations have become moral issues. Workers want proof that their employers — as well as businesses behind the products and services they buy — are truly operating sustainably and actively helping solve urgent ecological issues. How does your organization measure up in this regard?



A person wearing a bright yellow jacket, a dark beanie, and a red and black plaid backpack stands on a dirt path in a forest. Their arms are outstretched to the sides. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees, and the ground is covered in brown pine needles. The lighting is soft, suggesting a misty or early morning atmosphere.

# Green Behavior *Change*

Many of the same behavior change principles behind healthy living also apply to sustainability habits.





*"Like music and art, love of nature is a common language that can transcend political or social boundaries."  
— President Jimmy Carter*

Environmental psychology research informs the process, including these findings:

- Motivating people to act on climate solutions works when people feel they can help effectively.<sup>30</sup> **With pandemic-related stress and eco-anxiety on the rise, equipping people to take action on things they can control — like reducing, reusing, and recycling — is more important than ever.**
- Promoting a sense of psychological ownership and connection with the natural world increases willingness to protect and preserve the environment.<sup>31</sup> All it takes to realize these effects is spending more time in parks, forests, near rivers and lakes — even at work or in the backyard — to experience the wonders of nature.
- Priming people to feel proud of the eco-conscious actions they're already taking helps drive future sustainable choices.<sup>32</sup> Ask those in your circle of influence to share stories about their environment-friendly efforts and wins.
- Emphasizing and communicating new behavior norms present social proof for eco-friendly behavior and prompt people to give it a try.<sup>33,34</sup> Using a tailored appeal — such as *70% of your coworkers avoid single-use plastics* — fosters pro-environmental behavior.<sup>35</sup>

- Building self-efficacy with simple pro-environmental behaviors encourages people to take more challenging actions.<sup>36</sup> Mastering recycling, for example, can embolden someone to try an activity requiring more effort, like composting food scraps or using public transportation.
- Having higher perceived environmental self-efficacy — and a strong sense of being able to make a positive difference — adds motivation to act on climate solutions.<sup>37</sup>
- Practicing resilience boosts self-efficacy and feelings of control, equipping individuals to better manage stressful feelings about the environment.<sup>38</sup> Being active, sleeping well, and staying socially connected, for example, help maintain the physical and emotional energy to cope with stressors and pursue high-priority goals such as sustainable living.

From making environmentally-friendly purchases to eschewing plastic and planting trees, opportunities abound for individual and community action. Specific strategies, how-to guidance, and clear benefits for reducing personal ecological footprints make taking action more appealing. Even those not concerned about the environment may be willing to get involved to economize and enhance well-being:

- Spending money on experiences instead of material goods enhances social relationships, happiness, and satisfaction while reducing waste.<sup>39,40</sup>
- Running only full loads of laundry and adjusting the home thermostat with the seasons saves water, electricity, and gas while lowering utility bills.
- Mulching yard waste instead of burning it contributes to cleaner air and richer soil for gardening.
- Purchasing items in bulk reduces waste while cutting expenses and time.
- Eating more plants and fewer animal products lowers greenhouse gas emissions, conserves water and farmable land, and cuts grocery bills.
- Paring down food waste decreases costs and lessens methane emissions from landfills.

The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (November 2019 survey) cites 58% of US adults as *alarmed* or *concerned* about climate change.<sup>41</sup> With many people eager to do whatever they can to help mitigate climate change impact, the time is ripe to inspire action and offer support for an eco-friendly lifestyle.





## Sustainability & Healthy Living Go Together

Because human and environmental well-being aspects are tightly linked, actions that help the planet heal lead to healthier people, too.

- Living in ways that reduce waste and pollution means cleaner air, water, and natural spaces for everyone. Mental and physical well-being improves with more time in nature and less exposure to toxic substances.<sup>42</sup>
- Aligning everyday habits with personal environmental values enhances a feeling of authenticity and confidence in individual ability to make a difference.
- Taking action to improve sustainability stimulates a sense of unity and shared purpose with eco-conscious people and communities around the world. A stronger sense of purpose is linked with better health, longevity, and resilience.<sup>43,44,45</sup>
- Practicing Earth-friendly habits such as recycling and reducing waste can become part of everyday routines, similar to daily walking and eating a colorful variety of produce.

Personal, community, and ecological well-being go hand in hand.



A man with a beard, wearing a bright yellow jacket, a red beanie, and a large tan backpack, is captured mid-air as he jumps over a rocky cliff edge. He is wearing grey trousers and dark sneakers. The background shows a misty, mountainous landscape with green and orange foliage in the foreground.






# Promote *With* Purpose

Sustainability practices and a deeper connection with the natural world can be learned, just like other skills and behaviors.

Organizations can create the right conditions for employees, clients, and members to feel inspired and confident in taking action.



Incorporate these foundational concepts when planning and rolling out a sustainable living initiative for your population:

-  **Set the stage.** Working for an environmentally and socially responsible employer is a high priority for many. Whether your organization's approach to sustainability, conservation, and ecological justice is just getting started or already fully integrated, ensure your workforce, clients, and job applicants know about it. Corporate motives behind pro-environmental actions must be genuine, or people will see right through them. *Greenwashing* — the appearance of a commitment to sustainability without real action behind it — is terribly off-putting and affects employee attitudes.
-  **Light the way.** Look within your ranks for sustainability champions. Invite them to share stories about how these practices benefit their health and budget. Testimonials help others envision practicing the same habits while enjoying satisfaction from contributing to higher environmental, global, and personal well-being plus savings.
-  **Offer options.** People resist being told what to do; respecting the need for autonomy is an essential part of encouraging eco-friendly behaviors. Effective learning is self-directed and personally relevant; that's why designing a sustainable living initiative with choice and flexibility embedded is crucial to buy-in.
-  **Point to purpose.** Helping protect the planet is a big goal, with payoffs that go far beyond the personal. Craft messages that solidify a feeling of shared meaning and community to enhance motivation and drive consistent action. Working together on sustainable lifestyles develops the framework for a stronger sense of purpose — a critical predictor of well-being<sup>46,47</sup> and employee engagement.
-  **Fuel the fun.** Can buying used instead of new, reducing waste, or recycling be fun? Yes — when you wrap the experience in an appealing theme, offer a friendly team challenge, and suggest activities that build competence and confidence. You don't have to sell fun — it's naturally appealing and motivating; nobody wants to miss out on the good stuff.



Wondering whether your people are up for the challenge? The COVID-19 crisis has offered important food for thought about our ability to collectively make big changes.

- A representative sample of UK and US adults found 80% are willing to make lifestyle modifications to stop climate change as *big as those they've made for coronavirus*.<sup>48</sup>
- Almost half of those shifting to remote work during the pandemic hope to continue it when the crisis is over (Gallup).<sup>49</sup>
- Many people can — and will — make big, immediate *temporary and/or long-term* changes during emergency conditions when they perceive worthwhile personal and community results.

We're all capable of doing more to care for the planet we love and depend on. Let's challenge colleagues and those we serve to rise up and help solve the most pressing global health/well-being crisis of our time.



# 14

## Ways to Inspire Sustainability

Amplify messaging by combining sustainable living, Corporate Social Responsibility, and employee wellness communications. Cross-promote initiatives already in the works where it makes sense. Inform employee-facing vendors about upcoming programs and ask them to help get the word out.

4



1

Advocate for making sustainability a priority across all teams, systems, supply chains, and more. A culture of sustainability can lead to environmentally conscious big-picture thinking and choices outside of work.

2

Conduct training to increase sustainability knowledge and competencies relevant to the organization's mission.<sup>50</sup> This gives all levels the know-how to integrate green practices into their own workflows and boosts engagement with employer sustainability initiatives.

3

Communicate in ways that make the message relatable; avoid touchy-feely Mother Earth language... stick with the science and practical applications: Emphasize clean air, clean water, improved well-being/quality of life, safety, savings. Explain specific reduce/reuse/recycle behaviors, with visuals to show the advantages.

5

Strengthen connections between workplace sustainability and employee well-being, underscoring the links and overlaps. Amplify collaboration to spur innovation and shared efforts.



**6** Tap into marketing/internal communication expertise to create strategic plans and materials.

**7** Connect individual and cooperative efforts with global impact; include useful resources for those interested in learning more.



**8** Circulate spotlight stories featuring testimonials from leaders, employees, vendors, clients, and members working on sustainability.

**9** Offer investing options for employee retirement accounts in businesses that operate efficiently and with significantly lower environmental impact. Green funds generally outperform the market and are more resilient during disasters and economic downturns.<sup>51</sup>

**10**

Widen opportunities to spend more time in nature with subsidized park passes, outdoor rec fees, and sports equipment; offer similar items in prize drawings. Highlight seasonal recreation activities, with how-to and where-to details. Invite employees to share their adventures.

**11** Encourage whole-food plant-based eating, plastic-free choices, and other eco-habits with chat channels and/or lunch/walking clubs so employees can connect and support each other.







12

Create an onsite demonstration garden, host lunch-and-learns with master gardeners, give away spring vegetable starts or seed packets, and provide links to how-to resources.

13

Launch an annual short-term event like Plastic-Free July to spark curiosity and enthusiasm.



14

Foster civic engagement. Challenge your people to make their voices heard, to get involved in their communities and connect with leaders/candidates/elected officials about environment and sustainability matters.

*How are you and your organization*

encouraging employees, clients, and members to live more sustainably

Drop us a note at [sustain@hesonline.com](mailto:sustain@hesonline.com).



# Rise and Shine

Fighting climate change and protecting the environment are growing economic, health, and moral imperatives for all ages, all walks of life, in their work as well as personal lives. The good news: Many individuals and organizations recognize this and already have sustainable practices in place or are getting started.

Whether or not you see this passion for eco-action in your own workforce, the writing is on the wall: Unless individuals and organizations make sustainable changes and call for more local, national, and global action, getting participants in workplace walking or nutrition programs will soon be the least of our concerns.

Healthcare and well-being industries view evidence-based programming as a linchpin for effectiveness. The evidence regarding climate change and human health is staring us in the face; it makes sense to expand our definition of well-being to include sustainability. Surely we can promote these habits with the same fervor and science-based, multifaceted approaches as for tobacco cessation, physical activity, nutrition, emotional resilience, and more.

For the sake of our families, communities, businesses, and planet, we can't afford not to. Here's to joining forces in pursuit of a thriving planet, better well-being, and a brighter future for all.





# Recommended Resources

Finding Purpose: Environmental Stewardship as a Personal Calling (Hoffman, 2016)

How Companies Can Tap Sustainability to Motivate Staff (Wharton, 2016)

How to Make a Profit While Making a Difference (TED, 2015)

Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impact, Implications, and Guidance (APA, 2017)

There Is No Planet B: A Handbook for the Make or Break Years (Berners-Lee, 2019)

UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015)



## About the Author

**Beth Shepard, MS, NBC-HWC, LMC, ACSM-CEP**

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Beth's drive to help others feel their best has fueled a multifaceted career in health management, science education, workplace well-being, coaching, writing, and consulting. She brings a deep clinical, population, and in-the-trenches perspective to every project.

A longtime member of the HES family, Beth has contributed to the company's growth and achievements for nearly 20 years. As senior writer/researcher, a respected health promotion/behavior change expert, program developer, and content creator, she takes a lead role in many of our most successful programs. This includes *Sustain* — the first well-being program that promotes sustainable living.

Beth has worked with world-class medical centers as well as a Fortune 500 company and global-reaching wellness vendors to create engaging, effective, and scientifically sound programs that equip participants for lasting change.

A passion for ecology and conservation is central to the lifestyle Beth shares with her family in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. Having a lifelong love of nature and wild spaces, the Shepard family strives to live sustainably and advocates for the planet at every opportunity.







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# Sustain™

People of all generations feel a sense of urgency about living more sustainably, lowering their ecological footprint, and lessening the effects of climate change. If we all do our part, we can help move the needle. *Sustain* teaches and reinforces activities that make this a lasting habit, including:

- **Whole-Food Plant-Based** — move toward a whole-food plant-based meal pattern
- **Reduce** — use and accumulate less stuff, decrease waste, conserve natural resources
- **Reuse** — use again, repurpose, or repair instead of throwing away
- **Recycle** — keep materials moving through the circular economy and out of landfills
- **Miscellaneous** — advocate for the environment, spend more time in nature, deepen appreciation and connection to natural world.

## Grounded in Science

The COVID-19 crisis has heightened awareness of the human impact on our global environment and a growing interest in taking action:

- Consequences of climate change are already having a negative effect on human health — from temperature, air quality, and water-related illness to vector-borne diseases and more
- Scientists warn that continued deforestation, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure growth increase the likelihood of future pandemics.

There's never been a better time to help your employees, members, or clients improve their health and the health of the planet.

## Solutions for Corporations, Health Plans, Health Systems, Nonprofits, and Membership Organizations

*Sustain* is a new campaign from HES that promotes eco-friendly living and allows participants to personalize their experience by:

- Choosing activities most useful or meaningful to them
- Reinforcing their progress with a fun, motivating theme.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Global Change Research Program, The Impacts of Climate Change on Human Health in the United States: A Scientific Assessment, 2016, <https://health2016.globalchange.gov/>

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## Learn More

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