

P = POSITIVE EMOTIONS

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING OR IMPROVING WELLBEING DURING STRESSFUL TIMES

Wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct, and according to positive psychology research is made up of 5 key elements:

P = Positive Emotion
E = Engagement
R = Relationships
M = Meaning
A = Accomplishments¹

This week we will focus on **P** or **Positive Emotion!**

Positive Emotion means feel-good feelings like happiness, joy, love, and peace. It's not the absence of difficult emotions, but the presence of those emotions that you want to have stick around. So, how can we use the science to help us to stay positive during COVID-19?

Our brain receives 11 million pieces of information per second however, can only process 2–4 pieces at a time to construct a picture of the world².

These 2–4 pieces of information, which you choose to use to construct your view of reality, can predict your levels of happiness, success and also stress.

By choosing to focus more on what is going well, rather than on the negative stuff, you train your brain to look for the positive, and to feel happier and be more optimistic. This in turn improves your wellbeing.

Focus on Positive by reflecting on what has gone well for you at the end of each day.

Instead of focusing on the doom and gloom of COVID-19, choose to reflect on the day's good experiences. For example, maybe you took your dog for a walk in the sunshine, completed an online reading task, worked productively on an assignment, connected with an old friend, cooked a delicious dinner for yourself, or saw a funny toilet paper joke on Facebook!

The science shows that simply choosing to reflect on three positive experiences each day will contribute to an improvement in your happiness and wellbeing. By reflecting on what has gone well in their work, teachers have realised that they played a big role in why it went well in the first place. This reveals that we often play a significant role in creating situations in our work, study or home life that contributes to our own and other people's feel-good feelings³.

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¹ Seligman, M. E. P. (2012). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Free Press

² Achor, S. (2011). *The happiness advantage: The seven principles that fuel success and performance at work*. United Kingdom: Virgin Books

³ Turner, K., & Thielking, M. (2019). Teacher wellbeing: Its effects on teaching practice and student learning. *Issues in Educational Research*. 29(3).



E = ENGAGEMENT

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING OR IMPROVING WELLBEING DURING STRESSFUL TIMES

Thanks for reading our second tip sheet in the PERMA for students series! This week we focus on **E** or **Engagement**.

Engagement refers to being interested, involved and excited by an activity.

When you are highly engaged in an activity, you may experience 'flow'. Research tells us that when in a state of 'flow' people become thoroughly absorbed in an activity and lose all sense of time. They are also less distracted and less likely to focus on personal problems.

During a state of flow, you become completely focused on the activity that you are engaged in. Your creativity, effort, motivation, performance, cognitive functioning and concentration are all high.

Being in a state of flow is a known contributor to wellbeing and happiness.¹ Flow can cause many 'feel good' chemicals to be released in the brain, producing a natural and often very productive high.

After a flow experience people will often feel exhilarated, or say that the activity was enjoyable, fun or rewarding. People choose to engage in flow activities not for any rewards (like winning), but because the activity itself is enjoyable.

During Covid-19 try creating or revisiting enjoyable and engaging activities that are likely to produce a state of flow for you. Ideally, if you can create this experience through deep engagement with your learning it will have positive effects on your course results and overall university experience. Whether it be astronomy or psychology, this is your chance to read more deeply on your favourite topic!

Think about other types of activities that are likely to give you that flow-like feeling. Maybe it is finally reading the book that has been sitting collecting dust beside your bed, or participating in an online exercise class, dancing, playing music or creating art.

Activities which produce flow require our full concentration, and there is often some challenge involved in improving our skills. It's a personal thing, and you need to discover your own unique interests and talents that contribute to an experience of positivity during this period of self-isolation.

Everyone is different when it comes to their choice of activities that produce a state of flow. For optimal wellbeing, discover your own suite of 'flow' experiences that you can include in your daily life.

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² Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins



R = RELATIONSHIPS

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING OR IMPROVING WELLBEING DURING STRESSFUL TIMES



In the field of positive psychology, supportive or positive relationships are one of the five key elements of wellbeing.¹ This is the third tip sheet in our PERMA for students during Covid-19 series.

People with strong social support networks feel happier, and are more successful, motivated, productive, creative and cooperative.^{2,3} In addition, they feel a greater sense of purpose, experience less stress and recover more quickly when they experience stress.²

Interestingly, research shows it is the social support which we give, rather than the social support we receive, which has the biggest effect on our wellbeing.⁴ When we are kind or helpful to another person this is called altruism. Some of the most effective methods for improving individual wellbeing involve refocusing our attention towards the wellbeing of others by showing kindness, appreciation or some other form of caring about other people.⁵

Our research showed that when teachers consciously provided social support to their colleagues they experienced an increase in feelings of being cared for by others and being authentically connected to others. In addition, they experienced less loneliness. Often, a ripple effect occurred whereby the recipients of social support would reciprocate or 'pay forward' the social support which they had received.⁶

Think about how you can provide social support to others during Covid-19 social distancing and contribute to the contagion effect of compassionate caring for others! Social support can include random act of kindness, expressing gratitude, carefully listening to someone, emotional support or providing advice, information or feedback to another person.

A simple experiment that you can try at university is to check in with a study buddy to see how it brightens their day and reflect on how, in turn, it makes you feel. Or send a lecturer, who has recently put in a lot of effort to teach an online class for the first time, an email expressing your gratitude. Who knows, maybe you can start a kindness-pandemic!

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² Achor, S. (2011). *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles that Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. United Kingdom: Virgin Books

³ Barsade, S. (2002). The ripple effect: Emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47(4), 644-675.

⁴ Colbert, A. E., Bono, J. E., & Purvanova, R. K. (2016). Flourishing via workplace relationships: Moving beyond instrumental support. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(4), 1199-1223.

⁵ Diener, E., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). *Two principles of psychological wealth*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

⁶ Turner, K. & Thielking, M. (In press). Teacher social support: A phenomenological study.

M = MEANING

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING OR IMPROVING WELLBEING DURING STRESSFUL TIMES

This is the fourth tip sheet in our PERMA for students during Covid-19 series. This tip sheet we focus on the **M** in PERMA: **Meaning**.

In the field of positive psychology, finding meaning in life is a well-established route to achieving optimal wellbeing.¹

One strategy that contributes to optimal wellbeing is work-related attitudes. Let's reflect on this research and then apply it to your studies.

Research has found that people can have three basic approaches to their work, that is they can approach their work as either a job, a career, or a calling.² A job is done for a paycheck, the work is not an end in itself, but instead is a means for acquiring the resources needed to enjoy time away from the job. With a career orientation, the overarching goal is to maximize income, social status, power, and prestige in their occupation. A calling orientation is a commitment to the work because it contributes to the greater good and somehow makes the world a better place, and the work is fulfilling in its own right.²

People with calling orientations toward their work are found to have greater levels of wellbeing. They are more optimistic, conscientiousness, have a more positive outlook on life and are more satisfied with their lives than people who approach their work as either a job or career.³

In our research we asked teachers to adopt a calling orientation toward their work by consciously focusing on how their work was making a meaningful difference. As a result, teachers' wellbeing improved and they made small changes to their teaching practice and work environments to make them more personally meaningful and satisfying.^{4,5}

Other research has found that undergraduate students who approach their future careers as a calling report greater meaning in life, life satisfaction, career decision-making efficacy and fewer depressive symptoms.⁶

To improve your wellbeing, try approaching your studies with a calling orientation. Consciously focus on how the skills you are learning may contribute to the greater good in your future career. Think about how your future work makes the world a better place.

Keep this calling focus in mind, and let it motivate you to keep going and achieve your best as you work toward graduation. By approaching your future career as a calling, and as an activity that gives you and others meaning, there is a high chance you will feel happier and have greater job satisfaction.

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¹ Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6(1), 25-41.

² Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 21-33.

³ Wrzesniewski, A. (2002). It's Not Just a Job": Shifting Meanings of Work in the Wake of 9/11. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 11(3), 230-234.

⁴ Turner, K., & Thielking, M. (2019). Teacher wellbeing: Its effects on teaching practice and student learning. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(3).

⁵ Turner, K. & Thielking, M. (2019). How Teachers Find Meaning in their Work and Effects on their Pedagogical Practice *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(9), 70-88.

⁶ Steger, M. F., & Dik, B. J. (2009). If one is looking for meaning in life, does it help to find meaning in work? *Applied psychology: Health and wellbeing*, 1(3), 303-320.



A = ACCOMPLISHMENTS

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING OR IMPROVING WELLBEING DURING STRESSFUL TIMES

This is the fifth and final tip sheet in our PERMA for students during Covid-19 series. This tip sheet focuses on the **A** in PERMA: **Accomplishment**.

Accomplishment refers to experiencing achievement or success.¹

Research shows that people who invest sustained effort and perseverance, or 'grit', into their achievements at work are happier, have higher levels of wellbeing and are more successful.^{2,3}

In striving for success and achievement, students often show two different types of mindsets.⁴

Students with a fixed mindset believe their intelligence is fixed, they may avoid challenges, give up easily, do not explore topics in depth and tend to be low on self-accountability and self-assessment strategies.⁴

In contrast, students with a growth mindset strive for honest assessment of their weaknesses so that they can accommodate and remedy them, see failure as an opportunity for improvement, learn from the feedback given to them, embrace challenges and are persistent in their learning, believing that effort will lead to success.⁴

A fixed mindset inhibits learning, accomplishment and success whilst a growth mindset supports learning, accomplishment and success. Students with a growth mindset understand that individual talent and ability is variable, can grow and develop over time, and may improve with repeated practice.

How can you develop a growth mindset to support your learning, achievement and success?

- Choose to see failure as a shared experience and an opportunity to learn and improve your skills.
- Welcoming feedback given to you from lecturers and mentors as being vital to helping you to grow, learn and achieve success.
- Embracing the challenges involved in learning by knowing that the way to success is through resilience, persistence and sustained effort.
- Celebrating successes that are achieved by your sustained effort and perseverance.

"Whether you think you can, or you think you can't—you're right." Henry Ford

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² Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). *Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087-1101.

³ Sheldon, K., Abad, N., Ferguson, Y., Gunz, A., Houser-Marko, L., Nichols, C., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2010). *Persistent pursuit of need-satisfying goals leads to increased happiness: A 6-month experimental longitudinal study*. *Motivation and Emotion*, 34(1), 39-48.

⁴ Dweck, C. S. 2006, *Mindset: How you can fulfil your potential*. London: Constable and Robinson Ltd.