



## Positive Psychology

In the Mental Health Notes to date, we have focused on a range of topics, including our relationship with ourselves; our inner critic; and how our thoughts, feelings and behaviours interact and the impact this can have on our physiology. We have also looked at some tools to help us cope with strong emotions. In this, our final note for the year, we'd like to borrow some concepts from Positive Psychology.

When Martin Seligman became the president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, he said that he had spent his career relieving suffering and treating mental health disorders. However, he pointed out that relieving suffering is not the same as promoting well-being. Suffering and well-being are both part of the human condition and it is important to focus on not only what helps people to survive, but also what enables them to thrive. More than twenty years on, he has identified 5 building blocks to flourishing – a word he uses interchangeably with well-being. The acronym PERMA is used to describe these five building blocks.

**P – Positive emotions** - For us to experience well-being, we need positive emotions in our lives. Any positive emotion such as happiness, gratitude, satisfaction, pleasure, inspiration, hope, curiosity, or love falls into this category. It's important to enjoy yourself in the here and now and remain optimistic about outcomes for the future.

**E – Engagement** – When we're truly engaged in an activity, we experience a state of flow - time seems to stand still, we lose our sense of self and concentrate on the present. This feels really good! The more we experience this type of engagement, the more likely we are to experience well-being. Flow can be experienced with a range of activities, e.g. a good conversation, reading a book, building furniture, gardening, sports training, to name a few.

**R – Relationships** - From an evolutionary perspective, we are social beings because the drive to connect with and help others promotes our survival. It is not surprising then that relationships are at the core of our well-being. Support from and connection with others is one of the best antidotes to “the downs” of life and a reliable way to feel up. Research shows that doing acts of kindness for others produces an increase in well-being.

**M – Meaning** – Meaning comes from serving a cause bigger than ourselves. There are various institutions and causes that enable a sense of meaning, such as religion, family, science, politics, work organisations, justice, the community, social causes (e.g., being green), among others. Being involved with these also helps us to flourish.

**A – Accomplishment** - Many of us strive to better ourselves in some way, whether we're seeking to master a skill, achieve a valuable goal, or win in some competitive event. As such, achievement is another important thing that contributes to our ability to flourish.

When we consider these five elements within the context of the current pandemic, we may find new opportunities to help ourselves to flourish. Perhaps being forced to stay apart has given us a sense of appreciation for the important relationships in our lives, which we will nurture as we begin to return to closer connections. Maybe we have experienced a deeper sense of meaning by helping vulnerable family members or people in our community. Some of us will have more time to find a hobby or interest through which we can experience flow; or maybe we can deepen our skill level within a long held pastime, e.g. playing a musical instrument, to a point where we experience new levels of mastery and achievement. Taken together, Seligman suggests that these 5 elements account for what makes up the “good life” – an authentic and sustained happiness and well-being.