

What is Wellbeing?

By Karen Gillespie, 2015 [paper]

The question of what 'wellbeing' means and its definition has perplexed philosophers for centuries, and remains not so much unanswered as open to ongoing debate. The use of terms such as 'wellness', 'subjective wellbeing', 'emotional wellbeing', 'psychological wellbeing', 'health', 'life satisfaction', 'happiness', 'flourishing' and 'quality of life' on an almost interchangeable or synonymous basis has further muddled the picture. That its definition has eluded consensus may also be a reflection of its inherent complexity but this has not prevented a multitude of descriptions, of which our two favourite are:

- Wellbeing is about more than living 'the good life': it is about having meaning in life, about fulfilling our potential and feeling that our lives are worthwhile...our personal or subjective wellbeing is shaped by our genes, our personal circumstances and choices, the social conditions we live in and the complex ways in which all these things interact. (Eckersley, Hamilton, & Denniss, 2005)
- Wellbeing is more than just happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, wellbeing means developing as a person, being fulfilled and making a contribution to the community. (Shah & Marks, 2004)

However we might choose to interpret wellbeing, there are three central themes:

1. Self-fulfilment in mastering a 'balanced life' is a core dependency.
2. Wellbeing is an "active agent" i.e. it is individuals who possess the power and consciousness to interpret and create the perceptions of wellbeing.
3. Any evaluations of wellbeing yield a dynamic rather than fixed state assessment based on continual flux and nothing will bring constant contentment

Pathways to Wellbeing

Historically there have been two broadly opposing philosophical perspectives regarding the most likely pathway to wellbeing:

1. Hedonia (maximising pleasurable positive emotional affect) and
2. Eudaimonia (living an Aristotelian authentic life of virtue and self-actualization and positive functioning)

Despite the historical contention, the prevailing view today is that both these perspectives are inherently valid and that an integrated approach encompassing both aspects will

contribute to a flourishing state. A more thorough review of the research reveals a multitude of factors which add further to our understanding of the scientific pathways to achieving wellbeing:

1. Creating meaning in life, sense of purpose, spiritual wellbeing, health of the soul
2. Engagement and flow, creativity, intellectual inspiration
3. Personal growth, autonomy, competence, self-mastery, realisation of potential, ability to fulfil one's goals and self-realization
4. Presence of more positive emotion and optimism than negative affect or pessimism
5. Feelings of harmony, mindfulness, balance and evenness, inner peace, serenity, humility, authenticity, values congruence and self-acceptance
6. Social connectedness; family, supportive social and work relationships which facilitate bond building, sense of belonging, love and intimacy

The Australian Wellbeing Manifesto provides an accessible and integrated description of the various dimensions that promote wellbeing:

The evidence shows that a good marriage, the company of friends, rewarding work, sufficient money, a good diet, physical activity, sound sleep, engaging leisure and religious or spiritual belief and practice all enhance our wellbeing, and their absence diminishes it. Optimism, trust, self-respect and autonomy make us happier. Gratitude and kindness lifts our spirits: indeed giving support can be at least as beneficial as receiving it. Having clear goals we can work towards, a 'sense of place' and belonging, a coherent and positive view of the world, and the belief we are part of something bigger than ourselves foster wellbeing... All in all our wellbeing comes from being connected and engaged, from being enmeshed in a web of relationships and interests. These give meaning to our lives. We are deeply social beings. The intimacy, belonging and support seem to matter most: and isolation exacts the highest price. (Eckersley, Hamilton, & Denniss, 2005)

The GLWS approach to Wellbeing

Wellbeing implies a sense of thriving, flourishing, being fully alive and living life to the full, as well as feeling balanced, calm and at ease.

Wellbeing is not an entirely steady state which once attained can be kept safely forever – it will fluctuate in accordance with the events, challenges and experiences we encounter but also from person to person. Each of us has a different combination of psychological, social, emotional, financial and physical resources upon which we draw, and these will vary as we progress through the lifespan.

Wellbeing can be imagined as a “see-saw” with a balance point between an individual’s inner resource pool and the challenges faced. Stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing.