

# What is Wellbeing?

To understand wellbeing, we need to understand its origin in the field of positive psychology. Much of what we know about wellbeing is attributed to Martin Seligman, with roots in the study of happiness. Seligman is not only the founder of the science that studies happiness, but also the strongest critic of the word. Seligman (2011) wrote, "I actually detest the word happiness, which is so overused that it has become almost meaningless . . . The first step in positive psychology is to dissolve the monism of 'happiness' into more workable terms" (p. 9). He dissolved the happiness monism into a three part formula: positive emotions + engagement + meaning = happiness. This three pronged approach to happiness became his authentic happiness theory. With additional time and research, Seligman adapted his focus from *happiness* to *wellbeing* by creating the influential PERMA framework, with five principles: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment. Each principle can be independently measured, contributes to wellbeing, and is sought for its own intrinsic value.

As the field of positive psychology has grown, so have its theories about wellbeing. Tom Rath, co-author of *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements*, considered overall happiness as a product of wellbeing in five distinct areas of life. He explained,

Wellbeing is about the combination of our love for what we do each day, the quality of our relationships, the security of our finances, the vibrancy of our physical health, and the pride we take in what we have contributed to our communities. Most importantly, it's about how these five elements interact. (Rath & Harter, 2014, p.4).

Furthermore, he argued, long-term happiness is really about the positive short-term decisions we make in relation to our finances, relationships, physical health, community, and career.

Psychologist Ed Diener thought of happiness more simply: "Happiness is the name we put on thinking and feeling positively about one's life." What really matters, he continued, is psychological wealth which takes into account "life satisfaction and happiness, spirituality and meaning in life, positive attitudes and emotions, loving social relationships, engaging activities and work, values and life goals to achieve them, physical and mental health, [and] material sufficiency to meet our needs" (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2011, pp. 4-6).

Ryff and Keyes (1995) defined psychological wellbeing as the combination of six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationship with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Each of these components is designed to lead to positive functioning. Thus their model focuses more on eudaimonic wellbeing than hedonic traditions that argue wellbeing is about gratification and positive emotions. Eudaimonic

wellbeing argues that happiness comes from meaning, rather than gratification and positive emotions (Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan, & Kauffman, 2017).

Another train of thought, beginning with Greenspoon and Saklofske (2001), views wellbeing as contingent on two factors: psychopathology (PTH) and subjective wellbeing (SWB). Rather than factors at opposing ends of the same spectrum, these are an integrated system building on the idea that wellbeing is not simply the absence of mental illness and struggle. More current research continues to support this model of wellbeing and differentiate among the four distinct groups that emerge on a dual factor system, “positive mental health (high SWB, low PTH), vulnerable (low SWB, low PTH), symptomatic but content (high SWB, high PTH) and troubled (low SWB, high PTH)” (Lyons, Huebner, Hills & Shinkareva, 2012, p.183). For more information on this model of dual factors or dual continua of wellbeing, see our [“Wellbeing on Dual Continua”](#) section.

With countless researchers and authors thinking about wellbeing in such varied ways, you may have difficulty grasping what wellbeing means to your school. The references below can help you understand additional models of wellbeing to consider in making your decisions. The variety of assessments and associated definitions of wellbeing allows you to measure the facets of wellbeing that are most important to your school community. We hope these resources serve as a foundation for more customized definitions and measures of wellbeing which ultimately result in flourishing for students, teachers, parents, and school communities now and into the future.

## Section Summary

- Several different models and theories have been proposed for wellbeing.
- Martin Seligman's PERMA framework argues that wellbeing is a combination of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, relationships, and accomplishment.
- Some researchers consider wellbeing from a domain-based perspective: as the result of flourishing across different domains of life: social, emotional, occupational, spiritual, physical, etc.
- The variety of definitions for wellbeing allows you to decide which framework and facets are most important to your context.

## Suggestions for Further Research

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Bates, M. & Boren, D. M. (2019). *Assessing Wellbeing in Schools: An Educator's Practical Guide to Measuring Wellbeing*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/wellbeing>



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