

Article rank | 23 Jun 2008 | Ottawa Citizen | DONNA JACOBS MONDAY MORNINGS

How to have a good morning, and a better day

Give yourself time to get organized

It's an old saying: "As the morning goes, so goes the day." Leading Canadian mental health expert Bill Wilkerson agrees.

"In the morning," he says, "the key thing is to avoid a scramble — scrambling to get your act together. That is very hard to recover from.

"If you don't have a steady morning," he says, "it's hard to believe in the rest of the day."

Besides rising early enough for a rush-free morning, he says, "you have to know where your day is going. You've got to start the morning with clarity."

Mr. Wilkerson knows how to focus. He is one of the men who helped make the case to Prime Minister Stephen Harper that he should focus on the millions of Canadians who, at some point, succumb to stress, burnout and illnesses such as depression.

"This is the first prime minister in Canada's history," says Mr. Wilkerson, "to stand up and make the statement that mental health is a national priority.

Statistically, nearly 40 per cent of people have mental health lapses in their lifetimes — including public servants, on whom Canadians depend and who are booking off sick or submitting disability claims in record numbers.

Mr. Harper appointed former Liberal senator Michael Kirby last year to head a mental health commission to study cause and cure for the massive absenteeism, lost productivity and the human toll wreaking havoc in the public and private sectors.

Mr. Wilkerson, CEO and co-founder of the Toronto-based Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, is a wellknown advocate of removing the stigma that drives distressed people deeper into themselves and away from family, friends and professionals.

In a front-page feature in last Monday's Citizen, he told writer Kathryn May that Canada needs a nationwide study into the "toxic" public sector management and working conditions of Canada's public servants — including bureaucrats, military, police, nurses, doctors and teachers.

He was commenting on a new groundbreaking survey by the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service that revealed even top government executives feel harassed and beleaguered. (Since one definition of depression is a sense of powerlessness, the APEX study broke any lingering illusion that rank protects against depression.)

Whether it's a loss of happiness, of fully-functioning workers or of tax dollars, stress and illness cost dearly. Mr. Wilkerson says disability claims and economic loss — public or private sector — totalled \$51 billion — four per cent of GDP.

"Human despair," he says starkly, "costs the economy of Canada more than strikes and product defects."

What, specifically, does he recommend to have sane mornings that lead to sane days? What does he say to Canadians locked into health-destroying jobs?

"I say to these people that you've got to get up in the morning not just thinking, 'I've got to go to work.' You've got to get up thinking what are the things you're going to have to do.

"But, in the same breath, what are the things you're going to do that you're going to be proud of? I think it's in that light and context we rediscover our professional values and our sense of balance.

"If you don't have a steady morning," he says, "it's hard to do."

To gain the peace and sense clarity, he says, do a little workout. "It helps and gets you more clearly focused on what you've gotta do — even if it's some simple stretching or sit-ups."

He follows his own advice. "It's almost like falling out of bed because it gets me going — 60 crunches sitting on a big workout fitness ball in my bedroom in Port Hope," a small city

"on the shores of Lake Ontario, 100 kilometres east of Toronto. Then, there's the clarity part. "You need to know what kind of day you're facing."

"Ideally, you already wrote it down the night before. Whether it means (you do it) over a cup of coffee or listening to music, you need a key 20 minutes every day to write yourself a note on a piece of paper with a line down the middle.

"On the left side of the paper, write down what everyone else thinks you're going to do for them, and what you

can do. Sort out a priority list. "And on the right side of the paper, list the things you really want to make

sure you get done — things that are close to what you believe your job really is — the quality of things you really want to do.

"So one side is quality and what you will do for sure. And on the other side are demands that you have to juggle, whether you like it or not."

His own morning solution is to get up early — 5:45 a.m. "I hate it, but I do it. It's really necessary if I'm going to meet my deadlines I set for myself."

He often takes the 7:10 a.m. train to Toronto, where the Global Roundtable is based.

"This is my first small-town living experience," he says. He and his wife, Olga Cwiek, a retired CTV and CBC-TV executive, live there with four-year-old Reggie, the Wheaten terrier poodle with the light brown body and black face

"I wasn't sure how it would work out," says Mr. Wilkerson, considering his tackle-it attitude towards work.

He is surprised. "It has been a tremendous advantage to my pace and the quality of work I do," he says. He doesn't miss the logistical problems of getting around Toronto. The train ride is relaxing and great for reading. "Living in small town? I'm now a believer."

He doesn't have lingering, idyllic mornings, however. "I turn pretty quickly after a workout to the computer. I will do a lot of fast e-mails from home. If I have any writing of substance to do, I will usually do it early in the morning before heading out — if I'm going out.

"What I don't do well in morning is eat breakfast." He drinks two or three cups of tea with double milk and, if he eats anything, it's fruit or instant oatmeal with milk or fruit. "I learned to exclude sugar from my life — and I lost my taste for it."

Noon is one of his wife's salads and a piece of bread or cottage cheese. Dinner is pasta and steak once a week, chicken and no carbs after 7 p.m.

"If you have too many carbs and go to bed," he says, "that's when you put on the weight."

Unsurprisingly for someone on a low-carb diet, his favourite meals are spaghetti and meatballs and Kraft dinner. Though dessert is rare, he'd choose a good cherry pie.

At home, he wraps up his work day at 3:30 p.m. and heads out for nearly three hours of a wildly-varied workout in the park. There, he drives dozens of baseballs off a rubber tee — "I used to be a pretty good ballplayer in my 30s" — and keeps a log of distances hit.

"It's my most passionate outing," he says. "I hit left- and right-handed and chase the balls myself — a tremendous cardio workout." Stretches, crunches, free weight work and arm curls follow. He takes boxing lessons and works with a personal trainer twice a week.

On a big game night, he heads to the historic Ganaraska Hotel pub to meet his buddy, Andy Lamont, ex-Toronto police detective, for some brews. "Well, another incentive," he says. "I can only drink beer on the days I work out."

At six feet, 200 lbs, with all those workouts, is it mostly muscle? A chuckle: "I like to think it is. Like men my age (66), I work on my midsection a lot."



He laughs at the suggestion of dietexercise zealotry. In defence, he tells a story of vice. He hides medium-sized bags of Lays Classic potato chips in the trunk of the car and eats them as he drives. Or he sneaks them, tucked into his briefcase, up to his office. Occasionally, he successfully tempts his more-disciplined wife with the open chip bag.

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