The Journey Within:

Stories of how Mental Health Professionals give meaning to their own sense of well-being.

By

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Abstract

This is a study of the wellness journey of four mental health professionals and its perceived impact on their physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions. In-depth interviews were carried out with one male and three female mental health professionals coming from different developmental stages in life (ages ranged from 29-68 years old), different nationalities, and with a varied range of experience in different settings. An interview protocol containing ten probes was used as an aid for the participants self-disclosure. After this, participants were also asked to describe a metaphor which came to mind when they thought about the concept of wellness. This helped capture more intensely the representations of the wellness experience. The data were analysed using the narrative method. In all four narratives it was seen how participants, albeit having faced the pains, joys, struggles and challenges of life and work, not only survived but they flourished. The chief conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this research is that wellness in the participants is a foundational way of being that is built from the combination of particular behavioral, interpersonal, existential, and personality factors. All these factors help these individuals structure their lives to attain a continual sense of balance, fulfillment, well-being, and personal meaning. Moreover this study sheds light on the significance of spirituality in the participants’ lives, and how this transcendental orientation sustains their lifelong commitment towards wellness. This study may have two very important inferences: the first is the influence of wellness across all the domains of the professionals life, and how the therapists self-nurture practices not only promote individual wellness, but may also be a key component for improved therapeutic process, and also essential for the sustainment of the mental health profession itself.

Keywords: mental health professionals; lived experience; well-being; healthy balance; self-care.
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To my brother

who is the source of my inspiration for
writing this thesis, and for whom I am
deeply grateful for teaching me the real
significance of perseverance, resilience,
and strength.
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DECLARATION

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Date
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION
The Heart of this Study: My Own Story

This journey of exploration did not commence with the mission of conducting this thesis, but was born five years ago when, through the diagnosis of the terminal illness of a very close family member I became witness to the resilience and strength that lies within humans. This heart-rending experience which was happening in parallel with another important journey: that of pursuing a counselling career, not only profoundly changed my own personhood, but also profoundly transformed my notion of the significant importance of wellness.

Due to my nursing career; ill-health, disease and death have been part of my reality for the past 23 years. However, never had I been as deeply challenged as I was this time round. This painful journey threw me into turbulent seas and I was overcome by waves of terrifying emotions. As the strapping physique of my loved one started failing, desperation and helplessness engulfed me. It was a continuous struggle to try and keep afloat and function effectively in my daily life. Fear, that had been unknown to me, overwhelmed and tormented my soul, and this in its turn started eroding my spiritual and emotional wellness.

During this time I continued reading my degree in Counselling and even began working in the field. All this time, during which I went about carrying out my professional duties, I felt as though my very core essence was progressively being depleted and drained. The effort of putting on a brave face for my family, coping with the internal turmoil this experience was throwing me in, and trying to listen empathetically to my clients’ experiences, was putting a tremendous strain on my mind, body and spirit. Although my capacity to care, connect and be compassionate did not leave me, the capacity to balance my life did. I was finding it harder and harder to constantly summon the energy to engage with another human’s emotions while at the same time balancing my own personal life.
Yet, amidst all this pain and struggle, the foundation of something very profound and beautiful was coming into being. Although I have always been close to my relative, when he fell ill our relationship blossomed. In our deep and soulful conversations we spent hours discussing existential questions that have long been present since the existence of man. We sought to question the reason for pain and its meaning in our life; we shared our fears about death and loss; we revealed the beauty and appreciation of being alive; and we disclosed the significance of spirituality and faith in a Higher Power in our lives. Although my relative’s physical health was fading away and he was becoming weaker, his inner strength was increasingly becoming stronger - he reflected a sense of well-being that went beyond physical health. As I witnessed all this I could not help but connect his way of being to one of the most inspirational authors, Victor Frankl. Frankl’s belief is that humans are fundamentally driven by a search for meaning and that even in the direst situations; one can find meaning in suffering and move forward with renewed purpose. In my eyes this maxim was mirrored in my loved one’s way of being.

As all these thoughts unfolded in my mind I became aware that wellness is not just skin deep - wellness reaches deep within us. It has a multitude of pathways that connect all of the layers of our being - that is the body, mind and spirit. Slowly, as these discernments strengthened within me, a sense of serenity and peace of mind started to reign over me. I once again felt energized and replenished both emotionally and spiritually, and I was able to balance myself, my life and my work. I was able to accompany my clients in their painful journeys of growth, and felt honoured and glad to have these unique opportunities of intense human experience. I became overtly conscious that I cannot separate myself from the person of the counsellor - they are entwined and therefore nurturing wellness needs to be a day-to-day, minute-by minute, commitment in my life.
This is the journey which developed my eagerness, passion and vigor to conduct this research and this is what steered me through the process of the present research. By narrating my story, I am not declaring that I now have full understanding, or that all my questions are answered. I am well aware that if anything, my journey of growth has just started and that I will encounter more turbulent seas in my personal and professional life. However this one experience of ‘surrender and acceptance’ has opened up a window of awareness that is enabling me to see and experience the world, life, myself and others, with more respect and reverence. This opportunity of growth has also given me the wisdom of knowing how my own well-being will not only affect me personally, but also my person as a counsellor, my therapy and the therapeutic relationship I will create with my clients.

**Research Question and Definitions**

The leading question of the research is the following: How do Mental Health Professionals give meaning to their own sense of well-being? I intend to explore this question by conducting a qualitative research using in-depth interviews with four mental health professionals utilizing the narrative method to analyse the collected data. Owing to the fact that this research has been motivated by my own personal experience, self-reflexivity will play a significant part throughout the course of the study. I believe that this is essential for the following motives: first it will enable me to be aware of the ways in which my own narrative may impact my study; and secondly, it will at the same time encourage and inspire readers to make their own elucidations of such experiences.

Before I resume with this introduction it is imperative to define three significant terms which are going to be frequently used in this research: wellness/well-being/happiness, positive psychology and mental health professionals. For the purpose of this study I will utilize the definition of Myers, Sweeney and Witmer (2000) of wellness/well-being: “A way of life oriented toward optimal health and
well-being, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (p.252). These authors develop their wellness theory, based on the theoretical philosophies of Adler (social interest and striving for mastery), Maslow (striving toward self-actualization, growth and brilliance), and several studies on the characteristic traits of healthy individuals. Their definition represents holism as the foundation of human wellness, and it frames wellness in terms of balance and well-being across all the dimensions of the whole person. It shows how each of these dimensions is essential to the whole and no one aspect operates independently, making this approach holistic both within the person and with the environment (Myers, Sweeney & Witmer, 2000).

Moreover, for the purpose of this study the word happiness is going to be used interchangeably with the words wellness and well-being. The definition of happiness is deciphered through the lens of positive psychology, which expands the meaning of this notion to a state of optimal functioning and well-being. This will be explained in more detail in the next paragraph.

Positive Psychology was introduced as an initiative of Martin Seligman in 1998, is the scientific study of strengths, well-being and optimal functioning. Humanistic psychology is the field most identified with the study and promotion of positive human experience, and in fact the ancestors of humanistic psychology all struggled with the same questions tackled by positive psychologists (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005). Such questions include: What is a good life? What is the meaning of authenticity? How can we promote growth in ourselves and in others? When are humans at their optimal state? Of significant relevance is Maslow’s philosophy by which individuals can become self-actualized, a condition in which they have access to their peak potential. These peak potentials which Maslow posits are characteristic of self-actualized individuals, and are very much the theme of present positive psychology studies (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The ultimate goal of positive psychology is to seek to learn how people can live happy and well lives.
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through discerning and building positive emotion, gratification and meaning (Seligman, Parks & Steen, 2004).

For the purpose of this study the phrase Mental Health Professionals incorporates psychologists and counsellors.

**The Rationale of this Research**

In my opinion, two features make the rationale of this research particularly strong. The first feature that gives significance to this study is the fact that I will attempt to depict the multidimensional nature of wellness through the qualitative method. Although there are a good number of wellness studies, most are quantitative (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997; Myers & Sweeney, 2004; Renger, Midyett, Mas, Erin, McDermott, Papenfuss, Sweeney & Myers, 2005a). Many researchers contend that this way of capturing such a complex and fluid construct such as wellness is very restricted, since there is the loss of rich background data (Lorion, 2000; Harrari, Myers, & Sweeney, 2005; Christopher & Maris, 2010). Based upon these considerations I will try to understand the multidimensional nature of wellness through the qualitative method, and instead of using pre-existing measures I will explore this construct through the participants’ life narratives. I also consider my use of the narrative inquiry as an added strength to this research since it offers a unique avenue of investigation that can help to reveal and make sense of my participants’ complex life experiences. My participants’ narratives will provide an open-ended exploration of the influence of wellness across all the domains of their life. This I believe will help me identify themes that will be an important first step for future research.

The second feature that I feel makes the rationale of this study particularly valid is its influential propositions for the training of mental health professionals. Lawson, Venart, Hazler, and Kottler (2007) maintain that our vocation as mental health
professionals entails that our person acts as the instrument for the work that we do, and this intense degree of connection, dedication and compassion brings forth the greatest strengths of our work. However, these same qualities may make us vulnerable and susceptible to injury. As research consistently confirms, a helper can support another person’s wellness, growth and autonomy only to the degree that they have sustained their own (Rogers, 1961; Lum, 2002; Lawson et al, 2007; Schure, Christopher & Christopher, 2008). For this reason when our behaviours mirror respect and value for our own wellness, it is more probable that we will be able to cultivate wellness in our clients and in the people around us (Miller, 2002). Although there is restricted empirical data about this phenomenon, I believe that therapists’ self-nurture practices not only promote individual wellness, but may also be a key component for improved therapeutic process, and also essential for the sustainment of the mental health profession itself. The results of this research may highlight the importance of providing wellness strategies for trainees, which may help to promote wellness practices early on and to diminish factors that put a helper’s well-being and professional competence at risk.

Chapter Outline

This study will be organized into six chapters. Chapter two is aimed at grounding this study around theories and also exploring what the literature says about the related issues. This chapter is divided into three sections. Section one offers an analysis of the vast research that identifies factors that influence the wellness of the mental health professional. Section two, using the theoretical philosophies from Positive Psychology and Wellness theory, depicts a comprehensive understanding of the ‘wellness journey’ of a person. Section three shows how the personal characteristics that are nurtured on this wellness journey seem to act as protective buffers to the many variables influencing the mental health professional’s wellness discussed in section 1. Chapter three presents the methodology, method of inquiry and writing style chosen for this study, and also discusses Ethical, Confidentiality, Reliability and Validity issues of this research.
Chapter four represents the findings of the study, giving importance to the participants’ voices. Chapter five presents my interpretation of the findings in my own voice, utilizing myself in two ways: firstly, to self-reflexively place myself in the data and make my own voice apparent so that I will enhance the study’s validity; secondly, I will utilize myself in this study as an instrument so as to better understand my participants. Chapter six concludes this research with a summary of the study and also provides suggestions and ideas for future research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW
The mental health profession is a vocation in which the person herself serves as the instrument of her work (Lawson et al., 2007; 1995; Rogers, 1961). The level of connection, dedication and caring are amongst the highest strengths that one brings to this work; and they are also amongst the qualities that may make one vulnerable (Lawson & Venart, 2005; Cummins, Massey, & Jones, 2007). Impairment frequently occurs when mental health professionals continually concentrate on the plights of clients while disregarding, setting aside, or underestimating their own needs for balance and self-care (Baker 2002, 2009; Lawson et al., 2007; Lawson & Myers, 2011). Although subjected to the same pressures, stresses and struggles, some mental health professionals can endure and thrive; experiencing a passion, love, and gladness in their work that intensifies instead of diminishes their passion for life itself and other life commitments (Dlugos, & Friedlander, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Over the past two decades the study of wellness has flourished (Lawson et al., 2007; Cummins et al., 2007), and in fact many different models have been developed to provide a framework for understanding this complex construct (Venart, Vassos, & Pitcher-Heft, 2007; Roscoe, 2009). The increase in research on issues of wellbeing has signalled a greater focus on wellness rather than impairment, shifting from a deficit model to a more strength-based and prevention model (Lawson et al., 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In spite of the fact that several authors have proposed definitions containing different wellness dimensions (Ardell, 1977; Clark, 1996; Jensen & Allen, 1994), body, mind and spirit are the most commonly recognized areas of wellness (Adams et al., 1997; Ardell, 1977; Dunn; Myers & Sweeney, 2001).
Consistent with these paths of wellness study, I have chosen to try and capture the complexity of such construct through the philosophies of Positive Psychology (Seligman, 1991, 1993, 2002, 2004) and through the wellness theories portrayed by Witmer, Sweeney & Myers (1998, 2000, 2005). For an integrated paradigm of wellness, I will be looking through the positive experiences and positive individual traits proposed by Positive Psychology (Seligman, 1991, 1993, 2002, 2004) and also embracing the notion that high-level wellness relates to wholeness in mind, body, spirit and community as suggested by Witmer, Sweeney and Myers (2000, 2002, 2005). Following is the literature review which is divided into three sections. In the first section I will investigate the present literature which reveals features that influence the well-being of the mental health professional. In the second section I will explore the interrelated relationship between a person that adheres to a wellness philosophy and a more balanced, passionate, and happy life. In the last section I will bring together all the presented literature by demonstrating ways of how the main research question can be better understood.

The Wellbeing of the Mental Health Professional

In this first section of my literature review I will explore a good number of research studies which clearly expose elements that affect the well-being of the mental health professional and elements that make them more susceptible to distress and impairment. In order to get a good glimpse of all the variables that affect wellness within this context, I will take into consideration the personal level, the therapist-client relationship level, and the work environment level. Embracing the notion that wellness is more than the absence of disease (WHO, 1947), but rather the choice of encountering and resolving life challenges purposely on a daily basis and all through the life span I will frame wellbeing in terms of balance and wellness across all the dimensions of the whole person: physical, emotional and spiritual (Myers, Sweeney & Witmer, 2000). On the other hand I will use Gladding’s (2006, p.72) description of impairment which posits that “it is the inability to function adequately or at a level of one’s potential or
ability”. These definitions will help me to comprehend more clearly the whole spectrum of wellness.

Within this framework wellness is seen as the opposite end of the spectrum from impairment (Witmer & Young, 1996). In my opinion, in order to comprehend the most beneficial ways to support wellness, it is also imperative to comprehend what puts wellness in difficulty. In fact Lawson et al., (2007) contend that exploring wellness in this way will help identify risk and resiliency, and also help identify aspects linked with greater wellness and less impairment. Following this, I will try to identify and explore the variables affecting wellness both within the personal and professional levels of the mental health professional, supporting all these variables by a number of research studies in the field. I will conclude by attempting to describe, what have been in my opinion, as implied by all the read research findings, the suggested characteristics and behaviours of a well mental health professional.

Personal Level

Impact of personal life events

Opposite to what many mental health professionals believe, (Cummins et al., 2007; Good, Khairallah, & Mintz, 2009) they are not resistant to the effects of personal life events or to the influence of constantly working with pain and trauma (Cummins et al., 2007; Good, Khairallah, & Mintz, 2009). This notion is echoed in a study carried out on 294 therapists, where it was discovered that more than three quarters recounted experiencing relationship problems and that half of them testified experiencing depression in their lives (Deutsch, 1985). Similarly, Sherman and Thelen (1998), in their survey of 522 practicing psychologists, found out that problems in close relationships and a major personal illness/injury caused the most distress and impairment across all of the examined life events. A significant finding
in this study is that when a therapists is dealing with stressful life events they are inclined to feel less satisfied in their personal life, and this can affect gratification and passion for work (Sherman & Thelen, 1998).

**Personal vulnerabilities to distress**

Another significant line of research evidence which, in my opinion, gives strong support to the susceptibility of impairment is a personal predisposition to distress, due to inherent and/or circumstantial factors. Having a personal history of trauma (Pearlman & Maclan, 1995), having a history of psychiatric illness (Brewin, Andrews & Valentine, 2000), experiencing current life stress and having unresolved personal issues (Figley, 2002; Valent, 1995), may all increase the professionals’ vulnerability over time. Moreover, being female and being younger (Brady, Guy, Poelstra, & Brokaw, 1999; Myers & Cornille, 2002), and having less professional experience and training (Harrington, 2001) may also increase one’s risk for the development of impairment. Such vulnerabilities may place the therapist in a more difficult position to maintain boundaries with clients, and this may increase her liability for injury, which may manifest as compassion fatigue, burn-out, or vicarious traumatization (Baker, 2009). Interestingly, although there is vast evidence supporting these personal vulnerabilities, similarly there is ample empirical evidence (Folette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994; Ortlepp & Friedman, 2001) that suggests that personal coping styles and the capability to give meaning to stressful experiences may be a more accurate determinant of professionals’ emotional functioning. According to a study which examined the unique factor of resilience, therapists who possessed this cognitive framework were described as committed to work, with an ability to perceive change as a challenge (King, King, Fairbank, Keane, & Adams, 1998).
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Self-awareness

The extent of one’s own wellness outcome is, in my opinion, greatly influenced by the degree of attunement with self. This is clearly conveyed by Coster and Schwebel (1977) who describe “self-awareness as a prelude to regulating our way of life, modifying behavior as needed” (p.10). Baker (2009) explains how self-awareness helps one to observe her inner experience, by processing one’s needs, strengths, capacities, fears, limits, conflicts, tendencies, defenses and weaknesses under stress. Within this framework it is conveyed that self-awareness promotes self-regulation, which consequently promotes balance in the physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions, and also promotes a balanced connection between self and others (Baker, 2009). Baker (2009) discerns that exploring and understanding this inner world of thoughts, feelings, values, aspirations, potentials and needs, will not only make one manage emotions in a manner acceptable to self, but it will also bring forward the necessity to regard oneself with respect and care.

The Counsellor-Client Level

Strong agreement exists within the research literature that a lot of therapeutic relational factors may predispose therapists to experience distress and ultimately become impaired (Cummins et al., 2007; Sherman & Thelan, 1998; Venart et al., 2007). Skovholt (2001) asserts that the very nature of the therapeutic work, which involves the repeated engagement with clients via empathic attachment, requires a lot of emotional energy. In a study illustrating the effect of personal challenges on the therapeutic process, Cummins et al (2007) found out that when counsellors shift their emotional resources to focus on a personal crisis, a deficit within the therapeutic relationship is created, and it will eventually compromise the ability to remain well (Cummins et al., 2007). Skovholt (2001) caring is a vital ingredient in therapy, and the inability to care adequately is the “most dangerous signal of burnout, ineffectiveness, and incompetence” (p.12). Alternatively, other studies identify inherent traits that may help to renew and/or protect the therapists'
professional and personal vigour (Meyer and Ponton, 2006). Miller (1998), on his research on the stresses of helping, attests that having a sense of personal autonomy and avoiding over-identification with clients, acts as buffers against impairment. Similarly, in a research on self-care strategies Brady, Guy, Poelstra, & Brokaw (1999), conclude that when therapists have a strong spiritual foundation and they focus on positive aspects of their work, they are more resilient to injury.

The Work Environment Level

There is ample research that verifies the significant effect the work environment has on the wellness of the individual (Boscarino, Figley, & Adams, 2004; Creamer & Liddle, 2005; Figley, 2002; Myers & Cornille, 2002). It is proposed that particular environmental variables may contribute to enhanced stress which may eventually lead to job burnout, which is described by Maslach and Jackson (1986), as a “syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment” (p.1). Studies investigating factors that may influence the occurrence of job burn-out indicate that long working hours, long assignments, and caseloads with a high percentage of trauma patients especially children, place the therapist in a more vulnerable position for burn out (Boscarino et al., 2004; Creamer & Liddle, 2005; Myers & Cornille, 2002). Moreover, other studies suggest that professionals who work in environments that are not supportive and sustaining are more likely to develop this phenomenon whereas organizational factors, such as supportive work environments and adequate supervision, alleviate the occurrence of burn-out (Boscarino et al., 2004; Korkeila et al., 2003; Ortlepp & Friedman, 2002).

One main conclusion that can be drawn from this research review is that mental health professionals shares the same pains and joys of human existence as their clients, and are therefore no less vulnerable to the challenges of life. Evidently, self-awareness plays a significant role in being attuned to oneself and one’s needs, regulating and modifying behaviours as needed, thus promoting more
balance in one’s life. Moreover, the significance of inherent traits, such as resiliency, positive outlook on life’s challenges and a sense of autonomy, help to act as buffers against these trials. Evidence suggests that by achieving and maintaining a greater sense of wellness, the therapist will not only improve her personal development and life satisfaction, but she is able to face the demands of work more effectively, without being overwhelmed by stress and anxiety; thus decreasing the possibility of impairment.

The Many Facets of Wellbeing

The main aim of this section is to understand in the most comprehensive manner the complementary relationship between an individual who embraces a wellness philosophy and a more balanced, meaningful, passionate view of life. Moreover, I will try to get a better understanding of what maintains wellness, and what professionals in the field can do to replenish themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually. I will attempt to do this by gaining knowledge through the theoretical philosophies of the freshly developing field of positive psychology, since it is the field concerned with well-being and optimal functioning. Secondly, I will draw on the wellness model of Witmer, Sweeney and Myers (2000), to get an expanded view of holistic well-being, providing stratagems for maintaining health and vitality in all dimensions.
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Positive Psychology and a full life

The emergence of positive psychology

Positive psychology or psychotherapy, from which all of these theoretical philosophies are taken, has as its ultimate goal the nurturance of well-being in individuals and communities. This process of wellness is concerned with making people happier; by understanding and building positive emotion, gratification and meaning in one’s life (Seligman et al., 2004). Since the Second World War, psychology has been mostly dedicated to repairing weakness and understanding suffering (Duckworth et al., 2005); and although towards that end psychology has done well in addressing a number of disorders, it has seriously trailed behind in enhancing human positives (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006). Indeed, very little empirical research has investigated the role of positive emotions and of strengths in prevention and treatment.

Going through the vast empirical studies (Barrett & Ollendick, 2004; Kazdin & Weisz, 2003), it is observed that to understand the human experience many researchers take on what Duckworth et al., (2005) call the fix-what’s-wrong approach, by concentrating on bad events and inherent vulnerabilities. There is good evidence that points out to the fact that the absence of maladies is not equal to being happy or being well (Diener & Lucas, 2000). This premise is clearly echoed with Ardell’s (1986) declaration, that one can be well even if afflicted by illness, because one can opt for more positive lifestyle choices and thus health-enhancing behaviours, with the result of a more satisfying, serene and significant existence.

These notions place two questions in my mind; if well-being is a state over and above the relief of suffering, then what makes one truly happy and well? How can one live a full, happy, meaningful existence irrelevant of the tempests and turbulences that are encountered in one’s life? By shifting its focus beyond
suffering and its direct alleviation, positive psychology aims to answer such questions by concentrating on strengths, well-being and optimum functioning (Duckworth et al., 2005). From this positive view, one can understand more what makes an individual kind, caring, giving, optimistic, passionate, resilient, engaged, hopeful, content, brilliant or purposive. Moreover, optimal wellness is seen to be inextricably tied to inherent characteristics in the individual, which not only make her more attuned to her inner potential but also more equipped to sail through the tempests of life (Seligman, 2002).

Components of a happy and well life

One cannot start speaking about optimal wellness, without first determining what well-being/happiness really is. Seligman (2002) proposes that, for a better understanding, this complex construct needs to be deconstructed into more scientifically manageable components. He identifies three constituents of well-being: (i) positive emotion (the pleasant life); (ii) engagement (the engaged life); and (iii) meaning (the meaningful life). Seligman (2002) posits that these three constituents are scientifically useful, since empirically they can shed light on what builds such elements. In the following paragraphs I will define these three routes of well-being. Recognizing the fact that the conclusions of positive psychology research are only as valid as their measures, I will also review relevant assessment strategies that attempted to measure these constructs.

The pleasant life

The first path to greater happiness is hedonic, and consists of having a lot of positive emotion about the present, past and future, while possessing the skills to intensify the duration and strength of these emotions (Seligman et al., 2006). Positive psychology explains that enhancing positive emotions is possible within limits. One can enhance one’s positive emotions about the past (e.g. by nurturing
appreciation and forgiveness), one’s positive emotions about the present (e.g. by mindfulness and enjoying), and one’s positive emotion about the future (e.g. by fostering hope and optimism) (Seligman & Steen, 2005).

A lot of studies postulate that greater positive emotion is often associated with lower depression and anxiety (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Seligman & Steen, 2005), however it is not clear cut whether this is due to correlation or causal factors. Literature on depression records a downward spiral in which depressed emotions and narrowing thinking affect each other (Seligman et al., 2006). In contrast, positive emotion and broad thinking augment each other, steering to an upward spiral of well-being (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). This empirical data point out to a causal effect between low positive emotion and depression, and therefore it is hypothesized that positive emotions will shield against depression. Although similarly, hope and optimism counteract pessimism and depression (Seligman, 1991, 2002; Synder, 2000), there are some conflicting results.

Hope has long been acknowledged as a significant component of human growth and change (as cited in Weis & Speridakos, 2011). In fact, the developments of the theoretical models of hope have greatly influenced the field of positive psychology and the study of well-being (Lopez & Synder, 2004). In a meta-analysis of hope-enhancement strategies in clinical and community settings, researchers Weis and Speridakos (2011) present some interesting findings. Overall the mean effect size for increased life satisfaction was small ($d = .16$), when compared with moderate to large increases in well-being (mean $d = .61$) and using other positive psychological interventions (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Clearly, as has been declared by Seligman (2002), this route to happiness which relies entirely on positive emotions has distinct limits since it narrows the conception of well-being to mere hedonics. Fortunately, however, Seligman (2002) offers two other paths; the path of engagement and the path of meaning, which offer a much broader and deeper notion of happiness, leading to greater life satisfaction.
The engaged life

The second path to happiness in Seligman’s (2001) theory is the engaged life which consists of utilizing individual strength of characters (e.g. integrity, wisdom, ability to love and be loved, compassion, creativity, courage and leadership) and talents. Embracing these traits in one’s life enhances engagement, involvement and absorption in intimate relationships, work and leisure. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls this highly engaged psychological state as Flow. Seligman (2002) proposes that one way of increasing engagement and flow is to recognize persons’ peak strengths and talents and then help them utilize them more. To a large extent, this philosophy resonates with the philosophies of Rogers’s (1961) aspiration of the fully functioning individual, and Maslow’s (1970) notion of a self-actualized individual.

A reading of the literature concerning depression reveals that negative mood reflects clearly a lack of engagement, energy and passion in the many areas of one’s life (Cheavens, Gum & Burns, 2010). This notion was taken up by the Milan Group who set up a programme of therapeutic strategies, where the strengths and talents of individuals were highlighted with the hope that their engagement with life will be enhanced. In fact, results show that there was a significant reduction in depression and anxiety in all the participating individuals (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002)).

The meaningful life

The third path for happiness involves the quest for meaning, and it comes from utilizing one’s strengths to belong to and to be of service to something bigger than oneself (e.g. family, community, social justice, politics, higher spiritual power) (Seligman et al., 2004). It is agreed that this third path of well-being satisfies a longing for purpose in life, and quoting Seligman et al., (2004), it is “the antidote to a fidgeting until we die syndrome” (p.1380). Research confirms that irrespective
of the institution one is serving in order to create a meaningful life, doing so generates a sense of satisfaction and the notion that one has lived a purposeful life (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Similarly, it is empirically evidenced that such activities create a subjective sense of meaning and are significantly linked with happiness and well-being (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Interestingly, a persistent premise in many meaning-making studies is that individuals who gain the biggest profit use meaning to change their perceptions of their life situations from unfortunate to fortunate (Myers, 2000; Seligman, 2000). Myers (2000) contends that when individuals embrace the internal conditions of hope, love, enjoyment, and trust they are allowing themselves a more meaningful existence in that any amounts of objective obstacles can be faced with composure and even joy.

The three paths of happiness - the pleasant life, the engaged life and the meaningful life demonstrate how people differ in their pursuit of happiness and well-being. Persons who attempt to pursue happiness through positive emotions are taking the route of the pleasant life; persons who follow the path of gratification are pursuing the engaged life, whereas individuals who are following the meaningful life, are striving to use their strengths to attain something bigger than themselves. Peterson et al., (2005), who developed measures to investigate the three paths of happiness, contend that a person who uses all three paths lead a full life and this in its turn leads them to greater life satisfaction.

A Holistic Model of Wellness

For a more complete understanding of the complex construct of wellness, I will open up another complementary window, and look at the philosophies of Witmer, Sweeney and Myers (2011) to decipher more profoundly what holistic wellness really is. In order to understand the profound meaning of well-being, these researchers propose global village ecology and a cosmic consciousness that highlights the interconnectedness of all things (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). The key
themes in this philosophy of wellness relate to wholeness in body, mind, spirit, community and the whole universe (Witmer & Sweeney, 2001). This notion of wholeness is drawn from the theoretical concepts of three distinguished thinkers. Adler (1954), in his work about individual psychology, notes that the ultimate aim of the psychic life “is to guarantee the continued existence on this earth of the human organism” (p.28). In his writings, Jung (1956) observes that the human spirit pursues integration, and that there is an instinctual drive toward health and wholeness. Similarly, in his study of the characteristics of healthy people, Maslow (1971) states that growth and self-actualization must be acknowledged as universal.

This framework confirms that the proposed wellness approach is holistic both within the person and the environment. Moreover, it shows how wellness is described in terms of many dimensions that interact in a complex, synergistic and unified manner. In the following paragraphs, I will describe a number of positive sustaining interventions and stratagems which give empirical evidence of how this sense of wholeness and happiness can be kept vital.

The Nurturance of Wellness

One thing that most of the wellness models seem to suggest is that persons on the wellness journey can take their own responsibility in this journey by cooperating with it and by becoming more open and receptive to it through certain practices. Whether through overt practices (e.g. physical exercise, sharing feelings with someone, being creative through art, music, writing or poetry, and doing voluntary work), or through internal strengths (e.g. hope, courage, interpersonal skills, optimism, genuineness, purpose, determination, courage and personal responsibility), ample evidence shows that these practices act as buffers for positive emotions, that consequently lead to a happier and more meaningful life.

Moreover, empirical evidence points out to the ‘undoing effect’ of positive emotions (Duckworth et al., 2005); where studies confirmed that positive emotion
caused negative emotion to dissolve more quickly, furthermore helping an individual to find positive meaning in stressful situations (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Studies focusing on character strengths - such as kindness, compassion, resiliency, self-awareness, determination, spirituality, humour, optimism and autonomy have recognized these traits as wellness boosters. In a six-week kindness study, two groups of participants were asked to perform five acts of kindnesses; one group had to do these acts all in one day and the other spread them over one week (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Interestingly, only the participants who performed five acts of kindness per day resulted in being happier. Similarly, in a gratitude study, Emmons and McCullough (2003) conclude that participants who were randomly assigned to a gratitude intervention demonstrated increased positive effect as compared to control participants.

Self-awareness puts one in touch with one’s inner deeper self, something which has been shown to be a prelude for regulating one’s way of life, and thus promoting balance and wellness (Baker, 2009). Contrastingly, consistently numbing oneself with escape-avoidance activities will eventually disconnect one from self and this will eventually undermine wellness (Venart et al., 2007). In their study about mindfulness practices in counselor trainees Chambers Christopher and Maris (2010), reported an increased ability to be present and aware even when facing stressful emotions and critical internal monologues. Moreover, they also report participants feeling less defensive, more emotionally open and flexible, and being more equipped to tolerate ambiguity in their emotional life.

Neff (2003), in his studies on self-compassion, contends that individuals possessing this trait are more satisfied in life, more optimistic, happier, wiser and more curious. Moreover, compassion enables them to perceive their own experience in light of the common human experience; accepting that suffering, failures and disappointments are part of the human condition, and that all humans including themselves are worthy of self-compassion (Neff, 2003).
Similarly, spiritual practices such as meditation, contemplation and prayer have shown not only to nourish the human spirit (Valente & Marotta, 2005), but to lead to an improved ability to experience joy in small things in life (Elkins et al., 1988; Fulton, 2005; Underwood & Teresi, 2002), and to be more optimistic and hopeful; breeding confidence in either the best possible outcome, or the ability to decipher meaning out of life situations (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992).

A characteristic of healthy people is the ability to perceive reality as it is (Maslow, 1998). In fact, empirical evidence confirms that emotional distress is nearly always the cause of gross distortions or unrealistic expectations (Beck, & Steer, 1992). Witmer and Sweeney (2001) assert that a sense of control, which is closely related to feelings of mastery and confidence, is another trait that promotes a healthy view of self. These same authors find that individuals who possess a sense of control, which is defined as the opposite of powerlessness, are more optimistic, perceive life as more manageable and are more able to cope with stress. As a result these individuals are less anxious and have fewer physical symptoms. Furthermore, this sense of control goes hand in hand with resiliency, which is a cognitive framework where one feels in control, has a passion for life and sees change as a challenge (King et al., 1998).

Significant relationships and peer support seem to be the best positive predictors in a study of well-functioning psychologists (Coster & Schwebel, 1997). Sharing feelings with another person who is non-judgmental can be healing (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992), since the disclosure of innermost thoughts can significantly improve physical and mental health (Pennebaker, 2004). Moreover, Herr and Cramer (1988) claim that social connectedness through work provides one with self-identity, psychological benefits and economic assets. Furthermore, many studies declare that finding satisfaction in work is a great forecaster of overall perceived quality of life since it has an important positive relationship with factors
such as hardiness, commitment, less anxiety and stress, a more meaningful life and longevity and greater productivity (Burke & Mc Keen, 1995).

Taking into consideration the physical dimension, studies indicate a positive influence of a healthy diet on mood, and highlight the negative influence of processed foods, sugars and caffeine on anxiety and sleep (Myers & Sweeney, 2004; Young & Lambie, 2005). Moreover, Venart et al., (2007), declare that yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong, dance and all kinds of aerobic exercise are pursuits that enhance physical health; augment one’s energy, determination and discipline; increase feelings of wellness and decrease stress. Research shows that adequate rest is a significant factor of self-care, and so contrastingly sleep deprivation has many negative effects on the mental and physical functioning, such as decreased mental and physical performance, and medical problems, such as compromised immune functioning, chronic colds and body pain (Dement, 1999).

In addressing the topic of self-care in psychology professionals, Baker (2009) explores this phenomenon through the life narratives of 30 practitioners. The personal narratives of these professionals shed light on the challenges and triumphs in their self-care journeys. Baker (2009) reveals how balancing one’s personal and professional life entails tending and nourishing the physical, emotional and spiritual self and also opening oneself to others. Moreover these stories reveal how personal well-being in these therapists has a direct, positive, proactive approach to their chosen profession and pushes them to be the best they can be.

The above studies confirm that an optimal state of health and well-being, mirrors wholeness of the mind, body, spirit, community and nature (Myers, Sweeney and Witmer, 2002, 2005, 2011). I believe this active and continuous effort to maintain the best level of well-being, will enable persons to lead a happy life; by understanding and building positive emotion, gratification and meaning.
How Mental Health Professionals give Meaning to their own sense of Wellbeing

Ultimately it is the personhood of the mental health professional that is at the centre of this study, and this will be the focus of the present section. Section 1 gave comprehensive research evidence on the factors that influence the wellness of mental health professionals and factors that make them more vulnerable and distressed. Section 2 used wellness philosophies to depict a comprehensive understanding of the wellness journey of the individual. This section is going to bring together all of the literature presented so far, and it is going to illustrate in what ways these give solid support for the application of the main research question of this study which is “How do mental health professionals give meaning to their own sense of well-being?”

All the wellness theories presented so far suggest that persons who embrace a wellness philosophy possess a greater sense of wholeness and connectedness within all dimensions; giving more meaning to their life. I will be presenting a list of characteristics which, in my perception, the different wellness philosophies agree belong to the growing and evolving person. However, this is not an exclusive list and it may not cover all the characteristics of this way of being. Moreover, I believe no one characteristic is totally separate from the other and they may all be interrelated, since they are portraying a way of being that is integrated and functioning as a whole.

Attunement with Self

As has been shown by the presented theories of wellness, persons who have wellness integrated in their way of being are persons who are greatly attuned with themselves (Baker, 2009; Seligman, 2002, Witmer et al., 2004), and so in touch with their inner experience and able to regulate behaviour as needed (Baker, 2009). Persons possessing this kind of attunement with self have a more balanced life, since they can manage her physical and emotional impulses, drives
and anxieties (Witmer et al., 2004). Moreover, self-awareness will breed more responsibility and respect for oneself, and this in its turn will promote self-care practices and a vigorous passion to continue learning what helps, deepens and strengthens one’s own well-being and happiness (Baker, 2009). Achieving this great sense of wellness, allows a mental health professional to meet work and personal demands by dealing more effectively with stress and anxiety, thus decreasing impairment (Roach & Young, 2007).

A mental health professional who embraces physical wellness makes an active and continuous effort to maintain the best level of physical activity and focus on nutrition as well as self-care and the sustenance of healthy lifestyle choices (Adams et al., 1997; Durlak, 2000). Being connected to one’s body is important since it helps one to stay grounded, and this is a vital part of physical nurture (Venart et al., 2007). This way of being is important for therapists, as they can observe when they need to rest or to re-fill, or when they need to participate in an activity to invigorate themselves (Venart et al., 2007).

Mental health professionals possessing emotional wellness have awareness and control over their emotions as well as a realistic, positive, evolving view of the self and life situations (Adams et al., 1997; Renger, Midyett, Mas, Erin, McDermott, Papenfuss, & Eichling, 2000). This capacity to accept personal limitations and the realistic perception of things leads to an enhanced acceptance of both self and others, together with the capacity to tolerate ambiguity (Fulton, 2005; Germer, 2005; Hahn, 2002). Their wellness is mirrored in their ability to cry, feel happiness, recognize one’s own fears and accept praise; the ability to say no without feelings of guilt and the ability to express love openly (Travis & Ryan, 2004).

The individual who is spiritually well has the incessant desire of discovering meaning in life, while at the same time accepting and transcending her place in the complex and interconnected universe (Renger et al., 2000; Seligman, 2002). This way of being induces mindfulness, which Kabat-Zinn (2003) describes as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present
moment and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p.14). This way of being cultivates an enhanced ability for concentration and attention; reinforced ability to accept the present moment; better self-awareness and compassion; and an enhanced ability for self-regulation (Fulton, 2005; Valente & Marotta, 2005).

An intellectually well mental health professional has insight, intelligent thought and creative problem solving abilities (Durlak, 2000). The ability for insight leads to the acceptance of one’s own limitations and to the dissolution of an all knowing mentality (Venart et al., 2007). Admitting and accepting that struggles and shortcomings are part of human nature, gives the mental health professional a new perception of her exchanges with clients, a perception which in its turn supports mutual healing (Venart et al., 2007).

An individual who endorses social wellness has healthy relationships where she can be as close to her true self as possible (Baker, 2009). In such relationships she can move beyond the listening role and is able to speak and express thoughts, feelings and concerns; and feel appreciated and loved for her true self rather than idealized or judged (Baker, 2009). Likewise, therapists embracing wellness are not afraid to seek support and help through personal therapy or therapists support groups, since they understand that this is a route for self-understanding and self-nourishment (Yalom, 2002).

**Inherent Strengths**

Many wellness studies attest to the inherent strengths within the individual that help act as buffers against the development of impairment (Rogers, 1961; Lum, 2002; Lawson et al., Schure et al., 2008). From the theories of wellness included so far, I determined what I consider the most salient character strengths that aid the mental health professional in her journey of wellness. These positive qualities
which I believe are virtuous across cultures include, kindness, compassion, hope, integrity, self-awareness, courage, honesty, positivity, creativity, curiosity, humour, resiliency, purpose, determination, leadership, wisdom and knowledge, justice, temperance, transcendence, loyalty, generosity, and the ability to love and be loved. These strengths, in my view, are worthy ends in themselves and not just the means to a greater end. Duckworth et al., (2005) posit that a life guided around these character strengths leads to an existence with more engagement, absorption, happiness and meaning.

Witmer and Sweeney (1992) contend that these positive traits enhance the sense of ‘wholeness’ within the individual and produce the conscious knowledge that all is connected. This sense of interconnectedness promotes a more profound client-therapist relationship, and this in itself is healing for both parties (Kelly, 1995). Curiosity, inventiveness and creativity are three traits that Maslow (1998) concludes are present in self-actualized individuals. A mental health professional who possesses such characteristics is mentally more active and creative, and this consequently augments the quality of life and longevity (Pelletier, 1981). In my opinion, all these inherent qualities contribute to mental health since the individual has an aspiration for growth, acceptance of self, autonomy, integration of character and an accurate view of reality. According to positive psychology, these character traits help directly to foster more positive emotion (Seligman, 2002), which consequently leads to more contentment, satisfaction and serenity in one’s life. Moreover, a mental health professional who owns such strengths is more hopeful and optimistic about her present and future life (Duckworth et al., 2005).

Passionate Commitment towards Life

In my view, there is a reciprocal relationship between wellness and a passionate commitment for life. As has been demonstrated, the key themes in the philosophy of wellness relate to wholeness in body, mind, spirit, community and the whole
universe (Witmer & Sweeney, 2001). This holistic wellness nurtures a positive outlook on one’s own existence and gives life more meaning, commitment and purpose (Seligman, 2002). In my opinion, an individual embracing such a philosophy is energized and invigorated, and continues to thrive albeit facing life’s adversities. In addition to this, she demonstrates a sense of balance and harmony with all aspects of her life, and she structures her life to achieve a continual sense of fulfillment, fascination and personal meaning. In my eyes, this way of being not only breeds more respect for self, others and the universe; but also brings about an insatiable thirst to keep expanding one’s soul and one’s mind, through savouring life to the full.

This experience of passion which can be understood through Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of flow, is clearly described by Jackson and Marsh (1996) as “an intrinsically enjoyable state, whereby the person experiences clarity of goals and knowledge of performance, complete concentration, feelings of control, and feelings of being totally in tune with performance” (p.18). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) contends that all life can be transformed into an incessant flow of experience, by nurturing purpose, creating resolution and discerning harmony. This passionate way of being is also mirrored in how one perceives her work as a therapist (Dlugos & Friedlander, 2001; Muller, 2007; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004). Dlugos and Friedlander (2001), in their study on the characteristics of passionate committed psychotherapists, find that these individuals have a particular outlook towards life that was reflected in their work: view obstacles as challenges to be faced with determination and creativity; acknowledge the spiritual dimension within themselves and others; have a hunger for enhanced knowledge and wisdom; seek activities that maintain freshness and excitement in all aspects of their life, and they have a continual fascination with human growth and change.

**Conclusion**

Two significant conclusions can be drawn from the above literature review both
strongly supporting the relevance and purpose of the present study’s research question.

The first one is that the lists of qualities that have been debated in this section seem to act as protective buffers to the many variables influencing the wellness of the person of the professional discussed in section 1. This section gave evidence of the powerful impact that positive character strengths have on the personhood of the mental health professionals and on their wellness. It was concluded that in spite of experiencing the same demands, pressures and conflicts that face all mental health professionals, these ‘well’ persons not only manages to survive, but also to flourish; experiencing joy, love, and passion in their work and personal life that enhance, rather than lessen their overall wellness and positive outlook towards life.

Wellness reaches deep within, with a multitude of pathways that connect all the layers of one’s being: mind, body and spirit. Mental health professionals functioning from their deep self are persons who are greatly attuned with themselves and in touch with their inner experience. As empirically evidenced this self-awareness will enable them to regulate behaviours as needed, consequently leading to a more balanced and happy life (Baker, 2009; Seligman, 2002; Witmer, Sweeney, Myers, 2004). Therapists possessing such heightened awareness have a higher reverence and respect towards themselves, others and the universe; and from this positive standpoint they make a life-long commitment to continuously nurture all dimensions of the self. It is also concluded that this state of being ignites a passionate commitment to life, where self-care is not perceived as an option but as a respectful, committed choice. Functioning from a ‘well’ and ‘whole’ sense of self, will not only affect positively the person of the individuals, but also their person as a mental health professional, their therapy, and the therapeutic relationship they will create.

From this idea, the second important conclusion and implication of this literature review emerges: that of incorporating a wellness focused education programme for trainee mental health professionals. These programs can be a
context in which there is a focus on the building of positive strengths, and also an opportunity to provide the students with the direct experiences necessary to explore specific self-care strategies. This, I believe, will help both students and professionals to make healthy changes in their life-style that would be lasting and pervasive both in their personal and professional life.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY
Philosophical Influence: Feminist Values

Growing up in a very patriarchal family where my father was the authority figure and everyone, including my mother had to gain his approval or follow his instructions, instilled in me a sense of rebellion. This intensified further when having five younger brothers, I had to witness daily the inequality between us and had to accept that because I was a girl I needed to take on the ‘submissive role’. Throughout the years this rebellion ripened into a driving force that pushed me not only to move beyond obstacles and reach out for my dreams, but it also made me understand more profoundly words such as equality, empowerment, resilience and injustice. This piece of life history has shaped my values and made me appreciate the Feminist Philosophies.

Feminism which emerged in the late 19th century describes a culture in which women, because they are women, are treated differently; and in that difference of treatment they are at a disadvantage (Tandon, 2008). Tandon (2008) holds that such treatment is cultural and proposes that a change for a more desirable culture is possible through the activity of personal and social change. In this way, feminism is seen as transformational in that it is about choice, respect for equality, and independence of mind, spirit and body (Singh, 2004). Expanding these notions to feminist research whose foundations are those of critical theory, the researcher not only documents aspects of reality, but also takes a personal engaging stance in the world (Punch, 2000).

For this reason, although this study will be using the narrative method of inquiry, it will also be embracing the Feminist paradigm since I believe it will add value to this research. One significant feminist premise is the dismantling of power relations between researcher and participants. This equality stance can be
achieved through engaging in collaborative work that expands the notion of reflexivity and encourages the use of self-disclosure and user participation in the study (Harding, 1987). I believe that through sharing ownership of the data with participants I did not only restructure power imbalance in the research, but I also encouraged reciprocal education through our shared knowledge.

Another feminist concept embodied in my research inquiry is what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) call a “women’s ways of knowing”. Women’s way of knowing is a theory that emerged through in-depth interviews with 135 women from diverse demographics (Belenky et al., 1986). From these interviews which addressed self-image, moral dilemmas, important relationships, education and learning, and visions for the future, common themes were identified and transformed into five epistemologies of women’s ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986). This way of being inspires and values multiple ways of knowing and understanding, such as: sensing, feeling, intuition, tacit knowing and use of images, symbols, poems and metaphors. This creative way of knowing generates mental pictures that capture more vividly the representations of experiences. Moreover, this expanded route of knowing will enable me to have a more profound understanding of the narrator and her recalled experiences; her feelings, her attitudes and ideas, her thoughts and her senses.

While adopting the narrative method of inquiry, the present research embraces this interpretation of feminism, which in my view not only gives more voice to my participants, but also through the use of reflexivity and the creative ways of knowing, captures more profoundly the complexities of oneself and one's experiences.
Selecting the Method of Inquiry

Constructivism, at its essence, suggests that human knowledge is constructed (Creswell, 2003). With this guiding principle the Constructivist method of inquiry was chosen to depict the multidimensional nature of wellness, as it was intended to understand ‘the world of human experience’ (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36), being fully aware that ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Martens, 2005, p. 12). Many researchers assert that trying to understand the complex and fluid construct of wellness through the positivist inquiry is very restricted, since there is the loss of rich background data (Lorion, 2000; Harrari, Myers, & Sweeney, 2005; Christopher & Maris, 2010). Christopher and Maris (2010) assert that one of the limitations of positivist research is that the focus of study has already been allocated out into variables which interest the researcher, and then allegedly captured by pre-existing measures. I believe that existing research on wellness needs to be supplemented by qualitative inquiry that can explore the participants’ experiences in their own terms, possibly exposing dimensions of change that have been ignored or cannot be captured by pre-existing measuring instruments.

To gain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon, the narrative method of inquiry was chosen. Polkinghorne (1988) describes it as “a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole” (p.13-14). Connection and meaning are two elements which stand out in this definition, and which make it the most appropriate method for gathering and analyzing the type of data this study is interested in. First, narratives have a particular form (Polkinghorne, 1995), where the storyteller organizes the story by linking events, perceptions and experiences (Kramp, 1995). Moreover, Elliot (2005) posits that narratives preserve our memories, prompt our thoughts, connect us with our past and present, and help us to visualize our future. All these factors made this method of inquiry the best suited method since this research analyses the story of mental health professionals’ lives. The mental health professionals’ understanding of their wellness journey through their life
The Journey Within consisted of many interrelated and connected life events. For this reason, no other means of data collection and analysis could have been more apt because this method captures more profoundly the phenomenon I need to understand, or as Bruner (1986) accurately puts it, it helps “endow experience with meaning” (p.12).

The second element is that the narrative enquiry accentuates the participants’ reflective meaning-making. The narratives reveal fascinating knowledge that brings together layers of understanding about the individuals, their culture and how they have created change (Etherington, 2009). In my view, meaning is possibly the most significant characteristic of the phenomenon explored in this research, since it seeks to gain a rich understanding of how the participants structure their lives to achieve a continual sense of well-being, meaning and fulfillment. Furthermore, published studies have almost exclusively investigated this construct through quantitative approaches. A narrative research design provides complementary knowledge; in-depth description, comprehension, and interpretation of lived experience with attention to details and complexity (Polkinghorne, 2005). This further justifies the power of narrative as it is the most effective vehicle to identify behavioural, existential, interpersonal, and personality factors that might be common to ‘well’ mental health professionals.

The Participants and the Interviews

In order to get a more profound sense of how participants gave meaning to their own sense of well-being, subjects had to have had considerable exposure in the therapeutic arena. This, in my opinion, gives a more realistic view since it exposes all the faced challenges and the numerous demands on their time, resources and talents. For this reason the participants who collaborated in this research had to fit two conditions: they had to be (i) qualified mental health professionals; (ii) had to have worked in the field for at least eight years, four of which should have been
spent engaged in psychotherapy or psychotherapy-related activities. There was a third influential criterion for the choice of the participants, and this was subjectively determined. Although I did not have a close personal rapport with any of my subjects, I have been present for many of their inspirational talks and was deeply impressed by the qualities I observed. The compassion and love that accompanied their words, their apparent joy in having such a career, their vitality and their general sense of passion and respect for life were the basis for choosing these individuals to be a part of my study; as I believed that their rich life experiences could shed light on the intricate and complex construct of wellness. In this regard Murray (2003) explains that qualitative research follows a different logic than quantitative research, in that participants are deliberately selected for their specific characteristics because they are identified as possessing knowledge about the particular topic.

The number of participants chosen for this research study was determined on the assertion of Josselson & Lieblich (2003) that “what is necessary depends on what the researcher intends to find out and at what level of analysis she or he intends to treat material” (p.268). As this research intended to investigate the wellness journey in a deep and thorough way, only four research participants were chosen to be part of this study. One in-depth semi-structured interview was carried out with each participant, followed by other meetings to check up the accuracy of data.

The four participants selected were three females and a male. For ethical reasons I will be using the fictitious names of Vera, May, Rose and Carl. Mary and Rose were in the 30-40 age brackets, while Vera and Carl were in the 50-65 age brackets. Rose was of Maltese nationality; May and Vera were of American nationality, whilst Carl was of English nationality. Although all participants came from the mental health profession, their professional orientations were diverse. Rose was a clinical psychologist, whilst Vera, Mary and Carl were counsellors. The amount of years they have practised as qualified mental health professionals
varied significantly: the more seasoned professionals had worked between 20 to 35 years, whilst the younger ones had been working for the past 9 to 15 years. Moreover, participants practised in various settings that were both private and public and had experience of therapy with different populations: children, adolescents, adults, couples, families and groups.

Each participant underwent a semi-structured interview, utilizing an interview protocol (refer to appendix), which contained ten probes that were used to deepen the interview when deemed useful. Semi-structured interviews were used since they not only encouraged two-way communication and enhanced mutual learning, but they also allowed informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Questions of this interview protocol were selected to prompt narratives from participants and questions were created to invite the interviewees to give details of values, beliefs, habits, specific times and situations (Elliot, 2005). Apart from the interview, another method was used to understand more deeply and vividly the meaning my participants give to the studied phenomenon. This method consisted of encouraging them to describe the metaphor which comes to mind when they think about the concept of wellness. As pointed out previously in this chapter, creative ways of knowing help create pictures that capture more intensely the representations of experiences. Eisner (1991) expands on this notion by saying that a metaphor has accuracy and honesty, allowing it to work effectively as a “central vehicle for revealing qualitative aspects of life” (P.227).

All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim. Owing to the fact that three of the participants were from outside Malta and it was not financially possible to carry out interviews face-to-face, Skype face-to-face interviews were carried out. Draft narratives were sent by e-mail to all participants with a request for modifications to the narrative and feedback on the interpretation of the text. This helped to assess the validity of the findings and to provide the opportunity for participants to further elaborate upon the first
interview. By beginning and ending with the story teller, I believe this approach to be respectful since the findings were repeatedly confirmed. Likewise, these were repeatedly confirmed. Likewise, these activities, as for Holloway and Jefferson (as cited in Elliot, 2005), provided me with the opportunity of enhancing my rapport with the participants and demonstrating to them that I was genuinely interested in their experiences.

Analysis of Data

Knowing that in narrative inquiry I am committed to show the phenomenon I am researching rather than tell it (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bleakley, 2005), I repeatedly read and re-read, listened and re-listened to the stories I gathered. This helped me to familiarize myself with the story-teller’s language, intonation, and mostly the story itself. Throughout this process I was sensitive to how I was using my own story to understand the stories of my participants, and also how my own story was influencing the interpretation of the data. Being aware that the meaning of the lived experience I was researching was to be found in identified themes (Bleakley, 2005), I worked incessantly with the text until the particular themes in each narrative emerged and became clear. This identification of themes is described by Van Manen (1990) as “to touch the very essence” (p.88) of the story. After finishing with the process of identifying themes in each story, I moved inductively to identify any common or shared themes that structure my participants’ stories. Throughout all these processes I preserved the language of my participants, because as Etherington (2004) puts it, by using the actual words spoken, the researcher will capture “the social reality of the narrator” with its messiness, richness, texture and depth (p. 81).

The Use of Self and Self-Reflexivity

Self-reflexivity and the use of self as an instrument has been a factor that has guided my research process and has significantly characterized the data analysis of this research. Etherington (as cited in Kramp, 1995) describes reflexivity as “a
dynamic process of interaction within and between ourselves and our participants, and the data that informs decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages” (p.20). In my opinion, this personal involvement not only adds passion to the chronicling of experience and events, but also adds validity and reliability to this research; as I acknowledged my own voice and my story’s influence on the construction and interpretation of the data. This self-awareness and reflexivity made me engage in intense and transparent reflection, while making me question my own position, beliefs, values and even cultural background. However, as Edwards and Ribbens (1998) contend, this way of making oneself apparent through such reflexivity carries the danger of getting carried away and making oneself the central focus of the dialogue. In order not to risk this happening, I sought to put my participants’ ‘voices’ at the very centre, stating when I was using my own voice and how it may have influenced my interpretation of my participants’ voices.

Another reason why I used myself as an instrument in the research process was because I believe it helped me attain a much deeper and developed understanding of my participants. By using myself and my own narrative with all my strengths and vulnerabilities, I accomplished what Clinchy (2003) describes as connected knowing. This author contends that this connected knowing will make the researcher look at the participant not as an object but as a subject with a better chance of entering the participant’s subjectivity and sharing in that experience. I believe that this way of being breeds more empathy because through my own story of vulnerability I was able to connect more to my participants’ narratives and humanness.

Style of Writing

Since I believe my own story to be intrinsic to this study, I find autoethnography the most suitable genre of writing, especially during the results and discussion section. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the
personal to the cultural” (p.739). What I aim to attain through this way of writing and researching is a deep interaction between my own voice and my narrators’ voices, because I believe this intersubjectivity will have more impact on the reader. It aims not only to give a substantial awareness of the studied phenomenon, but also affect the readers emotionally and intellectually, making them reflect on their own point of view about the subject and how this phenomenon touches them.

**Ethics and Confidentiality Issues**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that ethics in narrative research does not only entail abstractly correct behaviour, but responsibility in human relationships. For this reason I strived to obtain data in a deeply human, genuine, empathic and respectful manner, taking into account both the *explicit* and *implicit* contract between us. The explicit contract was the presented Consent Form (refer to appendix) which informed them about the nature of the study, as well as their rights as research participants. Here I explained who I am; the purpose of the study; their role in this study; their free participation and their right to withdraw at any time; the nature of the recorded interview; the guarding of confidentiality of the material, and their protection from any possible harm.

The implicit contract is the development of a trusting, respectful, compassionate and genuine relationship between the participant and researcher (Smythe & Murray, 2000; Stark, 1998). As a researcher I was transparent about my interests in order to build a trusting alliance with my participants. Moreover, I listened to all stories with genuine empathy, holding a wide range of human experience with humbleness and without any overt or subtle judgments. Knowing that after having shared important events of one’s life the participant may be vulnerable, I made it a point to give some proper closure to the end of the interview. I asked each participant how they felt about this experience, and
questions. I also shared my experience of this time and expressed my gladness for their participation.

The principle of assurance of confidentiality and privacy of participants was central to this research. To safeguard the privacy and anonymity of the participants, when the data was analysed and presented, they were given fictitious names. Particular biographical details were changed or omitted especially when it came to the Maltese participant because of the risk of being identified because of the small island community. Since this study entailed collaboration between participant and researcher, subjects had an active voice where they could be the authority on the meaning in the text. This helped to clear any wrong interpretations from the researcher’s side. All interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed. Once the research is over, all recorded audios will be deleted.

Conclusion

To capture more profoundly the participants’ experience of wellness, this study will be using the constructivist method. Through the unfolding of the participants’ own narratives, this method of inquiry will offer an opportunity for a deeper and richer understanding of how the participants give meaning to their own sense of well-being. The narrative method of inquiry together with some feminist philosophies aim to give more voice to my participants and to capture more intensely the complexities of oneself and one’s experiences through the use of reflexivity and the creative ways of knowing.

The four participants whose age ranged from late twenties to late sixties were purposely chosen because of their ‘passionate, energetic, compassionate way of being’. Moreover, all four were qualified mental health professionals who have worked in the therapeutic field for at least a period of eight years. Each participant underwent a semi-structured interview, using some probes to deepen
the recalled narratives when believed useful. To understand more vividly the meaning they gave to the studied construct, each participant was asked to describe the metaphor which comes to mind when they think about wellness. All interviews were recorded and carried out face-to-face, three of which because of geographical distance were carried out on Skype.

Data was analysed through a thorough process of repeated reading and listening of the four narratives. I worked meticulously with the text until the particular themes in each narrative emerged clearly. After having identified themes in each story, I moved on to identify any common or shared themes across my participants’ stories. Throughout the whole research process, especially during the data analysis, self-reflexivity and the use of self as an instrument was a significant factor. This personal involvement helped me question my own position, values, beliefs and cultural background.

During the whole research process I tried to act in an ethically correct way. For this reason I strived to obtain data in a deeply genuine, humane, emphatic, and respectful manner. I clearly explained my purpose for this study, my participants’ role, their free participation and right to withdraw, the nature of the recorded interview, the guarding of confidentiality, and their protection from any potential harm.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS
This chapter presents the results of this research divided into three parts. The first part tells the core story of each participant, condensed to retain the key meanings. This core story introduces the personhood of each narrator while presenting their life’s narrative in its totality. In the second part, which depicts each participant’s journey towards wellness, my focus will be on the occurring inner processes that in my opinion reveal more profoundly the development and meaning of wellness in one’s life. I believe that a deeper scrutiny of stories allows me to discover the uniqueness of each participant and to learn how this ‘deeper self’ behaved, acted and gave meaning to life events; with the aim of discovering a common path that was shared by all participants on their journey to wellness. Finally, in the third part of this chapter, I will be outlining the emergent themes that helped each participant’s process of wellness to develop. The themes and subthemes will be explained briefly since a more thorough exploration will be tackled in the subsequent chapter. Throughout this chapter I will describe how the research process unfolded and explain how themes were analysed and chosen.

FOUR PERSONS: FOUR NARRATIVES

Having approached the interview with the intention of hearing stories, I was left with a lot of data in hand. For this reason I created a core story (Polkinghorne, 1988 & Mishler, 1986 as cited in Emden, 1998), which is a concise account of the full length story to aid the narrative analysis process. I used Emden’s (1998) guidelines to help me select without losing any meaning.

First I read the full interview text several times within an extended time period to comprehend its content. Then the interviewer’s questions and comments were deleted and the remaining text read for sense. The last step was repeated several times until I was happy that the mains ideas were retained and irrelevant content
removed. After this step I organized the content thematically to create one coherent core story. The finished core story was then returned to the participant for verification and possible alterations. The core stories were about one third the length of the full interview text and used the participant’s words almost entirely. Following are the created four core stories.

**Vera** - Vera is in her mid-fifties and of American nationality. She is a qualified counsellor and has worked in the field for over twenty years. At present she is an activist in the fight for social justice and human rights.

> “I envision wellness as the feeding of the spirit - all those things that bring a sense of peace and growth - the being and the becoming”

(Vera’s metaphor for wellness)

During the interview, Vera had a calm composure but recounted her life experiences with passion and energy. As I listened to her life events, I was even more intrigued to get to know this remarkable woman more deeply.

Pondering on her journey towards choosing counselling, Vera smiled warmly, and after a short reflecting pause she told me “I think it was always in me, I just needed to bring it to my awareness”. She went on to recount how the actual birth of this awareness came about. “I was a P.E. teacher, and I realized that reaching out and giving is very important for me because it is part of humanness, part of the human experience”. This first work experience not only ignited more deeply her love, connection and respect for others, but set ablaze her desire and passion to be an advocate for human rights and social justice. Ardently, she explained that she considers her work “an extraordinary gift and a privilege to watch people grow
Vera’s passion for the advocacy of human rights and social justice has taken her all over the globe pushing her to have a very “different lifestyle”, spending a lot of time travelling and in hotel rooms alone. She fervently expressed how this “lifestyle”, helped her endow herself with a “self-sufficient and self-contained” way of being, as she has learned to get things done on the road with very few resources. After a long contemplative pause Vera gave a small sigh and confessed that “sometimes I will go on for six weeks without a day off, and this means the amount of time I am away from home is also a lot”. As Vera acknowledged to me that because of this “lifestyle” very often family things that need to be done do not get done, I could deduce resignation in her eyes.

This fast-paced, efficient way of being is also mirrored in one of the most significant and stressful events in Vera’s life - when she suffered from cancer. “It was a very difficult time, but I worked throughout the treatment...that is part of my personality: to keep going”. She explained how she always faces things in life upfront, because she is not “good at denying”, and living life as normally as she could, helped her cope with this very difficult period in her life. Listening to her matter-of-fact narration, I felt great admiration for this woman who in my eyes held remarkable inner strength and stamina even in the midst of such turbulence. After this sharing, Vera opened up to another very stressful event in her life; the death of her older brother. In her brief account of this narrative, I detected the pain that reminded me of my own similar experience, which I then shared with her.

While recognizing that certain personality traits, such as humour, resiliency and drive help her manage high levels of stress, Vera is aware that “when it comes to personal cases of life, it is the hardest and the biggest challenge”. In these
instances Vera’s knowledge of self helps her acknowledge that “enough is enough and I need to re-charge”. This re-charging usually happens within her, as she finds the space to be on her own, to meditate and reflect. Inside this internal stillness she finds herself again and connects more deeply to an important aspect in her life - spirituality. With some difficulty to find the right words, she explains that she “can get the sense of the whole that is optimal...that piece that sustains me”. On a contrasting note to this inner stillness, she also sustains that having been an athlete, movement is a very important aspect for her and to feel at her best she needs to work out. Similarly, she explains that being around friends is crucial for her self-nourishment: “I need relationships that are authentic, where I can truly be me...where I can be the good, the bad and the ugly”. In her closing remark, Vera discloses that being a counsellor is all about passion, “passion for the work...passion for humans...it validates we are alive”. The spirit of this concluding assertion as well as the spirit of the whole interview was that of a powerful testimonial: a vibrant passion both in Vera’s narratives and her whole way of being. I was greatly moved by the generous, joyous and passionate outlook she has for others, and was amazed by the inner strength and resilience that gives her so much energy, strength and drive.

**Carl** - Carl is in his late sixties and of English nationality. He is a qualified counsellor and has been working in the field for over thirty years. Although retired, he still sees clients privately and gives lectures around the globe.

“As I think of wellness a flower flashes in my mind....a flower in full bloom, just standing in the meadow going with the breeze....beautiful colours, standing upright embracing the sunlight - aspiring towards growth”

(Carl’s metaphor for wellness)

From the first meeting, Carl came across as being serene both in demeanor and in his narratives.
As Carl reflected on his motivations for choosing counselling he looked back on his childhood to describe one of the major events of his life, which he confessed had a “distressing influence”. Due to his father’s job, his family had to move several times, and consequently he went to nine or ten different schools. With a sigh Carl explained how “with each school it got worse...I was always the outsider”. However, this awareness gave him the ability to understand more deeply the complex and distressing social, psychological and emotional processes that people in transition go through. Holding the same contemplative gaze, Carl went on to say that from a young age he believes he had a quality which made others feel safe sharing with him. “Sometimes my aunts and uncles used to talk to me...I became sensitive to other people’s distress and the importance of listening attentively to stories”. Carl believes that the true motivation to become a counsellor was sown in him as early as those childhood experiences: “something about the power of those moments has clearly marked who I am”.

As he recalled his adolescent years I could catch the air of struggle that came through in his halting words. Having failed the majority of his exams at sixteen, Carl expressed how: “I felt quite unintelligent and I doubted my capacity to make friends...I doubted my capacity of being likeable”. However, this difficult time urged him to tap into his inner strengths, which he believes developed in him a stronger sense of resilience and the ability to cope and strive in hardship. Carl went on to recount that this sense of being the “outsider” was not only felt at school but also at home, where although he knew he was greatly loved, he started realizing that he was “the different one” . With a voice rich with emotion, he told me that it took him way into his twenties after a gradual process of introspection, to actually develop his own confidence and to stop “feeling the stupid one in the family”.

Carl described how after having failed school, he took on a full time engineering training programme for five years though it clearly did not fit him. His real journey took off when he discovered youth work in his early twenties and after a one year training programme, he started working as a full time youth worker in London.
With each significant experience at this youth centre, it started to dawn on Carl that he not only ‘fitted’ perfectly well in this role, but it became clear that this was the path he wanted to pursue as a career. Carl decided to follow a counselling course and immediately after qualifying he was thrown fairly unequipped into a full time post, working as a university counsellor. On the very first week in this university setting, he met a very challenging client, who not only proved to be one of the most taxing clients in his career, but also a client he kept seeing for the next nine years. This 19 year old young man was talented but profoundly disturbed and after he was expelled from university, Carl kept seeing him. With a cheeky grin Carl commented that “I still kept seeing him although I should have not, but you know I was idealistic and wanted to cure the world”. The decision to keep seeing this young man proved to be very stressful and distressing at times, especially when on one occasion the client damaged the university building and when on another occasion threatened Carl with a hammer.

Carl believes that working with this client proved to be a profound learning experience. Moreover during that stressful period he met an exceptional man: his first clinical supervisor. This colleague used to advise Carl that whenever he felt professionally overstressed, he should “get lashings of supervision”, and in fact he religiously embraced these wise words, and they not only counteracted his stress but also restored him. He went on to describe that when it comes to stress, not only his “stoic and resilient personality sustains him”, but also his other passions in life. “I like writing...also being active physically...being in the outdoors restores me...it is a source of meditation...it is pastoral...I love seeing green, it feeds me”. I admire Carl for despite being in his senior years, he is vibrant and passionate.

After a long reflecting pause, Carl told of the time he was running a counselling service for over 17 years. Although there was great satisfaction attached to this period, similarly there was a “lot of stress which was not only due to managing twenty members of staff, but also because I worked too hard”. He expressed a curious thing that happened during those years as a counselling manager: “During those years I stopped dreaming and just after one week of leaving that post due to
retirement I started dreaming again”. His only explanation for this strange occurrence is that he was working too hard at the conscious, strategic level. Carl went on to share about a very critical period in his career were despite having his usual nourishing activities “I was slipping into depression….I went for therapy again and stopped working late”. Carl strongly believes that “without care of self it is hard to take care of anyone else, and more so to sustain this work for a long period of time”.

Humbly, as a conclusive note Carl tells me that after 35 years as a counsellor he is still “trying every day to be the best therapist I could be”. To him this work is spiritual, since by witnessing growth he feels he is touching spiritual moments. The same gentleness and calmness that welcomed me at the beginning accompanied me throughout, and as our interview came to an end I was inspired with a more resolute determination to be the best therapist I can be.

May - May is in her early thirties and of American nationality. She is a qualified counsellor and has been working in the field for over eight years. She specialized in child and adolescent counselling and works as a school counsellor. At present she is doing some research on this population.

“Wellness is a plant to me where it has numerous essential parts, including the soil that grounds it and gives it nutrients and the part that grows out of the soil that gives it grace and beauty”

(May’s metaphor for wellness)

Listening to May and the telling of her narrative I was drawn by the freshness and openness with which she shared her experiences. As we journeyed together through her life I not only discovered aspects of her inner self, but also revealed aspects of my own inner self. What in my view was the most powerful message that May wished to convey to me all along the interview, was the ability to view any life experience as an opportunity for growth.
The first life event that marked May’s journey towards counselling goes back to her childhood: “I was the middle child...I came from parents who had a very chaotic relationship...naturally I became the mediator of the family”. May believes that through a natural process she became the advice giver, the helper and the mediator in friendships and even relationships. Describing her adolescence she attaches it to great confusion and struggle: “I spent a lot of time figuring out who I was...what my purpose was.” With conviction, May declared that her own personal struggle for the search for self influenced her work with adolescents, in that she recognizes their struggles and challenges.

May described the curious unfolding of her career: “Events were happening in a way that made me put one piece with another until I got the whole picture”. With vigour she explained how she took on journalism as an undergraduate programme, and as she sat there “interviewing people and putting stories together, I discovered that I cared more about the individual story as opposed to the hard news”. Working as a school teacher put all the pieces of the jigsaw together: “I loved being with young children, so sort of I combined those three interests... that of helping others, hearing stories, and working with young children”. With pride May confirmed that this is her life’s profession now; counselling and teaching children and adolescents, and conducting research to contribute towards helping these populations. Leaning forward, conveying her eagerness with a greater force she communicated “I never question this choice...it is my life’s work...it fits me totally”.

May described how her work with children and adolescents has been marked by both feelings of joy and heaviness: “my students battle such horrors in their life...neglect, abuse, poverty”. Confessing that this work is highly demanding and taxing, she insists that it is where she wants to be because she can make a greater impact. As an early counsellor she struggled not to become enmeshed emotionally with her young clients: “it was very difficult for me to separate myself...there was a great sense of pity towards them”. Progressively she learned not to submerge
herself in her clients’ stories: “Now I look out for strengths...I look for resiliency in clients...I try to think how I can empower them to get through these challenges”.

After a long contemplative pause May shared there are personal vulnerabilities within her that make it harder for her to cope with certain situations. With a distant look she told me of a very difficult time during her childhood when a close family member had a substance abuse addiction. She acknowledged her vulnerability to this topic and confessed that “whenever I have a student who has a parent, or a grandmother, or an older sibling who struggles with that, it can be very difficult for me to get through, because it is hard to separate my own life story from the child’s”. However, through the years she has learned to recognize this occurring phenomenon and is able to work more through it.

As if to break the heaviness of the narrated events, May announced that counselling has proved to be the most powerful medium for self-reflection, self-knowledge, and self-acceptance: “Self-acceptance is a huge thing in that I am aware I am not perfect and that it is okay”. This knowing of self has prompted her to respect and cherish herself more, and in fact she is an ardent advocate for self-care and well-being. To nourish herself and counteract the encountered stress, May regularly goes for walks, runs, does yoga, spends time with her animals, does mindless things such as watching T.V., reading books and spending time with friends. Meaningful relationships are the most nourishing source of sustenance. Pausing she confessed: “I treasure my relationships and I try to prioritize...but still it is a constant challenge to try and balance between home and my career”.

Laughing whole-heartedly she exclaims “I cannot separate myself from my work...it is my passion and part of who I am, however, I know that balance is part of self-care, so I will keep working on it”.

With this concluding statement, I felt grateful for the honesty with which May described her strengths and vulnerabilities; and admired the wisdom which allowed her to turn all her life experiences into opportunities of growth. This made
me look deep within myself and outside myself and be glad for what life has given me.

**Rose** - Rose is in her late thirties and of Maltese nationality. She is a qualified psychologist and has worked in the field for over fifteen years. She shares her time between therapeutic work and teaching.

“For me wellness is a countryside pond with a completely flat surface... you throw a pebble in it and you see the ripples move in concentric circles....the letting go of the pebble happens when you possess the hope, trust and faith that what you are doing is what is giving meaning to your life”.

(Rose’s metaphor for wellness)

Rose’s narrative was studded with various difficult events that have pieced together the canvas of her life. With poignant insight, she told her life story and revealed deep understanding and knowledge of each of these experiences. Once again I noticed how her struggles and difficulties closely resonated with the pain that had touched my own life, and this is why I greatly identified with her.

Sharing about her chosen profession, Rose confessed how “at times when I really think about it, I am not sure whether it was a conscious choice...it was like there was this thing that I had to do...a mission I had to accomplish”. The emergence of this journey took me back to Rose’s childhood, which she greatly believes imprinted her way of being. “I have the need to be of service and also to be seen as being of service...it comes primarily from being the eldest child and having many other children after me”. Rose’s upbringing was marked by the value of self-sacrifice, where despite financial hardship, her parents always made sure that the children had everything they needed. Rose embraces the belief that “the care mentality started somewhere there...it was a natural progression towards choosing psychology”. As Rose shared all this, I was amazed how similar our childhoods and upbringing were.
Rose reflected more deeply on her childhood saying “my parents gave me the greatest gift any parents can give to their children...they gave me a strong attachment...I always felt loved and wanted”. Rose considers this gift an invaluable asset especially with regard to her work with clients: “this sense of security is helpful especially in my work with children and adolescents when the transference is strong...because I am securely attached I see it for what it is”.

Another event that marked Rose’s childhood was when she was bullied at school for a whole year. She recounted this distressing experience of having “to walk around the playground totally isolated...totally ostracized”. Notwithstanding the distress and pain of that time, Rose finds this experience “as extremely useful especially when dealing with children who have experienced or are currently experiencing bullying”. The desire to be of service culminated when as an adolescent she started doing voluntary work and “felt extremely dismayed that because of lack of skills [she] could not help others properly”. This pushed her to pursue education and after two weeks in a medicine programme she realized that this was not “the way [she] wanted to help people”. With a smile she explained how during that time, back in 1990, psychology had just started at University, and although she knew little about it, she felt that this was the route to take. After graduating, she immersed herself in a very demanding job with children.

Sharing about this first work experience, she confessed that “even talking about it, straight away I feel tired”. Although she described this time as wonderful since she was helping to set up a new service, she also looks at it as “extremely exhausting and taxing”. Retrospectively, she understands that her burn out was due to lack of self-care: “I was working ridiculous hours and I never said no to anything or to anyone”. During this time Rose decided to expand her education abroad, consequently experiencing great financial hardship. What sustained her during those hard times was the knowledge that “by touching rock bottom...by feeling so destitute and desperate, [she] had a better understanding of people who
were reaching this point”. She went on to say that everything in her life, every challenging experience can be useful so far as she can help someone else.

The culmination of this woman’s courage, resiliency and wisdom came in the next narrative, which told of the singular most stressful life experience; that of losing a very close relative. With acute emotion she recounted how she not only had to come to terms with this loss, but she also had to summon all her strength to help her family deal with it. She went on to describe how during that time she contained her pain and tried not to collapse as first she needed to give space for her family to collapse. Owing to her knowledge of self, she humbly acknowledged that she was not infallible, and out of respect for herself, her family and her clients, she took some months off work. During this time, she was not only there for her family, but she also nourished herself with intensive therapy, where she could vent her feelings.

Rose’s journey towards wellness is still developing but has become much deeper over the years. She is better at saying no and slowly she is “dispelling the illusion that [she is] absolutely irreplaceable”. She achieves more balance in her life by alternating her therapy hours with lecturing at university, and also finding time for self through reading, doing non-sensical activities, and taking walks in the countryside. “I get a spiritual high when I am walking in the countryside...there is a feeling of someone creative and great”. As she expanded on the notion of spirituality, she explained how she also ties spirituality to the values she holds: “I want to be the best person I can possibly be to propagate goodness...make every effort without expecting returns”.

Her final thought embodied her whole way of being and perception of the world:
“There are pockets of wellness even in the most desperate of circumstances, and the whole challenge is to recognize them as such and make an effort not to be overwhelmed by the negativity”. These words of intense insight brought forth the
potential and strength that lies within humans.

FOUR PERSONS: FOUR JOURNEYS WITHIN

Having created the four core stories, it is easier to look underneath the surface of my participants’ narratives to reveal the development and meaning of wellness in their lives. I am confident that a close examination of these inner processes can shed light on how these individuals construct their lives to attain a continual sense of contentment and personal meaning. Furthermore, I am interested in identifying behavioral, existential, interpersonal, and personality factors that might be both unique and common to these individuals.

Strikingly, all participants underscored the notion that there was a latent, natural disposition waiting to be discovered and drawing them towards choosing this profession. Vera disclosed how “it was always in me”, whilst Carl experienced it as a “natural development”. Similarly, May explained how “this path filled with contentment my very being” and Rose gave this natural progression a transcendental significance, by saying that it was like an unconscious mission she had to accomplish. In hindsight, three of the four participants attributed the first inklings towards this ‘mission’ as far back as their childhood, to their experience in their primary family environment. For Rose, being the eldest and having lots of younger siblings helped her not only to cultivate a “care mentality”, but also to nurture in her the significance of “being of service”. Moreover, being brought up in financial hardship and witnessing the unconditional giving and love of her parents, sensitized her “to what it means to be in need” and instilled in her an appreciation for whatever came in her life.

May also embraced the notion that “life history experiences have influenced [her] path through life”. In contrast to Rose, her upbringing brought memories of chaos, fights and insecurity. She attributed her natural role of mediator and peace-
maker to being the middle child. Notwithstanding the hardships of that chaotic period, she acquired vital skills: “As a child I gained those skills, and now I have translated those same skills and my way of being in my client work”. Looking back on his childhood, Carl acknowledged that even as a boy he was considered a confidant. Besides “becoming sensitive to other people’s distress”, he became appreciative of the trust others invested in him. Likewise, I was aware that being the eldest girl amongst five brothers and having been brought up in a tempestuous environment during childhood, influenced my process of development, as well as my paradigm of life, my experience of myself, and my relationship with others.

Although the winding paths leading to this profession were diverse for each of the participants, once the destination was reached they all consented with passion to their calling. The four participants not only acknowledged that their personalities were a “perfect fit” for this work, but also that once they took this path they never questioned their choice. They reflected on how the training programme and the profession itself led them to increased self-awareness through the practices of self-reflection and self-discovery. Moreover, the commitment, contentment and personal growth derived from this profession is evidently transmitted into the personal lives of the four participants. This journey within has helped them and is still helping them to keep evolving psychologically, spiritually and intellectually. This enhanced awareness had a positive impact on May as she became a “calmer and more forgiving person”. Carl contended that “happiness and positivity is catching…it spreads to the ones around you”.

A salient feature that was significantly evident in all interviews was the respect and compassion for humanity. All the narratives were testimonies of a surging drive and to help and serve humanity. May stated that although very difficult and taxing, she chooses to work in the most challenging communities. With the same fervent passion Vera revealed how she “combines[s] counselling with civil rights law to push forward towards human rights”. Rose reflected on how she “always felt deeply the pain of others” and this motivated her to “help others get more meaning in their lives”. On a similar vein Carl explained how he tries to promote
healing and growth through the therapeutic relationship itself: “I try to create the space where there is the possibility for the nurturing of trust, hope, encouragement and the willingness to grow”.

Each participant, in the course of their life was confronted by the unpredictable turbulences of life and forced to face its pain and restrictions. Even though they could have easily sidestepped each experience and the grief it inflicted on them, by switching themselves off and continuing with their life as if nothing had happened; each participant had the spirit to turn each experience into an opportunity for growth. In my opinion this ‘being with the pain’ had a twofold positive effect; both on the personhood of the participant and her work with the clients. All participants perceived these challenging circumstances as a window of opportunity for an enhanced understanding and sensitivity towards the pains of others.

The second reward I believe comes out of ‘being with the pain’, is the access to inherent strengths that most often surface after touching very rough patches in one’s life. I am aware that this conclusion has been influenced by my own reality. Having touched rock bottom, I turned within myself and thrived by reaching for the strengths within. As a result these inherent strengths have accompanied me throughout my life. Reflecting on a very difficult period in his childhood, Carl discerned that his feeling of isolation urged him to rely on his own resilience and become more “stoic”. By tolerating and ‘being with this pain’ he developed “the capacity to listen to problematic stories without being thrown into big despair”.

After her challenging experience with cancer, Vera was made aware of how “we are truly very strong and capable as human beings and we have much more reserve than we think”. This enhanced awareness motivated her to look at these same strengths in others and to be more hopeful and determined in life. On a similar note, May expressed that the discovery of one’s own strengths during very chaotic times, nurtured in her more resiliency and hope, while making her look with more “humbleness and awe” at humanity. Rose’s life challenges brought to the foreground the courage and resiliency that lie within her, encouraging her to learn
and accept her “fallibility” and her “limitations” in order to embrace genuineness and the being real.

The theme of congruency and genuineness is prominent in all four interviews. All four fervently contended that since they are their own instrument in their work they cannot, as Rose accurately put it, be a “fake” but a “truly genuine person in any circumstance”, be it in their personal and professional life. For Vera “it is a way of life...something that you cannot pick up in the morning and put down at night”. Likewise, Rose shared how “there is nothing except ourselves...we are our own tool”. Expanding on this notion, May asserted that being her own instrument she has the responsibility “to take care of self”, and similarly, Carl said “I think as a professional priority entails giving a lot of attention to self-maintenance”.

Interestingly, all four participants agreed that being their own instruments at work, set two dynamics in motion. The first, being the drive to keep evolving in self-awareness and acceptance of one’s totality: strengths and limitations.

Consequently, this way of being helped each participant to view oneself realistically: “acknowledge one’s fallibility” (Rose); “I know I cannot know all” (May); “I know I cannot be perfect and it is ok” (Vera); “I make mistakes and I accept that” (Carl). The second dynamic was an enhanced awareness of the significance of self-nourishment, so as to counteract the encountered stress during work, and keep oneself fuelled physically, emotionally and spiritually. In fact all four participants placed great significance in these nurturing activities and progressively, through the years worked to incorporate them in their daily routine. Physical activities, non-sensical activities, significant relationships and time with self, were the four most mentioned self-care strategies. All four asserted that these activities ‘fed them’ and helped them feel more ‘balanced both within them and outside themselves’. A curious observation evident in all four interviews was that although all four participants regarded the balance between one’s work and one’s family as extremely important, they struggled to maintain that balance and dedicate more time to family.
Another aspect that was evident in all four narratives was the sense of transcendent significance in one’s life. This sense of spirituality was not only evident in the belief in a Higher Power but also reflected in how one lived and gave meaning to one’s self, one’s life, and one’s relationships; including therapeutic relationships. Spirituality has always been a very big part of my life, and since childhood I have embraced this sublime reality which became my driving force, helping me have greater respect for and connection with humanity, nature and life. I am aware that this way of being and believing did not only influence the way I interpreted my participants’ narratives but ‘our spiritual likeness’ made me identify more with them.

In my view, my participants’ journey towards a more authentic self, which comes through the courageous stance of facing one’s true self, was actually the evolving of the spiritual self by becoming a more integrated, whole person. All participants recognized the importance of ‘time with self’ where owing to the stillness within they could get in touch with their ‘true essence: their Higher Self. This being in touch with one’s Higher Self had a threefold beneficial effect. Firstly, this deep connection greatly nourished all four participants, and using Vera’s words “it feeds [their] very inner core”. Secondly, it made each participant experience both oneself and others through all dimensions of being, including feelings, intuition and body sensations. Thirdly, by embracing their true essence, each participant opened themselves to a deeper empathic connection with others. All four participants look at their work as sacred and transcendental in nature, which in my opinion makes them think about other humans with more reverence, awe, hope and humility.

FOUR PERSONS: FOUR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

In this section, I will present the results of the meaning the four participants give to their own sense of well-being. The emergent themes and subthemes will be
The Journey Within

described briefly since a more thorough exploration in the light of relevant literature will be dealt with in the next chapter. Moreover, I will describe in sufficient detail how themes got to be chosen and analysed.

**Analysis strategy: identification of themes through combing all four Core stories**

My main focus throughout the analysis of the gathered data was to start and end with the narrative text. I read the created core stories, which were made up of ‘concentrated data’, repeatedly so as Polkinghorne (2007) suggests, I would familiarize myself with the narrator’s language, inflection and especially the narrative itself. I worked with the text until I acquired a holistic understanding of each narrative, knowing that the meaning of the lived experience I am researching will be found in the emergent themes. From each narrative I lifted appropriate words and phrases, to identify any common or shared themes that structured the stories of all participants. The movement from stories to common elements is what Polkinghorne (2007) calls an ‘analysis of narrative’. As I identified significant elements across every story, four general themes emerged that were salient in all the narratives. These themes and their subthemes are meaningful both on their own and in relation to each other.

Prior to displaying the results, I believe it is important to make the following annotation which in my view is already a noteworthy result in itself. As I analysed the four narratives for emerging themes and patterns, there was a remarkable consistency across participants. This is in itself an important result: all participants were purposely chosen because of their exemplifying passionate outlook towards life, and the resultant consistency may reflect an *actualized* way of being. This way of being, not only resonates a deeper more meaningful outlook towards life, but it also reflects a continual sense of passion, joy and love towards self and
others. Next I will describe briefly the four general themes with their specific sub-categories.

**ATTUNEMENT AND OPENNESS**

A prominent feature of the four narratives was not the presence or absence of difficult and challenging circumstances in one’s life, but the way they responded to such situations. Attunement and Openness was picked up as the title of this theme because I perceived it as depicting the stance all of the participants took in reaction to these challenges.

**Challenges become opportunities of growth**

Through facing and being with pain participants not only managed to get through these difficult phases, but they also managed to tap into their inherent strengths which opened up a whole new way of being and seeing.

**Stance of Acceptance**

Another theme which in my opinion is intricately linked with the being with pain is a sense of acceptance. This is born out of living the moments of one’s life, especially the painful ones, as fully as possible.

**Openness for Help**

All four participants showed an acceptance of their fallibility and the humbleness to seek support through personal therapy, supervision and colleague consultation. This not only acted as an effective intervention to reduce physical and emotional distress, but also broadened their perspective on possible options for intervention.
PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

Purposeful Learning conveys the characteristic passionate nature of the four professionals, where their distinctiveness is highlighted in their openness for experience and their great disposition to receive vitality and wisdom from as many resources as possible.

Enhanced Growth through Work

All four participants revealed that their work has empowered them to live better, healthier and more complete lives. A recurring emerging theme was the significance of self-awareness and self-reflection, which was greatly encouraged because of the nature of the work. Thanks to this evolving self-awareness, participants were not only in touch with their inner experience, but also in touch with their true selves.

Work: Innate Part of Identity

Results strongly indicated that all four participants felt drawn to choose such a career, and once they started working it felt like the perfect fit. They described how this work expresses who they are: an inherent part of their identity that greatly facilitates self-expression.

Unrelenting Awe for Human Growth and Transformation

The four participants looked at their work as a privilege and precious gift as they described the joy and honour they feel when they witness the healing, transformation, development and growth of humans. Three participants further asserted that by honouring the clients’ uniqueness, their fascination for therapy is never boring and this consequently breeds a continual sense of energy within them.
Engaging in Lifelong Learning

This thirst for learning and ongoing personal growth not only keeps their enthusiasm about their work fresh and rejuvenated, but it also breeds an eagerness and sense of contentment for life in general.

BALANCE

All participants expressed that paying attention to their personal life was important to maintain overall wellness, passion and balance. Within this general category all the participants confessed that they had a tendency to overextend their hours at work and that they had to make a conscious effort to balance time between family and work. Moreover, they admitted that inadequate attention to personal life negatively effects their functioning as therapists.

Pursuing Variety in Work

Results showed that all four participants perceived having multiple professional roles as an important resource, not only to grow personally and professionally, but also to avoid staleness and to promote a continual sense of renewal and energy.

Sharing the Journey with Clients

Three of the participants shared how through experience they had learned to let go of the overwhelming sense of responsibility for clients, and instead learned how to trust the inner strength and resourcefulness that exist within humans. Moreover, all participants accepted that struggles and limitations are a human condition, and through this awareness one’s humanness is highlighted and mutual healing can occur.
Social Support

Results testified that all participants embraced the importance of social support, and relished the satisfaction, support and happiness they derived from these meaningful relationships. Participants looked at these deep relationships as a safe haven: a place where they can be spontaneous and playful and reciprocally be loved and cared for.

Self-Care Strategies

The narratives strongly suggested that self-care strategies were a means of maintaining balance through the nourishment of their own well-being and by contributing to a more energized way of being with clients. Some strategies mentioned included exercising regularly, doing yoga, meditating, dancing, reading and doing non-sensical activities like watching television. All participants spoke about spending time with loved ones and the importance of spending time in nature. They also described helpful attitudes to life such as using humour, celebrating success, savouring each instance of life and seeking transcendental nourishment.

TRANSCENDANCE

The importance of spirituality in one’s life featured in all the participants’ narratives since it is translated in their way of being, their work, and their experiences as a therapist. This transcendence which is expressed as a vibrant force within helped each participant to tap into their very core essence, making them feel more whole and more connected both with self and others.
Recognition of the Transcendental Aspect of being a therapist

While using different descriptions, participants spoke about the beauty and spiritual meaning they give to their work. They experienced their encounters with clients as gifts and the witnessing of transformation and growth as an immeasurable privilege and honour.

Great Connection with Humanity

All participants showed an extraordinary sensitivity and passion towards humanity, and this was mostly evident in the involvement and connection with others that went beyond therapeutic relationships.

Time with Self

All four stories put forth the importance of time with self. Participants described how this ‘inner stillness’ helped them become fully centered in their own being which is transcendental in nature. Besides being a source of nourishment to one’s body, mind and soul, this activity made them feel more grounded, whole and connected.

Being Present in the Moment

All four participants presented themselves as people living fully in the present: they did not show great concern for the past even if it had proved difficult; or any great preoccupation for the future.

This chapter has displayed the results in three parts. In the first part each participant was presented through their life’s narratives. In the second part I
delved underneath the surfaces of my participant’s narratives so as to reveal the development and meaning of wellness in their lives. In the third part I presented the results of the meaning the four participants give to their own sense of well-being, by displaying the salient themes that emerged out of the four narratives. Throughout this chapter I described in sufficient detail how the research process unfolded.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION
In this chapter, the underlying themes and subthemes presented in the results chapter will be discussed in the light of relevant literature and personal observations and reflections. All the identified themes and subthemes will be written in italics.

**Foundational Way of Being**

From my analysis of the four narratives, wellness is revealed to be multifaceted, conceptualized by rich and profound ways by all participants. The numerous aspects that make up wellness often seem to merge together blurring the distinction among them. This is in line with Witmer and Sweeney’s (2001) description of wellness as multiple dimensions that interact in a complex, synergistic and unified manner. This interactive amalgamation explains the difficulty I had to decipher separate categories. Since all themes were so intricately linked and fed into each other, it was like I was trying to separate the colours from a painted image. With this in mind I realized that although I had managed to split the studied construct into separate categories, it was only an artificial split, since ultimately all colours merge with each other to portray one image – portraying ‘one way of being’.

With the theoretical models guiding this study and the four narratives with their emerging themes placed side by side, I realized that through my participants’ narratives, the theoretical philosophies that shaped the foundations of both the wellness theory (Sweeney & Witmer, 2001) and positive psychology (Seligman, 2000) came to life. I could connect more easily to the profound significance of Witmer’s and Sweeney’s (2001) global village ecology, where through an enhanced cosmic consciousness wellness is perceived as the interconnectedness and wholeness of mind, body, spirit, community and universe. I could understand more clearly the significance of Seligman’s (2000) promotion of positive human experience and personal fulfillment by tapping into one’s peak potential.
Tangibly, I understood how these peak potentials which are characteristic of self-actualized individuals (Maslow as cited in Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2004), not only enable one to live a more gratifying, engaged and meaningful life, but I also recognized how by gaining access to and utilizing one’s strengths, all life can be transformed into a continuous flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Looking at the four narratives through my chosen theoretical lens, I discovered that wellness in these four participants is characterized as a foundational way of being, which is distinguished by distinct behavioural and personality factors; and also by existential and spiritual beliefs and attitudes. My findings suggest that this way of being not only enables one to practise self-care regularly and to develop work-life balance, but it also promotes a happier and a more satisfying personal and professional life. Moreover, looking retrospectively at the participants’ stories, it is evident that this way of being had a profound impact on their personal growth, playing a significant role in recoveries from woundedness, and transforming their challenges to processes of growth and healing. Although throughout this chapter I will try to bring out the intricate and interconnected nature of each theme, I will keep bouncing back to each category to relate it to this foundational way of being.

All four participants described the profound significance of spirituality in their life, being the agent that saturates their love, respect and compassion for self and others, while enabling them to feel the rapture of being alive. This transcendent significance in one’s life is also reflected in their way of being, their work and their experience as therapists. In this regard Myers, Witmer and Sweeney (1998, 2000, and 2005) have posited that spirituality is the core of wellness and inseparable from other aspects of wellness. Sifting through the four narratives it became apparent that my four participants had personal characteristics and attributes that had evolved through a lifelong process of growth and change. This process of continuous growth and change in essence describes the developmental
nature of spirituality, (Wilbur, 1997) which entails the transformation of one’s life, giving a transcendental meaning to one’s path in life and life’s experiences (Lesser, 1999).

I believe that this transcendental awareness resonated in the way of being of all four participants, through the ‘Recognition of the transcendence aspect of being a therapist’, ‘Great connection with humanity’, and ‘Being present in the moment’. These three emergent themes which in my view issued from this spiritual awareness, propelled all four participants to acknowledge the sacredness of all things including the therapeutic process. I believe that living in the here and now, encouraged them to savour each moment of their lives with more passion, gladness, and awe, and helped them unload unnecessary worries and thoughts from their mind, thus enhancing their psychological and emotional well-being. In my view this way of being reflects a functioning from a Higher Self, which is transcendental in nature. Cashwell et al., (2007) contend that when viewing clients and sessions with the awareness of the sacred, a therapist is able to appreciate more the beauty of each client and be fully present. This can promote healing for both client and counsellor as it instills hope, joy and vitality in one’s life (Connors, Toscova & Tonigan, 1999).

All four narratives were evidence of experiencing life fully awake, with an attitude of acceptance and curiosity about current experience, even if challenging and painful. Results showed that not only did this acceptance of being generate more respect and compassion for themselves and others, but it also generated an acceptance of ambiguity in one’s life and one’s work, with the letting go of a sense of control and an enhanced acceptance of the process. Many researchers contend that this mindful way of being goes hand in hand with spirituality, since by living in the present the individual connects more with herself and others, and this produces an attitude of acceptance, curiosity, free of judgement and full of enthusiasm for life (Germer, 2005; Hahn, 2002; Neff, 2003). Results revealed that
this being in the here and now was also transferred in the therapeutic relationship. Valente and Marotta (2005) contend that working in this way, the therapist cultivates a greater ability for attention and concentration, greater self-awareness and compassion and an enhanced capacity for self-regulation: skills that not only aid the therapeutic process but also enhance the professional’s wellness.

All stories pointed out to an extraordinary connection and sensitivity towards humanity: all four participants went that extra mile. In fact two participants expressed their fervent fights against social injustices and their involvement in human rights promotion, whilst another participant explained how she offered her service for free in very poor areas. In my view, this deeper sensitivity towards humanity stemmed from the awareness that all is connected. In their description of spirituality, Ivey, Ivey, Myers and Sweeney (2005) posit that it is “an awareness of a being or force that transcends the material aspects of life and gives a deep sense of wholeness and connectedness to the universe” (p.51). This awareness of the interrelatedness of all things may perhaps explain why my participants go that extra mile, with an ensuing passion to use their voice and energy to advocate for justice and systemic change. The being involved in something greater than oneself conforms to Seligman’s (2003) third route for happiness, which is the meaningful life. This path satisfies a longing for a purposeful life (Seligman et al., 2004), and by taking an active attitude to challenge injustice may contribute to a grander sense of worth, control, and empowerment (Ivey & Ivey, 2005).

Maslow’s (1970) philosophies which influence both the wellness theory (Myers, Sweeney & Witmer) and Seligman’s (2000) positive psychology labelled people who are self-actualizers as individuals who are developing spiritually. He described self-actualization as the yearning for self-fulfillment and the yearning to become more and more what one is; that is to become everything one is capable of becoming (Maslow as cited in Cashwell, Bentley and Bigbee, 2007). This is in accordance with Seligman’s (2000) tapping of ones’ inner strengths and talents to promote more positive emotion, engagement and meaning in one’s life. Moreover, it also supports one of the themes that emerged from the study: ‘Work: Innate part of identity’.
Participants described how this work expresses who they are, and how it greatly facilitates their self-expression. In my opinion, this harmonious self-expression through one’s work has a noteworthy positive impact on the individual. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) posited, by connecting to and utilizing one’s inner potential there will be an enhanced engagement, involvement and absorption in all spheres of life. This highly engaged psychological state, which is described as Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) not only creates a sense of inner joy and happiness, but according to Dlugos and Friedlander (2001) promotes a passionate commitment to one’s work, where the individual is able to thrive in spite of the encountered personal and professional challenges.

In my opinion this passionate disposition made my four participants more open to experiences and helped them to nurture an insatiable thirst for wisdom and vitality. This in its turn unfolded in an ‘Unrelenting awe for human growth and transformation’ and a stronger commitment for ‘Enhanced growth through work’. All four participants contend that witnessing such intense experiences provides them with the constant opportunity to learn through the wisdom of others, and this in its turn contributes to their own growth. Osborn (2004) described how this disposition of wonder, curiosity, and inquisitiveness about human experience, together with a respectful attitude toward the client’s uniqueness and originality, not only cultivates and sustains stamina, but promotes cognitive wellness. Kramen-Kahn and Hansen (1998) expanded on this notion by saying that when a therapist savors humbly and with joy the witnessed victories of growth, both her client’s and hers, her overall wellness is enhanced. The inquisitive nature of the participants is also translated in inquisitiveness and commitment to ‘Engage in Lifelong learning’.

A prevalent feature in the narratives was the participants’ ongoing, life-long commitment to learning - not only about new advances in the field but also about themselves. Staying au courant with the professional developments sustains professional pride and loyalty (Osborn, 2004) and is found to be helpful in countering occupational stress as it reinforces resiliency (Skovholt, 2001).
Perhaps the most direct impact to become more what one is (Maslow as cited in Cashwell et al., 2000) comes from self-awareness which has a direct connection with self-growth and wellness (Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007). ‘Attunement and Openness’ is the transpired main category that describes the participants’ ongoing journey towards self-awareness and growth. Vera, Carl, May and Rose all endorsed the importance of being in touch with one’s inner self because it refined their attunement with their inner and external experience. Furthermore, a humble acknowledgement and acceptance of one’s humanness allowed them to live with a more compassionate, genuine and realistic attitude.

The points of suffering and pain presented participants with the occasion to look for and make use of the undeniably tenacious strength, resourcefulness and determination that lies within. All participants embraced the notion that their difficult life experiences not only helped them tap into their inherent strengths, but it helped them understand their clients better, since their own pain gave them a more profound understanding of humanness. The acknowledgment and use of this intrinsic potential is consistent with Seligman’s (2000) vision of positive psychology, and may also exemplify Myers’s, Witmer’s and Sweeney’s assertion about spirituality, which they describe as the being in touch with one’s core essence. As cumulative data suggests, the ability to embrace positive resources and adapt to life challenges, breeds resiliency (Skovholt, 2001, King et al., 1998), autonomy and competence (Masten, 2001). Results showed that the participants also acknowledged their clients’ intrinsic resources as the element for recovery and progress, which comes out clearly in the theme called ‘Sharing the journey with clients’. When a therapist uses the strength and resourcefulness that lies within herself and within her clients, her stamina is enhanced and burnout is prevented (Kottler & Carlson, 2004).

The participants’ journey towards a deeper connection with self, led them towards a more balanced way of being as they recognized more quickly any problems in the physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual dimensions, and took appropriate action. Clearly, the combination of self-monitoring and self-nurturing
activities, leads to a demonstrable sense of balance and harmony with all other aspects of one’s life. This is in line with Myers’s and Sweeney’s (2005a) assertion that although the self is ‘indivisible’ and the various aspects of wellness have unique attributes; yet they are interrelated and all contribute to holistic wellness. Moreover, striking this fine ‘balance’, which was one of the emergent main categories, has proved to counteract burnout (Skovholt, 2001), and generate a passionate commitment towards life and work (Dlugos, 2001).

All participants shared the awareness that self-care and self-nurturance is essential not only for one’s own well-being but also for a more effective therapeutic relationship with the client. Rose, Carl, May and Vera passionately spoke about at least one nonprofessional activity that they carried out in their free time, which in my opinion helped to create physical and psychological boundaries between professional and nonprofessional life. These activities help to replenish the individual as they create more balance and energy (Skovholt, 2001), while allowing one to express aspects of her personality that are not expressed in the therapy room (Dlugos et al., 2001). Another activity that in my view helped my participants to maintain freshness and excitement in one’s work and life is the pursuing of diversity within work. The participants asserted that the combination of teaching, supervision, researching, advocating and studying kept the ‘freshness’ but also helped to keep them attuned to new ways of seeing and thinking about the profession. Skovholt (2001) maintains that keeping oneself critically attuned to new ways of thinking about work will enhance growing, both personally and professionally (Dlugos et al., 2001).

Surrounding oneself with supportive, accessible, and positive persons, as well as seeking professional assistance when the need arises, helps maintain stamina and manage stress. ‘Social support’ and ‘Openness for help’ are the two themes that describe the participants’ openness for close human relationships and the humbleness to accept one’s fallibility and to seek support when the need arises. The importance of social support in maintaining wellness is evident in Myers’s and Sweeney’s multiple studies where they declare it is the “strongest identified
predictor of positive mental health over the life span” (p.34). Moreover, the ability to talk with other professionals about work has been found to reduce physical and emotional distress. By engaging in therapy as a client, one gains perspective, personal insight, and clarity into one’s own behaviours and the counterproductive ways that impede wellness (Venart et al., 2007).

While results showed that all four participants enjoyed the company of others, similarly they showed that they valued their privacy and moments of solitude: the ‘being in touch with their true essence’. In the subtheme ‘Time with Self’ all four stories put forth the importance of inner stillness which is attained through time alone. Rogers calls this ‘space’ as “laying aside oneself” (as cited in Rowan & Jacobs, 2002) where you wipe your mind clean and fresh. Cashwell et al., (2007) give this inner space a transcendental significance, and state that this deep connection with one’s inner being opens up to a great sense of connectedness and love for all.

CONCLUSION

From the determined results it appears that Myers’ and Sweeney’s model of wellness, which depicts spirituality as the most important characteristic of well-being, applies to my participants’ way of being. This ‘foundational way of being’ leads to a more meaningful and self-directed life, where, as explained by these authors, an individual functions more effectively as they possess more self-worth, self-control, realistic beliefs, emotional awareness, sense of humour, self-care, stress management, and a stronger identity (Myers & Sweeney, 2001). Such characteristics assist the individual in regulating and responding to work, leisure, friendship and love, with a more profound, meaningful and healthy attitude (Adler, 1954). Moreover, all the themes emerging from this study describe characteristics, which according to Maslow (1998) describe a transcendent self-actualizer, that is, an individual who is developing spiritually. Results showed how my participants’ personal characteristics keep evolving through a lifelong process of experience,
self-awareness, a passionate outlook to life, and a transcendental sense of connectedness with all. The richer, deeper, more content and passionate life leads to a fuller life (Fulton, 2005). This full life is explained in Seligman’s (2001) theory of positive psychology, where he contends that a person who uses all three paths of happiness, that is the ‘pleasant’, the ‘engaged’ and the ‘meaningful’ paths will lead a fuller life. The participants’ qualities and their outlook towards life seem to counteract the possible elements that may influence the well-being of the mental health professional, which were explained in section one of the literature review.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION
Conclusion and Recommendations

Trustworthiness of the Study

In order to verify the trustworthiness of the narrative analysis, several measures have been taken. As a first premise, at the phase of writing up my literature review and analysis of data I aimed for what Howard (as cited in McLeod, 2001) calls internal consistency and merging power which are two elements that determine whether a study is of scientific value. Research findings were presented in ways that were congruent with the goal of this study, and in fact section three of the literature review unified and consolidated all these findings. As a second premise, the participants were engaged in a member-checking process to provide feedback and further validate the process. The third important premise in which I warranted reliability and validity was in the self-reflexivity, clarity and frankness I used in displaying my analysis and interpretation of data. I was frank about my stance, my own story and experience of the phenomenon, so that as much as possible I let my readers make their own judgment and interpretation of the results. Lastly, the narrative inquiry itself assigned a high level of internal validity since it empowered the participants to use their own voice and language to describe their life experiences and this helped me as a researcher to gain a better understanding of the perspective and life of my participants.

Limitations of the Study

This study had a number of limitations which may have influenced the efficacy of the results. Firstly, participants were purposely chosen, or as defined by Kerlinger (1986) they were a non-probability based sample. This method of sampling may have impacted results in two ways: first subjects were chosen based on my judgment and with a particular purpose in mind, and this is highly prone to research bias (Black, 1999); secondly such samples are not easily defensible as
being representative of populations, since results represent participants’ lived experience and may or may not represent other therapists’ practices of well-being (Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011).

A second possible limitation might have been the use of ‘audio-visual Skype’ interviews, instead of face-to-face interviews. Since three of my four participants were from outside Malta, this method proved to be a cost effective and geographically flexible way of conducting interviews. However, as explained by Booth (2008) there are some challenges associated with this method: firstly time lags in the conversation can break the flow of an interview; secondly, although the face and upper body are visible, some verbal cues can be lost because you cannot view the whole person. Moreover, although I was sensitive to how culture might have impacted my three foreign participants during the interview, there might be influences which I remained unaware of and which might influence the reliability and validity of the reported results.

Another limitation has to do with the narrative method of enquiry. Polkinghorne (2007) states, that any story is constructed first through the participants’ telling of it and then through the researcher’s response to it. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) expand further by saying that a narrative of a personal experience is not a perfect path into the truth, since experience is fabricated. Furthermore, another limitation is that participants may have represented themselves in a way as to be socially acceptable and this may have interfered with the authenticity of their narrative, influencing the reliability of the research data (Scott & Alwin, 1998). Another shortcoming pointed out by Bruner (1987) is the dilemma created by reflexivity during self-narration. This author posits that it is very difficult to determine what ‘right narrative’ is covering the events of a life and the instability of such choices can make stories “highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences” (p.14). Finally, despite member validation being acknowledged as a way of increasing the precision of qualitative work, Sandelowski (1993) highlights some “deeply theoretical and ethical difficulties that may undermine the trustworthiness of a project” (p.4). This author posits that these
deficiencies arise largely because researchers and members may have different agendas to promote. During member-check, participants may try to ‘look for themselves’ in the researcher’s accounts, with the consequence that results may be far removed from their reality. Secondly, participants may participate in a formal checking process, only to please and accommodate the researcher (Sandelowski, 1993).

**CONCLUSION**

Ultimately a mental health professional shares the same pains and joys of human existence as her clients, and thus is no less vulnerable to the challenges of life. Furthermore, this vocation is a very demanding profession, and attempting to deliver high-quality services to others while sustaining personal wellness is a challenging goal. The chief conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this research is that wellness in the participants is a foundational way of being that is built from the combination of particular behavioural, interpersonal, existential, and personality factors. All these factors help these individuals structure their lives to attain a continual sense of fulfillment, well-being, and personal meaning.

The results of the study shed light on the significance of spirituality in the participants’ lives and on how this transcendental orientation sustains their lifelong commitment towards wellness. This happens through the recognition that every life experience has purpose and meaning and that all is sacred and connected. On this foundation is built the powerful amalgamation of a present-centered, nonjudgmental awareness, a humble acknowledgment and acceptance of one’s humanness, and a more compassionate, passionate, genuine and realistic attitude towards oneself, others and life. In this way the mental health professional moves closer, both personally and professionally to a fully authentic and healthy existence.
This honest continual appraisal of oneself evidently promotes balance of mind, body, and spirit. In addition to this, self-care activities, nurture wellness while preventing impairment. Results strongly suggest that these individuals experience a pervasive sense of meaning and significance in their work by locating it within a larger, more transcendent perspective. All participants displayed openness to all experiences as well as a flexible disposition for multiple activities that gave them not only pleasure but a continually renewed source of energy in their lives.

This study may have two very important inferences: the first being the influence of wellness across all the domains of the professional’s life. The therapist’s self-nurture practices promote individual wellness and may also be a key component for improved therapeutic process, making them essential for the sustainment of the mental health profession itself. On the basis of this assumption, I contend that a sustained effort to promote student wellness provides an appropriate starting point to expand the notion of holistic wellness and to integrate this wellness philosophy in one’s life. Therefore, the second implication is for the training of mental health professionals. Together with the learning of theory and technique, what these results propose is that several specific components should be included in the trainee’s curriculum. A wellness plan should include aspects that address both personal and professional wellness. Personal self-care should address all areas of the student’s personal life, including the physical, emotional, spiritual and social. Personal therapy is urged to allow for self-reflection, self-understanding and insight, ultimately enhancing the mental health professionals resiliency and sense of well-being. Measures for addressing professional self-care should be another significant aspect in the training programme. Trainees should be guided to generate what Skovholt (2001), described as a “professional greenhouse at work”, where one develops a work environment that is not only enjoyable, but also an environment that encourages growth and self-care with leadership and supervision. Moreover, the training programme should encourage realistic thinking by minimizing professional loss.
This is done by acknowledging that a lack of closure and tangible evidence of success are a part of the job and not tied to one’s worth as a professional. The chief conclusions and implications of this research are placing the professional’s way of being at the very heart of this study where wellness is seen to be embedded at the very core of the individual as a *foundational way of being*. 
REFERENCE
LIST
Reference List


Appendices
Appendix 1

Question Guide

Take some time to get in touch with yourself and visualize wellness - Can you describe to me the metaphor that comes to mind when you think about wellness?

Looking back at your life journey can you share with me what is your understanding of your motivations to choosing this profession?

What other significant life history experiences have influenced and continue to influence your work as a mental health professional?

How would you describe the fit between your personality and your work, and how does your work impact your emotional and personal vulnerabilities?

Can you describe one stressful event in your life that you lived through alongside your work as a therapist and how did you cope?

What have you learned with respect to your own needs regarding self-care:

- physically?
- intrapersonally?
- interpersonally?
- spiritually?
How do you view yourself, in terms of self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-acceptance?

If you could roll back time, given what you know now about yourself and the field, would you choose the same profession?
Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

I am a student reading a Master’s of Arts in Transcultural Counselling with the University of Malta joint with the University of Maryland. As part of the requirements for this Master’s Degree I am expected to do a research project.

My research project is on how Mental Health Professionals give meaning to their own sense of well-being.

You are being invited to take part in this research study as I would like to gain a deeper understanding of how professionals who work in the field, facing daily challenges and stresses, nourish themselves and maintain passion in one’s life and work.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It will involve you sharing your stories by means of a face-to-face meeting that will be audio-taped. The information obtained in this interview will remain strictly confidential. Should you not wish to participate in this study, or decline your participation at any point in the research process, you may do so. This will not affect you in any way.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

___________________
Ruth Farrugia
Consent form of Participant

I voluntary agree to participate in the research project designed to gather information about the meaning mental health professionals give to their own sense of well-being.

I have read and understood the explanation provided to me, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

_________________________
My signature

_________________________
Date
Appendix 3

Short Abstracts from the four narratives

Interview with Rose

I: Take some time to get in touch with yourself and visualize wellness - Can you describe to me the metaphor that comes to mind when you think about wellness?

P: (Long pause) I would say a pond....yes a pond....because for me wellness is not something that is static or stable or that is definable by its properties (PAUSE) it is something which is dynamic - which is happening and which takes on different forms. So for me wellness will be a countryside pond, the weeds going around it and a completely flat surface (PAUSE) and then you throw a pebble in it and you see the ripples moving out in concentric circles. For me that is wellness in the sense that the knowledge of that (PAUSE) the knowledge that it is possible (PAUSE) that if you believe that things are possible and if you have this frame of hope - if you can hold this pebble and have enough trust and enough faith to let it go and throw it - having the hope, faith and trust that what you are doing and the why you are doing is what is giving meaning to your life.

I: What nourishes you most?

P: Creation (PAUSE) for example for me I get a spiritual high when I am walking in the countryside in spring - i get a huge spiritual high - there is a feeling of someone creative and great out there somehow taking care of stuff - emmm it is almost intangible with a name probably - it is more of a sensation - I tie spirituality also to the values that I have, which I believe are also spiritual (PAUSE)in the sense that
The Journey Within

do not make sense in a modern world at all - like I would do things that do not make sense to other people (LONG PAUSE) to help things that are stressful, for example paying bills and things like that - for the people it is non sensical that I do things like this - but these actions are guided by a sense of spirituality, because for me spirituality is this drive to be the best person that I could possibly be - with mistakes obviously - but to be the best person I can possibly be in order to propagate goodness. I do not know whether it makes sense (Pause) that thing of the pebble in the pond for me is my spiritual core, in that I really believe that the more you make efforts without expecting returns the more that goodness spreads - and then the more it can spread to other ponds. I think for me that is the essence of spirituality - for me it is very sustaining I feel it all the time - it is like an enveloping presence - most probably if I was a person who feels auras it will feel like an aura - you know it is almost like a guiding force - giving you direction without you knowing that it is giving you direction.

I: Do you have any closing thoughts or feelings?

P: Probably the thing that helps me most when I am not feeling so great is that you do not have to be - things do not have to be perfectly well - in that there are pockets of wellness even in the most desperate of circumstances - and that the whole challenge is to recognize them as such, and to see them - and to make an attempt not to be overwhelmed or being shadowed by the negativity that there might be - but to acknowledge that to be well does not mean to be perfect or to be totally whole - or to be - or to have things in your life which are working perfectly well - but it is like to acknowledge these little pockets of happiness and of meaning - and of emmm stability when everything else is chaotic - so it is not like something you postpone you have to feel this wellness now in any circumstance you are in because it will be there - maybe a bit obscured but there.
I: Can you describe one stressful event in your life that you lived through alongside your work as a therapist - how did you cope?

P: Emmm yes - emmm yes - I am a cancer survivor so (PAUSE) that was a very, very difficult time - emmm I continued to work throughout the treatment - yes I did - I worked throughout the treatment - emmm I would go - I would leave the house here in the morning - I would go to the hospital to do physical therapy, then I would go to the cancer center and then drive downtown to work - then work and drive home - and that piece is part of my personality - to just keep going - that is how I coped I kept working - yeah I worked all through treatment - but for me that was good - that was good because I could keep staying in motion (PAUSE) I am not an idle person so the more I kept regular routine the more it helped me cope - so I am not one that will just go and disappear and escape - I do not believe in denial, I am not good at it - I just face it upfront - that just the way I know how to do it, because it is there so do it - so that is just what I did I kept living life as normal as I could - (laughs) in the end finally my body gave in and I had to two weeks in bed (laughs) yeah I did, but after that I was up and about in the road flying all over the country so it was fine (LONG PAUSE) but what I think is that we are truly very strong and capable as human beings, and we have much more reserve than we think we do and we are better than we actually think we are - emmm so I think to be able to help to empower and to encourage each other to be our best selves - is what we do you know because it is so beautiful to see somebody blossom - so emmm at the same time we have to respect how others cope - how one copes is not how another copes - and that is ok - in honoring that difference and uniqueness is important.
I: What are your attitudes about therapist self-care?

P: Critical - it is absolutely critical - it is a must (PAUSE) I think as students begin counseling careers, I think we should spend good deal of time really helping them focus on how to create that space if it does not exist in your life - I think - I do not see counseling as much - I see it as a profession but I also see it as a way of life - a lifestyle - a lived reality - I don’t see it as something that you put down and pick it up in the morning before you go to work - because it is a life (PAUSE) so I think as we teach and we work on becoming counselors we need to help them develop that - and modeling that - and be aware of human frailty when we do not do it well (PAUSE) emmm it is all part of that experience of why self-care is a critical component of counselling - of good ongoing development - and the piece we need to have.

Interview with Carl

I: Looking back at your life journey can you share with me what is your understanding of your motivations to choosing this profession?

P: Emmm (long pause) to be honest emmm it just felt so right - I qualified as a young man - I was probably thirty two or thirty three years old when I qualified (PAUSE) so this is the late 1970’s, so in terms of counseling it is fairly early days really emmm, emmm but I have failed school - did not do well at school for all kind of sort of reasons - I did a full engineering training but I was never meant to be an engineer - then I discovered work - working with young people in a youth club - then I realized it was a full time job - I did a one year youth training, because that was the length of the training in those days - one year diploma, and I became a full time youth worker in the east of London - and then after five years emmm I also had a two year teaching job in Jamaica - but during those seven years
I had many experiences of youths and their parents turning to me and saying - (Name omitted because of confidentiality) I have got a bit of a problem what do you think I should do - and I have done little weekend courses as regarding to counseling, but I began to notice that it was the thing that I wanted to specialize in - I am good in this work - it seems that people often turn to me - so emmm it was just a natural development - and so during those years I came to realize that yes this is really me.

I: What other significant life history experiences have influenced and continue to influence your work?

P: Emmm I think in the early day (PAUSE) I had multiple school moves - because of my father’s job we moved all around the country - only in England not even in Scotland or Wales emmm and I think when I look back on it, this was not an easy process for me - i went to nine or ten different schools, and with each school it got worse - and so it is no surprise to me that I became very interested in the outsider - the person who happens to be in the transition to another culture - and what a complicated process that is emmm so i think (PAUSE) i think in terms of distressing influences, that was one of the major events in my life - as I said I failed my exams at sixteen, and I spent the rest of my life trying to catch up really - that’s the big thing I suppose (LONG PAUSE) in terms of influences I am quite aware that as from young, even as a young boy - sometimes my aunt and uncles used to talk to me - very personal level you know - they would be telling me about their distress in their family relationships - about having fallen out with my father - you know all sorts of problems - so again that is always an influence I think in that I became sensitive to other peoples distress because they were sharing with me - and you know I trying to listen as attentively as much as I could (PAUSE) this goes back as a young boy - so I become sensitive to the importance of people telling their stories to me and sharing their distress - and of course I had my own experiences of that - particularly when I found someone who has been inspirational - or who has induced
confidence in me - something about the power of that moment has clearly marked who I am.

Interview with May

I: How would you describe the fit between your personality and your work, and how does your work impact your emotional and personal vulnerabilities?

P: Emmm it is a good fit - I spend a lot of time doing other things that did not fit, and it always seemed off - but this works for me because I love working with people emmm but I do not like big group situations - my personality is - emmm if you look at emmm Meyers Briggs you could see am right in the middle of an introvert and an extrovert - what I mean is that in certain situations I can be an extrovert - like in the course I am teaching emmm even in social situations I can enjoy that - emmm interaction with a lot of people - but at my core I have a much introvert core in that I enjoy time by myself but also in that I enjoy one-in-one relationships, and I enjoy one-in-one conversations - getting to know a single person in a period of time - so I think that matches counseling really well for me because I can delve into those one-to-one relationships emmm but then also when I have to I can be that advocate and go out there and stand up for the rights of my clients, and pursue the principles of social justice which is - which is an incredible part of counseling as well. Well emmm regarding my emotional make-up - I think one of the things that I did as an early counselor is that I become very enmeshed emotionally with my clients - and it is hard not to do so when they are children and adolescence and you see them struggling with things that are not fair - and as a result of the system that is bringing them down - and families who are malfunctioning and chaotic - and that really is not the child’s fault but everything around it (LONG PAUSE) so it was very difficult to me to move forward when - when I had a hard case but at the same time - and that sort of is an emotional style that I invested - but I wanted to separate myself in a way that I could still
find genuine empathy but not pity - like I did in the beginning - in that now I see that I look for strength - I look for resiliency in clients, and I do not worry about their situation - instead I try to think how I can empower them to get through these challenges (PAUSE) so that has been a learning curve for me I think - and it is something that I am still learning to improve upon (LONG PAUSE)in terms of personal vulnerabilities - I think everyone have certain things that happened in their past - or certain difficulties - as just one example (PAUSE) I did have a family member that had a lot of substance abuse difficulties - so I think I am very vulnerable to that topic - so whenever I have a student who have a parent or a grandmother or has a an older sibling who struggles with that and see how that impacts the child - emmm that can be very difficult for me to get through, because it is hard to separate my own life story and challenges with that from the child’s - but at the same time that is something I learned to recognize in myself and recognize that that is my stuff and not client’s stuff - and emmm work through that.