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## The Two Faces of Wellness in the Heart of Europe, in the Hearts of People from the Czech Republic

Posted By **NWI**, Tuesday, January 06, 2015

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Due to its location in the very center of the old continent, the Czech Republic is often called the Heart of Europe. In this article, I would like to introduce you to the two faces of wellness in my country. One is the wellness that calls itself wellness and then there is the other wellness that doesn't know it is wellness - wellness that is hidden in the hearts of Czech people.

### Let's start with the first case: Wellness that calls itself wellness

In Europe there is a long spa tradition and the Czech Republic is no exception. As Czech borders opened 25 years ago, many modern trends have emerged in the country; since wellness was one of them, it naturally found its place in the spa resorts. Unfortunately, there was no one to explain what the word wellness really meant so it became a marketing label for many things.

Czech wellness follows a similar pattern as [wellness in Germany, as described by Lutz Hertel](#). The word "wellness" has become a synonym for a type of service or a place where you go to feel better (so-called wellness centers). Many spa resorts and hotels now offer weekend retreats labeled as wellness, and the services and products you can buy in a wellness center vary from fitness classes, sauna, massage therapy, cosmetics, and hair dressers, up to wellness food or wellness towels.

Almost every Czech knows the word wellness, but when you ask people what wellness is, they struggle with a definition. On the other hand, when you ask them if they want to live healthy, happy and fulfilling lives, their answer is very clear - YES, of course!

### The second case: wellness that doesn't know it is wellness

For the purpose of this article I did a subjective wellness spin on the Czech nation using John Travis's 12 dimensions of wellness as a framework to organize my thoughts. I asked myself if there is a place for "real" wellness in the hearts of Czech people. (Please note that the following lines are my assumptions and generalizations from observing this country for the past three decades and comparing it with other countries where I have lived or studied.)

### Self-responsibility and Love

In terms of physical health, Czechs are very dependent on their doctors and as long as our healthcare services are for free, it seems to be enough (patients only pay \$1.50 to see the doctor and another \$1.50 for a prescription). Yet, many problems don't have their cures in the traditional healthcare system, so there is growing interest in psychosomatic and alternative medicine.

Czechs are aware that their state of health is dependent on their lifestyle and their behavior, but they tend to ignore the connection. The trend of healthy living has turned into something like: "You HAVE TO BE FIT, BEAUTIFUL AND SUCCESSFUL!" but it is a part of Czech's nature, that when we HAVE TO DO something, we just don't want to do it.

### Breathing

As any other human, Czechs do breathe in and out, but they don't really think about it. My experience from wellness classes I facilitate is that once you introduce Czech people to the "magic of deep breathing" they fall in love with it. Speaking generally, it is getting easier to breathe here - as thankfully smoking is prohibited from public spaces and from restaurants.

### Sensing

The Czech country is full of beautiful nature from mountains to fields, numerous historical monuments and cities full of old and contemporary art. The rumor is that Czech girls are very beautiful, so there is a lot to look at! Unfortunately Czechs spend most of their days on autopilot (because there is a lot of work to be done, right?) and living in the present moment can be ignored.

## Eating

The traditional Czech meal is cabbage, pork and dumplings, which is far from healthy. Most of what our grandmothers would cook as a festive meal could be labeled as unhealthy, but the second side of the coin is that almost every Czech family has a garden where they grow fruit and vegetables. The young people living in the city are very much into local farmers markets and eco/bio products. Still, mum's homemade meal is the most frequent menu.

## Moving

The current research says that Czech people are one of the most obese in Europe and that we don't move enough. At the same time the Czech Republic has the densest net of hiking routes in the world. There is also a long tradition of grass root sport clubs under Sokol or other voluntarily run organizations all existing alongside modern fitness/wellness centers.

## Feeling

My personal experience is that Czech people are less outwardly emotional compared to Americans, or that they at least don't talk about their emotions that much. Be it a matter of language or a cultural norm, you will not hear us say "I love it!!" but once we say "I love you," it really means something.

## Thinking

Czechs are very critical but also very humble, which might result in lower self-esteem (and self-love?), yet it makes for a very peaceful nation. When Czechoslovakia was split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, it happened over a table. No guns, no deaths, just a gentleman's agreement and signatures on a paper.

## Playing and Working

The Czech Republic follows the German working style and there has even been a saying "golden Czech hands" that described the quality of Czech workmanship. You can guess there is more work than play in every day. Especially the younger generation work days and nights to get a good career, but there appears to be a growing number of those who value their health over long working hours, and topics of self-care and work-life balance are on the rise.

## Communicating

A friend of mine, who lived for a while in the United States, once told me that Czechs are very sincere. I can only agree with that: If we like your new trousers, we tell you and if we don't like them, we don't say anything (sure, some would gossip about it behind your back, but that is another story).

## Intimacy

Czechs are very welcoming and it would not take you long to make a Czech friend. According to tradition, all Slavic nations offer their guests a slice of bread with salt. Well, Czechs say that beer is a liquid bread of their nation, so as a guest they would invite you to have a beer with them. But it is not for the purpose to get drunk! In fact, it is usually over beer where the "good talks" happen.

## Finding Meaning

Czechs love the question "Why?" It is a part of our critical thinking and the tradition of disobeying (or better say questioning) the rules. Yet we are still, as a nation and as individuals, learning to deal with the freedom to ask questions that don't have specific answers; questions like "Who am I/Who are we?", "Is money more important than my/our values?", "Do I/we want to go East or West?"...

## Transcendence

Due to historical events, Czech Republic is amongst the least religious of European countries. Even if churches remain partly empty, there is a growing interest in spiritual practices, like meditation, yoga, tai-chi, random kindness, etc.

Wellness in the Czech Republic remains mostly unrecognized, but it has many areas where the real understanding of the concept can grow from – it has its definite place in the hearts of Czech people. However, while currently spas/wellness centers attract people who want to feel better, the whole system lacks self-responsibility and applications outside of the spa resort.

When the person wants to change her life(style), she is left alone with a doctor's prescription and a set of services and products she can passively use. But the common question is: *Where do I start?* and *What do I do if I do not initially succeed?* This is the gap that understanding wellness can bridge; it can connect the dots; connect the nature of a person (be it a Czech or any other nationality) with the services and professionals that are already there.



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