

# IN PURSUIT OF WELLBEING

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When you pick up a magazine or newspaper lately, the 'buzz' topic seems to be 'wellbeing'. The whole community or world, for that matter, must be in chaos because we don't seem to be happy, and feel the need to address our state of wellbeing to remedy this.

So what seems to be the problem? According to an article in Time Magazine, *Mind Space* (2014), modern world 'multi-tasking' and the invasion of electronic devices in our lives are to blame. The lack of 'down time' is a particular focus. Taking time out, to focus solely on one thing, or nothing, is vital for both our productivity and our ability to cope in the modern world. Strategies suggested include: having some sort of 'no electronic device time' in our waking days; ensuring good sleep by having no electronic devices in bedrooms; incorporating mindfulness exercises in our daily routines. All these suggestions and ideas sound reasonably 'do-able'. It was also noted that there are some 'apps' that help with mindfulness. I'm not sure if this is going to 'help' or perpetuate the problem.

As advanced as technology is, many areas of our lives seem to be lacking in progress. John Dickson, historian and theologian stated, 'We are the most entertained people in history but also the most bored. We are the most educated people but our wars are even more deadly. We know more but believe in less. We can communicate by satellite instantly with anywhere in the world, but we are failing to communicate across the kitchen table' (Dickson, p53). How is it that our advanced society is having issues connecting with the community, with each other and with the society to which we belong?

'You must look after Number One' is the mantra by which western society seems to live. As long as Number One is OK, all is OK! Do the answers to our quandary - why aren't we happy? - lie in what used to happen in the 'good old days'? What seems to have changed since the 'good old days'? Lots actually. Since fifty years ago, the number of families with both working parents has increased; advances in communications have led to the fact that nearly everyone with a phone or computer is contactable 24/7; the number of church goers has decreased; the standard of living has increased; the basic standard of education has increased; unemployment has increased; and the number of people in the population taking anti-depressant drugs and suffering anxiety disorders has also increased. It seems as though there are fewer than twenty-four hours in a day these days because 'there just isn't enough time!'

Other than the decreased number of hours in a day, there is statistical information to support these suggestions. How is it that we cannot cope with these changes? Most of those not coping have not known what the 'good old days' were

like, and have grown up with all of these factors as part of their lives? Why is it that, the more we have, the more we seem to believe we are the centre of the universe, and the more we appear to be less satisfied and less fulfilled? In his book, *Flourish*, Psychologist Martin Seligman, of the University of Pennsylvania, promotes positive psychology and has pinpointed five elements we need in order to have a sense of wellbeing, a sense of purpose in life, and a sense of fulfilment.

The five elements that Seligman identifies are represented in the mnemonic: PERMA

- P: Positive emotion (in particular, happiness and life satisfaction)
- E: Engagement
- R: Relationships
- M: Meaning
- A: Achievement (Seligman, p24)

He continues to explain how positive psychology is one way we can 'flourish'. Colleagues of Martin Seligman, Felicity Huppert and Timothy So, in keeping with the spirit of the wellbeing theory, have defined flourishing: 'To flourish, an individual must have all 'core features' and at least three of the six 'additional features' (Seligman, p24). Core features include positive emotions, engagement and interest, meaning and purpose. Additional features include self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination and positive relationships.

All this sounds quite practical and almost too obvious to be considered a new buzz theme! As teachers, positive psychology is almost hard-wired into us as a 'given', as part of our characters or as a primary focus of teaching. But it seems not; otherwise, 'wellbeing' would not need to be spelled out to each of us as requiring a conscious effort or serving as a new theory in teaching. Why is it we are needing to consider each of these aspects as if they are new? Is the fact that we are needing a spiritual aspect to our lives driving us to this new-age wellbeing focus as a form of spiritual searching? In our Western world, have we lost our faith in a supreme being and resorted to faith in ourselves and our belongings, as if we are the creators of the world as we know it?

From a Christian perspective, faith has the ability to fulfil the elements Seligman describes in his PERMA model. In fact, there is evidence to substantiate this statement in the article Faith Pinnacle Moments: Stress, Miraculous Experiences and Life Satisfaction in Young Adulthood:

*There is now a fairly well-established positive relationship between religiosity and various measures of well-being, as well as evidence that religiosity can protect against the negative effects of stress (Krause 2002; Krause and Ellison 2003; Krause and Van Tran 1989; Lim and Putnam 2010; Pergamot 1997; Stark and Maier 2008). In particular, certain beliefs about God - particularly God's goodness and control over*

one's life - seem to support subjective **wellbeing** (Clements and Ermakova 2012; Krause 2004; Krause and Ellison 2003; Pollner 1989; Schieman et al. 2005, 2010). One such belief studied in some depth is the sense of "divine control," which is a belief that the good and the bad events of one's life are in God's hands and that God exercises a commanding authority over one's life (Schieman et al., 2010:519). This work has shown that the construct of divine control and other similar beliefs about God's goodness and involvement are positively associated with some aspects of subjective wellbeing (Krause 2003, 2004, 2005; Schieman 2008; Schieman et al., 2005, 2006; Stark and Maier, 2008) (Manglos, 2013).

From a Christian perspective, Seligman's model can be explained in the following way.

**Positive emotion** is what you feel as the result of fulfilment of the 'ERMA' sections of the model. Happiness is one of these positive emotions that is experienced through situations and activities which encourage engagement in an interest, enjoyment in the company of people with whom you feel safe and comfortable, and a sense of achievement and accomplishment.

**Engagement** in activities in which we are interested, and which even challenge our thinking or abilities, is not only one of Seligman's elements; it is part of what people of faith do for those around them. Using the talents that God has given us should help to foster a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem. Unfortunately life is not always a positive experience, and there are many challenges in our lives that continually test our faith in God and his teachings. Resilience is an element developed through these challenges and hardships, and belief in God, at these times, helps us to get through these challenges feeling comforted and knowing that God is with us and has a higher plan.

To be in **relationship** with others, and to know that we are created in God's image, and are loved and never alone, gives us a sense of belonging, and a sense of our 'specialness' and individuality. This is also extended to our relationships with others and our knowledge that others, too, have been created in God's image and therefore deserve our respect.

**Meaning** is experienced when we acknowledge we have been created to be stewards of the world and all within it. One of life's big questions is 'why are we here?' Philosophers have been asking such questions for centuries. For those with faith in God, this sense of purpose is recognised and encourages us to act and behave accordingly. However, as righteous as this sounds, acknowledgement of our 'humanness' also needs to be stated here. This 'humanness' includes our imperfection; we all have flaws which make us fall short of the ideologies of Christian doctrine. God, through Jesus' death and resurrection, has thought of this. We need only believe in him, examine our actions and faults, know that God will forgive us of our wrong-doings and give us the ability to move on.

**Achievement** in 'making a difference' gives us a sense of accomplishment. This achievement can be in any aspect of life, such as people, environment, policy or peacemaking. We need not be the highest achiever, but we feel a sense of achievement when we succeed at something.

Seligman, in *Flourish*, describes a number of strategies and exercises to develop our wellbeing. Some of these strategies include a 'what-went-well' exercise where one notes in a journal or diary three things he or she is grateful for during a twenty-four hour period. The writer then analyses the reason for these feelings of gratitude: everything is written in the journal. Another exercise looks at the number of positive comments or reinforcements, in comparison to negative comments, one receives per day. Naturally, for one's wellbeing, it is important to have more positives than negatives; however, Seligman also points out that too many positives can be counterproductive.

At least three of the following need to be considered and present in order for us to have good wellbeing: self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination and positive relationships. As we work through positive emotions, engagement and interest, meaning and purpose, many of these additional features will develop.

At Somerville House, the students and staff have the privilege of choice. As a Christian school, we acknowledge the teachings of Jesus and the importance of faith in God. We also accept those of other faiths or those who do not subscribe to a particular faith. Students who immerse themselves in the compulsory Christian Education program are able to consider the doctrines and values of the Christian faith, with the added advantage of feeling those core features of a sense of fulfilment and purpose. Some of the strands within the program consider relationships, Christian living, ethical issues, practising faith in everyday life, and the teachings of Jesus and the Bible. Seligman and many others drawn to positive education and its contribution to the welfare and wellbeing of others should be pleased with the contribution faith makes to the wellbeing of our students.

Seligman and many others who believe in positive psychology see the importance of wellbeing in our lives as primary to our happiness. I am asking you to consider the importance of faith in our lives as a parallel way of attaining similar results. When we fully embrace our faith, we attain happiness and wellbeing.

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