

# FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE



LEVERAGING WHAT'S RIGHT  
TO ACHIEVE PURPOSEFUL  
HEALTH PROMOTION

AN EXPERT INTERVIEW WITH MJ SHAAR

**WELCOA**★  
WELLNESS WORKS HERE

# FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE: LEVERAGING WHAT'S RIGHT TO ACHIEVE PURPOSEFUL HEALTH PROMOTION

*with*  
MJ SHAAR

## ABOUT MJ SHAAR



Marie-Josee Shaar is most known for her wellness workshops which leverage positive psychology to enhance health promotion. In recent years, MJ facilitated sessions for small and Fortune Companies, governmental institutions, wellness and coaching organizations, as well as various universities. A Masters in Applied Positive Psychology from University of Pennsylvania, she is certified as a Nutrition and Wellness Consultant, a Personal Trainer and a Wellness Culture Coach. She co-authored *Smarts and Stamina: The Busy Person's Guide to Optimal Health and Performance*, and contributed articles to the *Huffington Post*, *Psychology Today* and *Positive Psychology News Daily*.

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## ABOUT RYAN PICARELLA, MS, SPHR



As President of WELCOA, Ryan works with communities and organizations around the country to ignite social movements that will improve the lives of all working people in America and around the world. With a deep interest in culture and sociology, Ryan approaches initiatives from a holistic perspective that recognizes the many paths to well-being that must be in alignment for long-term healthy lifestyle behavior change. Ryan brings immense knowledge and insight to WELCOA from his background in psychology and a career that spans human resources, organizational development and wellness program and product design. Prior to joining WELCOA, Ryan managed the award winning BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee (BCBST) Well@Work employee wellness program, a 2012 C. Everett Koop honorable mention awardee. Since relocating to Nebraska, Ryan has enjoyed an active role in the community, currently serving on the Board for the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition in Omaha. Ryan has a Master of Science in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Northern Arizona University.

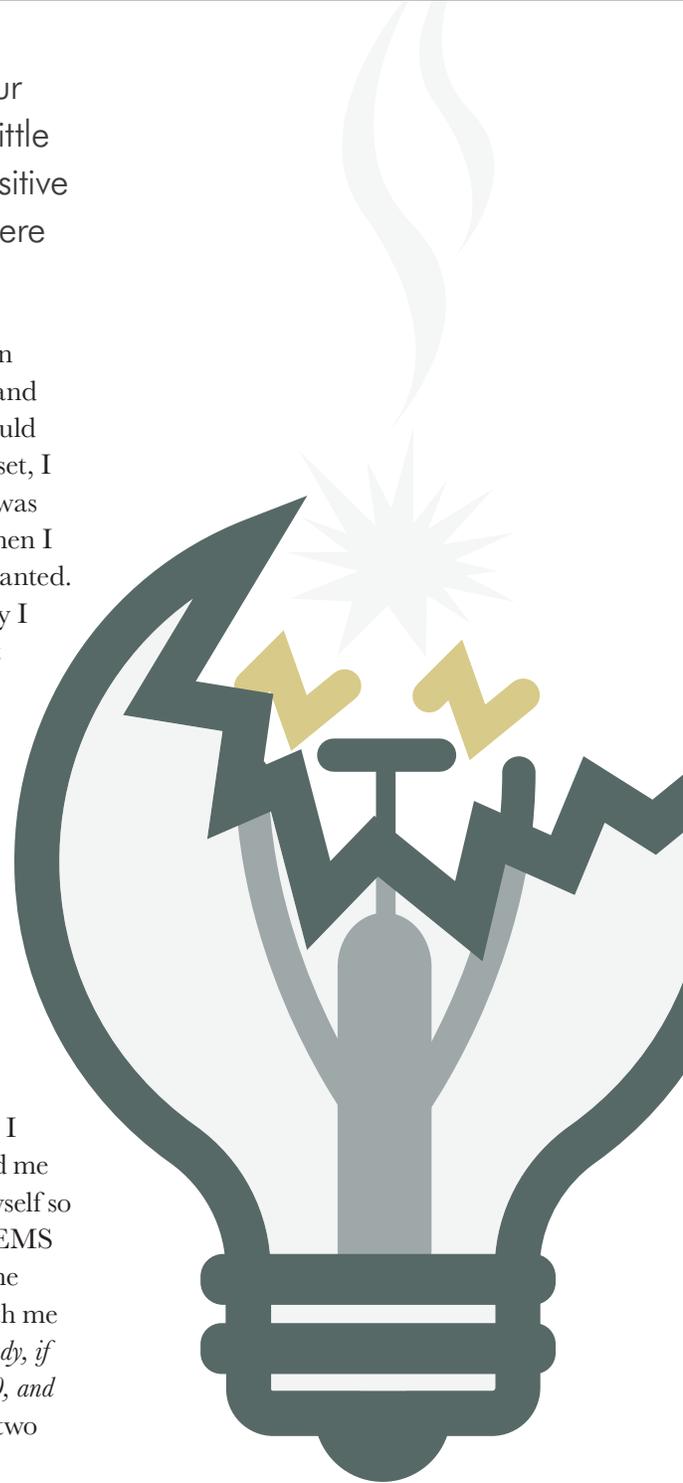
WELCOA President Ryan Picarella sits down with MJ Shaar to learn more about positive psychology and some quick strategies for fostering positive emotions in our own lives and among employees.

★ **RYAN PICARELLA** MJ, thank you very much for your time. Let's start kind of broad; why don't you just tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to be an expert in positive psychology and ultimately in wellness? How did you get where you are today?

**MJ SHAAR** My interest in wellness started when I was 15 years old. In the province of Quebec, Canada, there is one step in between high school and university, which we call cegep. The year I was 15 was when my grades would make or break my entry to cegep. With my really intense 15 year old mindset, I figured that if I did not have the best possible grades that one year and if I was not the best possible actress and dancer (my extracurriculars at the time), then I was not going to get accepted in the program of my choice in the cegep I wanted. Then I would not be accepted in the program of my choice in the university I wanted. That meant I would not have the career of my dreams. And if that did not happen, I was not going to be the happiest, most accomplished person I could have been, so I was not going to attract the most favorable possible male for a husband. And if that did not happen, then my kid's life was going to be mediocre [laughs]!

★ **RP** You were tough on yourself.

**MJS** No kidding! That was a lot of self-imposed pressure for a 15 year old! So I was investing all my time into studying more, dancing more and rehearsing more. I skipped my lunch breaks, shortened my nightly sleep and refrained from socializing because I thought it wasn't productive. But despite all these sacrifices, I did not perform any better. Actually, things got worse as I burned myself out. I looked—and was—so tired, my teachers started to send me to the nurse so I'd sleep instead of staying in their class. One day I pushed myself so hard in phys. ed. and got so hyperventilated that the teacher decided to call EMS on me. I ended up leaving the school in an ambulance—not embarrassing one bit! The doctor who examined me in the ER realized nothing was wrong with me except for my stress levels. He looked at me right in the eyes and said, *young lady, if you do not change your lifestyle, you will have ulcers in your stomach by the time you are 20, and you will die of a heart attack by the time you are 40.* My grandmother had survived two



heart attacks at that point, so I knew to take his warning seriously. That is when I started to pay more attention to my health habits.

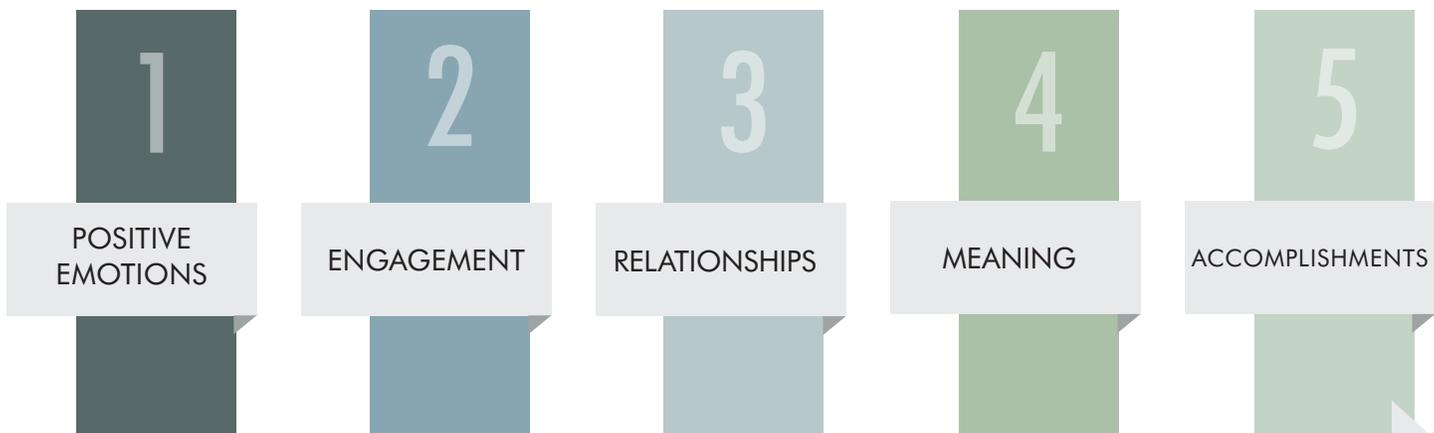
I started to sleep full nights again. I stopped skipping lunch. I started to take it a little easier while exercising. Magically, I worked less, and my performance went up pretty much in everything that I did, especially grades. I was much happier, and my friendships improved. I realized that I had been trying too hard for the wrong reasons, and that things got better because I was now taking care of my brain and body. So that is how I got into it. I wanted to prevent others from making the same mistake.

I started by getting certified as a group fitness instructor and later as a personal trainer and a nutrition and wellness consultant. I received a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology at UPenn. Looking at how all of these things work together, I created a health promotion model that is not just about exercise, or nutrition or psychology, but it is about all of our habits as a whole, and how to improve them in synergy.

★ **R P** That is a great segue to the next question. So how does MJ define wellness? If someone asked what wellness means to you, what would you say?

**M J S** I love the Gandhi quote that says that happiness is when what we think, what we say and what we do are in harmony. To me, wellness is when we can feel that peace, that completeness, in our minds and in our bodies. To achieve that, we need healthy sleep, food, mood and exercise habits. I use these four words because they are the simplest and most memorable way to put it. But when I say sleep, I really mean all forms of rest, including daily breaks and occasional vacations. By food, I mean everything that goes into our bodies through the mouth, including our water and alcohol consumption. Mood means all of positive psychology. Positive psychology is based on five pillars which spell PERMA. P stands for positive emotions. E is for engagement. R stands for relationships. M is for meaning, and A is for accomplishments. So mood is all of PERMA. And when I say exercise, I mean all forms of movement—not just when you have your running shoes on and you are hitting the trail or the gym. Exercise also includes when you do a quick little stretch, or when you decide to stand instead of sit.

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★ **RP** So what makes this definition different? What is the intersection between the traditional approach to wellness and PERMA?

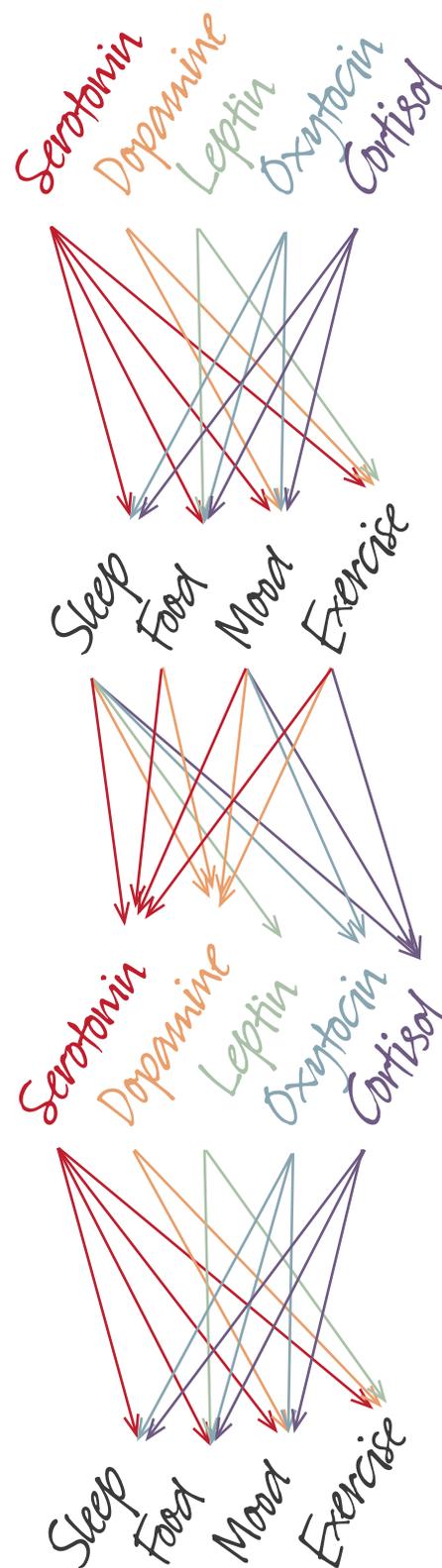
**MJS** The traditional approach tends to look at what's wrong, where's the biggest problem, and how do we fix it. Positive psychology is different in that it aims to discover and leverage what's right, and how to build from there.

The way I use it in my health promotion model is that I look at these four groups of habits—*sleep, food, mood* and *exercise*—as being not only interconnected, but mutually reinforcing. For example, if we sleep better, we rebalance our biochemical activity in a way that will then make it easier to feel emotionally resilient and optimistic the next day, will reduce cravings the next day and will make us more likely to implement our exercise intentions the next day. These resulting improvements don't happen just because subjectively we feel better, but also because objectively the body functions differently.

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So I recommend people use these synergies to their advantage. For example, a person trying to improve their food intake may benefit more from a sleep plan than a food plan. For one thing, sleep is often not associated with a lifetime of past failed attempts, and so it may seem easier, less defeating, even refreshing to start there. But equally important, as this person sleeps better, their cortisol levels will go down, which will result in fewer cravings. Their serotonin will be up, which will result in better self-regulation. So as this person improves sleep, food will become easier to manage as well.

That's a good way to use the tenets of positive psychology. Rather than work directly on the biggest problem (as the traditional approach would), we tackle things from a different angle, and build from an area where participants feel stronger. That's the gist of my health promotion model, and I explain all of it in my book, *Smarts and Stamina: The Busy Person's Guide to Optimal Health and Performance*.



★ **RP** How do you think taking a positive psychology approach can start creating change within organizations or wherever it is applied? How do you build those concepts into a wellness program or a broader organizational culture? What are the first steps?

**MJS** When we build wellness programs, we have to realize that if we only do nutrition or if we only do exercise or even if we do some back and forth between the two, it is the equivalent of buying a cell phone without a charger. People have some energy for the walking program or the mindful eating campaign, but no matter how truly beneficial and exciting those are, at some point participants get tired of it and it's game over. Things need to be woven together, and I think that positive psychology can be that thread that shapes the overall culture and that supports wellness between campaigns. It can truly make wellness come alive and make the whole larger than the sum of the parts.

★ **RP** So, one of the ongoing discussions in wellness is the notion of incentives, carrots and sticks, penalties or disincentives—whatever the dialogue. It seems that positive psychology—forgive the pun—is a more positive approach to creating change. Would you agree with that and what are your thoughts on incentives in general?

**MJS** I am not a big fan of incentives, and it is probably because of my positive psychology background. The positive psychology community believes that the most powerful and sustainable kind of motivation is intrinsic motivation. To create intrinsic motivation, you need to give people more autonomy, more connectedness to others, a sense of mastery, and a feeling that what they contribute matters. Incentives are generally contrary to that because if you are doing something for a carrot, then you are not doing it for the mastery, or the purpose, or the connectedness. Positive psychology is all about what makes life worth living. Things that have intrinsic value don't require a carrot nor a stick—people just want to do them because they are worth it.

★ **RP** I love it. I know the goal for these programs is to enhance that intrinsic desire that I think already exists within everybody. Everybody wants to be healthy. I think if you ask

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them if they wanted to have more energy and smile more and be healthy I think 99.9 percent of people would say yes and the .10 that said no were not listening to the question. So if an organization wanted to leverage positive psychology, how could they apply these in a practical setting?

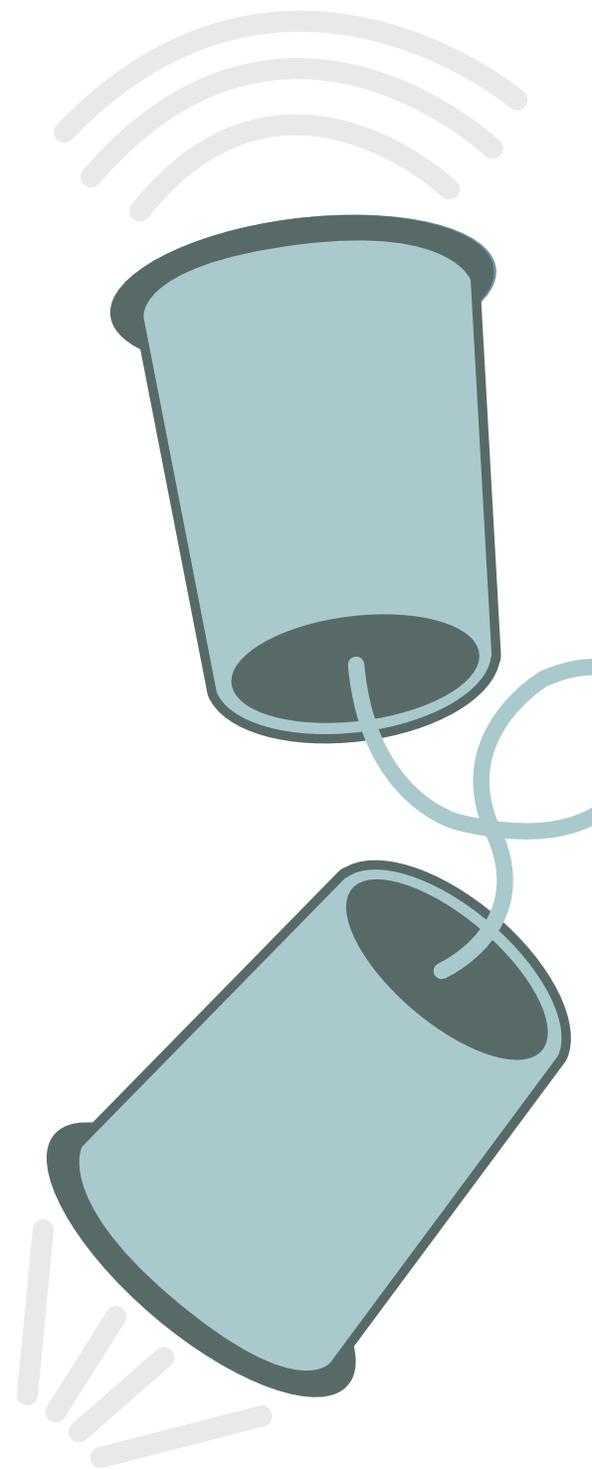
**MJS** Good question again. There is no one-size-fits-all. Everybody is different. Every organization is different, and strategy always depends on what kind of support you have from executives and middle management. But the idea of discovering and leveraging what's right instead of trying to fix what's wrong can apply in any context.

For example, if we find that the majority of employees are severely sleep deprived, we're all very tempted to come up with a sleep intervention of some sort. But instead, let's leverage the synergies once again, and tackle something that won't be quite so challenging. Maybe everyone is suffering from insomnia because stress levels are too high. Or maybe their bodies can't relax at night, because they've been tied to their chairs all day long. In this case, rather than tell everyone how to sleep better, addressing the underlying stress or sedentary ways may render better results more easily. It will also help employees feel that their needs are understood and taken care of.

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★ **RP** So what is one thing that we as individuals can start doing to incorporate this perspective into our lives whether it is individual or company focused?

**MJS** Try to look for what is already working well and build from there, rather than focusing on the biggest issues directly. A given situation might not be exactly what we are hoping for, but where is the silver lining? For example, I received a frustrating email. I can lash back, or I can write a response I am proud of. Or maybe it was a very busy day. I can come home thinking about how stressful it was, or I can think about what was the best part of that challenging day. If I fail at



something, I can crumble and say I'll never get anywhere, or I can wonder what I learned that will be useful and that will make me stronger in the future. That is one thing everyone can do: change our perspective so we are actively seeking what's right.

There is also much to be grateful for, and which we take for granted. Most of us have fully able brains and bodies. Most of us can afford to eat three meals per day. Most of us feel loved and safe. We have warm homes in the winter and cool homes in the summer, with clean, drinkable running water. We have freedom of thought, speech and religion. Those are things we can be grateful for, and which we easily forget.

Having said that, here's an important caveat: I'm not suggesting we put our heads in the sand and pretend everything is joyous and beautiful 100% of the time. That would be unrealistic and unhelpful. But once we've digested an initial challenge, or as we look at our overall daily routine, we can actively put ourselves in a mindset that allows us to feel empowered and face life constructively.

★ **RP** What is a success story from the people you have trained in this model through your workshops?

**MJS** One of my Licensees, Liz, worked with a gymnast, whom we'll call Piper. As a competitive athlete, Piper had very good nutrition and performance coaching. Yet, despite all this support, her weight had always been just a little too high for a gymnast of her caliber. Piper hired Liz as a last resort to "fix" her diet once and for all so that she could no longer be the "bulky" gymnast that she felt she was.

Rather than work on a food plan, Liz started by working on Piper's mindset, so that she felt capable of change and of achieving her goal. While those conversations were going on, Liz discovered that Piper wasn't sleeping enough, specifically when considering the massive amounts of energy her training was requiring. So they worked on establishing better sleep hygiene. As she improved her sleep, Piper started to lose those few stubborn pounds that were so troublesome to her.

The reason I like this example so much is because Liz and Piper didn't even address food directly at all. In many cases, after addressing some underlying issues, we then get back to the biggest problem, but by then we do it from a place of greater empowerment, because some of the original obstacles have been addressed. But in this case, Piper got what she needed simply by working on the periphery of what she thought was her "real" problem.

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★ **RP** What do you think has led to the decline in health within our communities, organizations—even across the globe? Why do you think that as a population we are making poor health choices?

**MJS** I think it is the result of a few pressures that are coming in at the same time. The first one is social/work pressures. Like I explained in the story about my 15-year-old self, we want to perform. We want to be recognized. We want to stand out. We want to be somebody. It is one of the most basic needs. That creates the pressure to always achieve more so we can outdo ourselves and others. As a result, we sacrifice things that, in the short term, we think are not as essential for that goal. Good health habits is therefore one of the first things to go out the window. I think the second pressure is consumerism. More and more families are living on two incomes—and in many cases, the second income is not because they couldn't get by on one income, but because they couldn't get to buy all they want on one salary. The number of single parents is also increasing. When you have kids and two working parents, or when you are a single parent, it's really tough to find time for healthy cooking or for working out. Meanwhile, kids learn that the drive-through is an acceptable lifestyle, and that when you become an adult, you no longer have time to exercise. And the pattern becomes more and more predominant over time. Lastly, with all of today's technology, we no longer learn the virtue of patience. We don't have to wait for a letter to come in the mail because we can talk to people right away, no matter where they are in the world. We don't need to wait for tomorrow's newspaper, we now get more info than we need in real-time. With that comes the need for immediate gratification. As a result, getting in shape, losing weight, or even waiting until the weekend to have dessert seem to take a long time, and we're not used to being patient. So I think all these changes or pressures together are contrary to what benefits us the most, ultimately.

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★ **RP** I am going to switch gears a little bit on you and I want to talk a little bit more about MJ. Do you have any traditions or rituals in your life that have been meaningful in defining who you are as a person?



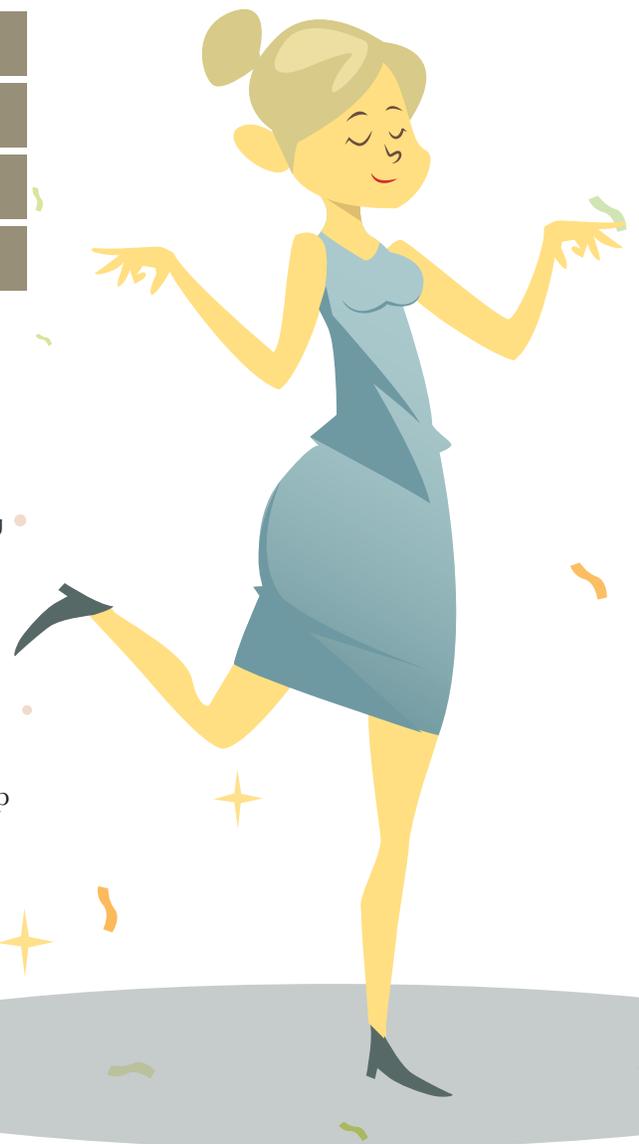
**MJS** Well, I am a new mom and my son is only five and a half months old. He sleeps well at night, but he really doesn't like to nap during the day, so my routine is completely upside down right now. Of course, I still cook at home as much as I can, and have my green shake in the morning. I work out as much as I can, take a walk when it is sunny outside, look for what I can be grateful for—all of that. But that is kind of boring. Don't get me wrong, I love it all, but everybody expects people who work in wellness to be doing that. But there is something that I have been doing for a long time that is probably a little more unexpected. When my energy is really low and I am a little discouraged—that can happen to new moms—instead of trying to process it and get deeply analytical (which never helps me feel better), I do the silliest, craziest dance you have ever seen. My limbs shake in every possible direction, my knees come up, my fists close, my shoulders and hips jiggle right and left and front and back. I even give matching facial expressions for extra emphasis. Sometimes when I give a speech, I throw in a short demo and let me say that people laugh!

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★ **RP** When did you start doing that? Is that something you have done your whole life or is that in your adult life that you started that?

**MJS** I cannot tell you when it started but I have memories of it dating from when I was a teen. But I think I got sillier over time. I do that often enough that at some point I was on the phone with a friend and I was telling her about some disappointment and how I was having a hard time getting over it. She said, “Do me a favor. Put the phone down and go do one of your MJ dances. You cannot stop until 30 seconds have elapsed.” I did it, and immediately felt better. It did not solve the problem, but it helped me alleviate the situation so I could better deal with it.

I also do those silly dances to celebrate other people's victories by the way. When my husband comes home with good news, instead of saying *oh, that is great Lover, let's open a bottle of wine*, I give him a particularly enthusiastic rendition of the MJ dance [laughs].



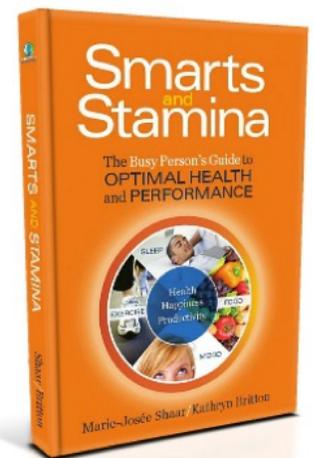
★ **RP** Wouldn't it be cool if we could bring elements of that gratitude and positivity into the workplace somehow? Instead of rushing around because of workplace "fire drills" and being reactionary, could we sit around the table at the office and tell others what we are grateful for today? It would really be an interesting activity to bring in some of those conversations to see how they might change an environment or diffuse tough situations.

**MJS** Absolutely! I worked with a manager who now starts every meeting by asking who can share one piece of good news before getting started on the agenda. I've worked with another who does exactly what you are suggesting, starting with a few gratitudes. And a third starts each meeting by asking one person to share a story and a photo of them at their best. I think these practices help everyone discover a more positive side of their co-workers. It helps foster friendships, and as we know from Gallup research, those who have best friends at work are seven times as likely to be engaged at work, so the benefits are many.

★ **RP** My final question is about something that concerns me in regard to the dialogue in the field right now. There are many disagreements and tough conversations happening around best practices for wellness, and while I think that can be a very healthy thing, many are not necessarily productive. Any thoughts on what we need to do to really move things forward and elevate our profession?

**MJS** I think that we are spending too much time criticizing what is not working and not enough time imagining what would be better and how to get there. So it would be really cool if we could do an appreciative inquiry forum. Appreciative inquiry is a process done in four steps, each starting with the letter "D". The first D is Discovery—finding out what we do especially well, and what has been most helpful so far. The second D is Dream—dreaming of a better future, imagining what could happen that would be a desirable improvement. The third D is Design—starting to plan steps that will move us from where we are to where we want to be. And the fourth D is Destiny—or implementing the plan, making that better future a reality. I think the industry would really benefit from going through that process. For it to be as realistic and beneficial as possible, we'd need to convene people from very varied positions and at every level of the wellness industry. All the different perspectives need to be considered and included. 📌

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Check out MJ's book, *Smarts and Stamina: The Busy Person's Guide to Optimal Health and Performance*.

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