

Part IV: Futures in the Making – Reimagining the Social

Chapter 3

THE SCIENCE OF FLOURISHING: REFRAMING WELL-BEING THROUGH POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

¹Jesline Maria Martin Mamen, Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Counselling Psychology, Loyola College of Social Sciences (Autonomous)

INTRODUCTION: FROM DEFICITS TO FLOURISHING

In the 20th century, psychological research and practice were predominantly shaped by the medical model, with primary emphasis on diagnosing and treating mental disorders. Although this paradigm has significantly advanced our understanding of psychopathology and therapeutic interventions, it offers limited insight into the promotion of well-being, resilience, and optimal human functioning. The emergence of positive psychology in the late 1990s marked a fundamental shift from this deficit-focused orientation, advocating the scientific study of human strengths, virtues, and flourishing (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Rather than solely focusing on alleviating distress, positive psychology seeks to understand what enables individuals and societies to thrive (Gable and Haidt 2005). The field spans diverse domains, including positive emotions, character strengths, engagement, meaning, and social connectedness, and has increasingly informed practices across education, healthcare, public policy, and community development (Donaldson et al., 2015).

The concept of *flourishing* has become a central construct in this evolving paradigm. Flourishing denotes a state of complete mental well-being wherein individuals experience vitality, resilience, meaning, and fulfilling relationships (VanderWeele 2017). It encompasses more than just transient happiness or life satisfaction. Instead, it reflects the full spectrum of emotional, psychological, and social functions. A growing body of international research links flourishing to enhanced health outcomes, increased longevity, prosocial behavior, and civic participation (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2013). At the societal level, measurement initiatives, such as Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program and the OECD's well-being framework, have developed reliable tools for assessing flourishing, indicating their practical relevance for public health, education, and

© 2025 Jesline Maria Martin Mamen. The Science of Flourishing: Reframing Well-Being Through Positive Psychology in *Reframing Futures: Concepts and Challenges in a Rapidly Changing World*. ISBN: 979-8-292-77050-3. pp. 146-155. Published by the Indian Institute of Industrial and Social Research.

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governance (Human Flourishing Program, n.d.). Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2023).

In India, the science of flourishing intersects compellingly with cultural and philosophical traditions that emphasize *ananda* (joy), *dharma* (duty or purpose), and *seva* (service). These indigenous constructs offer a holistic understanding of well-being that extends beyond the individual to family and community. Policy innovations such as Delhi's Happiness Curriculum and the National Education Policy 2020 reflect a growing institutional acknowledgment of the importance of mental well-being in shaping holistic education and human development (National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration [NIEPA], 2021; State Council of Educational Research and Training [SCERT], 2019). As the world grapples with complex challenges, from rising mental health concerns to social disconnection and ecological crises, the science of flourishing offers a timely and transformative framework. Rooted in empirical evidence and adaptable across cultural contexts, it enables the reimagining of well-being as a public and personal good. This chapter explores the theoretical foundations, empirical insights, and practical strategies that define flourishing in positive psychology, with particular attention to its resonance within the Indian context.

FOUNDATIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths, virtues, and conditions that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It emphasizes the enhancement of well-being and optimal human functioning, moving beyond the traditional preoccupation with mental illness and dysfunction (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Introduced formally as a movement by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive psychology seeks to systematically investigate positive human experiences and capacities such as hope, gratitude, resilience, purpose, and character strengths. These constructs demonstrate robust empirical associations with life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and flourishing. Over the past two decades, the field has gained global momentum, influencing diverse domains including clinical practice, education, organizational behavior, and public policy (Donaldson et al., 2015).

Grounded in interdisciplinary roots, positive psychology synthesizes insights from humanistic psychology, philosophical ethics, and empirical behavioral science to offer a comprehensive view of well-being. It champions practical interventions that are evidence based, replicable, and scalable. Among these, gratitude journaling, strength-based reflection, and mindfulness practices have consistently been associated with enhanced psychological resilience and emotional regulation (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These interventions go beyond mood enhancement and offer structured, theory-based techniques to foster long-term well-being. In culturally plural societies like India, positive psychology has proven adaptable, aligning with indigenous frameworks, such as *ananda* (joy), *dharma* (purpose), and *sangha* (community belonging). Its application is evident

in the growing use of positive education programs, workplace well-being modules, and national-level initiatives that redefine happiness and development in nonmaterial terms.

UNDERSTANDING FLOURISHING: DEFINITIONS, DIMENSIONS, AND THEORETICAL MODELS

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly defined flourishing as a comprehensive state of optimal human functioning that integrates emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is positioned as the central goal of positive psychology, a holistic state in which individuals feel good and function effectively. This concept encompasses more than transient happiness; it reflects the full spectrum of human experience, including both the hedonic (feeling good) and eudaimonic (functioning well) dimensions. This evolution in focus is reflected in the shift from the pursuit of happiness to flourishing in Seligman's later work (Seligman 2011).

A growing body of empirical research has substantiated the connection between positive psychology and flourishing. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that interventions, such as gratitude journaling and using signature strengths, generate small-to-moderate but reliable improvements in flourishing-related outcomes (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Large-scale European studies further indicate that individuals who meet the criteria for flourishing display superior physical health, stronger prosocial behaviors, and greater civic participation (Huppert & So, 2013). The universal relevance of flourishing is also affirmed by recent findings from the Global Flourishing Study, which involved over 200,000 participants across 22 countries (VanderWeele et al. 2025).

Given its importance, accurate measurement of flourishing is a key focus of ongoing research. Rule et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive scoping review of measurement tools, identifying strengths and gaps across commonly used scales like the Flourishing Scale, the PERMA-Profiler, and the Harvard Flourishing Index, with an emphasis on cultural applicability. Beyond its clinical and research relevance, flourishing is increasingly regarded as both a personal aspiration and societal goal, with its resonance confirmed in non-Western societies where indigenous concepts of well-being are paramount (Huppert & So, 2013).

This comprehensive view of flourishing was conceptualized using multiple theoretical models. Six major approaches—proposed by Keyes (2002), Huppert and So (2013), Diener et al. (2010), Seligman (2011), Ryff and Singer (2008), and VanderWeele (2017)—each offer distinct but overlapping frameworks (Willen et al., 2022). Despite variations in terminology and scope, these models converge on core components such as positive relationships, engagement, and a sense of meaning or purpose.

1. **Keyes (2002)** presents flourishing as the upper end of a mental health continuum, emphasizing emotional vitality, social coherence, and psychological integration. His model uniquely

incorporates societal variables, such as social contribution and integration, thereby locating flourishing within both individual and communal well-being.

2. **Huppert and So (2013)**, building on data from European populations, identified flourishing as comprising positive affect, vitality, resilience, optimism, self-esteem, and emotional stability. Their work underscores the cultural variability of flourishing, and introduces a strong empirical basis for policy adoption.
3. **Diener et al. (2010)** define flourishing as “psychological prosperity,” introducing an eight-item Flourishing Scale measuring constructs such as competence, positive relationships, meaning, and engagement. This scale has been proven to be especially influential in international comparative studies because of its brevity and cross-cultural applicability.
4. **Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model**, encompassing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, offers one of the most widely adopted frameworks, particularly in educational and organizational settings. The model’s accessibility and empirical grounding have made it a preferred tool for designing well-being curricula, including initiatives in India’s school systems and corporate wellness programmes.
5. **Ryff and Singer’s (2008) psychological well-being model** draws from eudaimonic traditions and includes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance as key indicators. Their framework offers a more intrapersonal and developmental view of flourishing, which is often linked to existential maturity.
6. **VanderWeele (2017)** introduced the most comprehensive model to date, integrating domains such as physical and mental health, virtue, close social relationships, meaning and purpose, and financial and material stability. His flourishing index has been utilized in public health and large-scale societal studies, reflecting an inclusive understanding of human thriving that spans moral, relational, and physical well-being. This broader perspective is particularly relevant when considering flourishing, as socioeconomic conditions, such as in India, where financial stability and family ties are central to life satisfaction.

Together, these approaches provide a nuanced, multidimensional, and culturally responsive understanding of flourishing. Their shared emphasis on meaning, relationships, and competence affirms that flourishing is not reducible to momentary happiness; rather, it represents a durable state shaped by internal strengths and external systems. In India, these frameworks resonate with indigenous values, such as *dharma* (purpose), *seva* (service), and familial harmony, offering fertile ground for contextualized interventions and policy innovations. As well-being gains prominence in the global and national discourse, these models serve as foundational tools for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers committed to fostering human flourishing.

PATHWAYS TO FLOURISHING: EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS AND CULTURAL APPLICATIONS

Flourishing, as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, relationships, and accomplishment, has advanced through a wide array of empirically

supported interventions rooted in positive psychology (Ackerman, 2018). These practices are designed not only to elevate individual well-being, but also to strengthen personal capacities that foster sustained human thriving. One of the most extensively researched techniques is gratitude journaling, which involves regularly noting aspects of life, for which one is thankful. Meta-analyses indicate that gratitude interventions significantly enhance positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience, while reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cregg & Cheavens, 2021; Dickens, 2017). In school contexts, such practices have improved academic motivation and interpersonal relationships, especially when implemented as part of broader school-wide wellness programmes (Froh et al., 2008).

Character-strength-based interventions form another central pillar of flourishing science. Seligman et al. (2005) demonstrated that individuals who actively identify and use their signature strengths experience greater happiness and reduced depressive symptoms over time. Tools such as the VIA Character Strengths Survey offer structured ways for people to recognize their personal strengths and integrate them into their daily functioning. This process not only reinforces competence and agency but also supports goal-directed behavior and long-term purposes. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), which involve present-moment awareness through practices such as mindful breathing, body scans, and walking meditation, are strongly associated with enhanced emotion regulation, resilience, and empathy (Garland et al., 2015; Kuyken et al., 2013). Organizations across the healthcare, corporate, and military sectors have integrated these practices into diverse settings, underscoring their scalability and global relevance. Recent efforts to synthesize flourishing strategies into structured and comprehensive programs have yielded promising results. Gonçalves et al. (2023) developed a multidimensional flourishing intervention using an e-Delphi methodology that integrates psychological, social, and behavioral components to enhance mental health outcomes.

In India, culturally contextualized programs have been creatively adapted to these interventions. A notable example is the ‘Happiness Curriculum’ implemented in Delhi government schools, which blends mindfulness, storytelling, and reflective dialogue to foster emotional intelligence and social harmony (SCERT, 2019). Rooted in Indian philosophical concepts such as *ananda* (joy) and *dharma* (purpose), this curriculum has shown positive early outcomes in terms of students' attentiveness, empathy, and classroom engagement (NIEPA, 2021). Community-based interventions in India, particularly among women and youth, also integrate life-skills training, resilience workshops, and group counselling to address psychosocial challenges. Initiatives led by organizations such as Sangath and the Live Love Laugh Foundation highlight how positive psychology can be operationalized in grassroots mental health efforts with contextual sensitivity.

Moreover, flourishing can be cultivated through lifestyle interventions targeting sleep hygiene, physical activity, nutrition, and social connections. VanderWeele (2017) emphasized that health behaviors and relational well-being are fundamental to flourishing. Programs such as the Human

Flourishing Program advocate a holistic approach to well-being, promoting practices such as forgiveness, generosity, and spiritual reflection (Human Flourishing Program n.d.). These evidence-based strategies are not standalone techniques but are part of a broader systemic orientation that embeds flourishing into public policy, educational reform, and health promotion. As societies increasingly recognize the urgency of building mental resilience in the face of ecological, social, and existential crises, such integrated interventions offer sustainable pathways to individual and collective well-being.

CONCLUSION: EMBEDDING FLOURISHING FOR SUSTAINABLE WELL-BEING

Flourishing represents a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of well-being, moving beyond the reduction of psychological distress to the cultivation of holistic, multidimensional thriving. Positive psychology has laid the foundation for this evolution by advancing the scientific study of strengths, virtues, and optimal human functioning. As discussed in this chapter, flourishing is both a theoretical ideal and measurable state, supported by robust models (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017) and empirical validation across diverse global contexts. Its policy relevance is reflected in its adoption by major institutions, such as the OECD and the Human Flourishing Program, reinforcing well-being as a core focus of public health and governance (Human Flourishing Program, n.d.). ; OECD, 2023). In India, efforts such as the Happiness Curriculum and National Education Policy 2020 underscore the rising prominence of flourishing as a culturally resonant and institutionally endorsed framework for human development (SCERT, 2019; NIEPA, 2021).

Looking ahead, the successful integration of flourishing principles into education, healthcare, organizational leadership, and policy design requires a deliberate emphasis on cultural sensitivity, structural equity, and long-term sustainability. Evidence-based practices ranging from gratitude journaling to mindfulness-based interventions must be aligned with indigenous value systems, such as ananda (joy), dharma (purpose), and seva (service), to ensure meaningful implementation and impact. Additionally, as communities worldwide grapple with intersecting crises, from ecological uncertainty to mental health disparities, the science of flourishing offers a hopeful, empirically grounded, and contextually adaptable roadmap. It calls for interdisciplinary collaboration, systems thinking, and visionary leadership that places humans flourishing at the heart of societal progress. Ultimately, flourishing is not merely an individual aspiration, but a collective imperative—a shared endeavor to co-create conditions in which people, communities, and cultures can truly thrive.

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