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The New Science and Practice of Positive Psychology

PERMA+4, Optimal Experience, and Beyond

Control of consciousness determines the quality of life.

(Csikszentmihalyi 1990 in Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience)

Our colleague, mentor, and great friend Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934–2021) had a wonderful life that propelled him to make lasting impacts on us, many other colleagues and students, and societies across the globe. During the last two decades of his life, he created with his colleagues a new science and practice of positive psychology (Donaldson et al. 2023). Positive psychology is “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions that promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 5).

While other pioneers in psychology, such as William James and Abraham Maslow, set the stage for contemporary positive psychology, it was not until the turn of this century that the late Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his partner Martin Seligman provided a clear vision for how to develop a body of empirical evidence and a rigorous science of positive psychology began to emerge (Donaldson et al. 2023). Mihaly also clearly described the intangible and almost invisible difference that positive psychology is likely to make toward our understanding of what it means to be human and positive psychology’s potential to give us new hope for the future of humankind (Csikszentmihalyi 2020). He inspired us with

his view that “this new perspective in psychology, positive psychology, should guarantee a rewarding life to those who choose to pursue it.”

The Evidence Base

Since Mihaly and his colleagues provided us with a vision for evidence-based positive psychology, there have been more than two decades of peer-reviewed science on positive psychology topics, supporting a thriving evidence-based practice to assess, develop, and care for the building blocks of well-being and positive functioning (Donaldson et al. 2023). There is also now sound experimental evidence showing that positive psychology interventions (PPIs), intended to improve the building blocks of well-being and positive functioning in life, are efficacious on average, and work very well under specific conditions (Donaldson et al. 2021).

After an extensive examination of the empirical evidence generated during the first decade of positive psychology, Seligman (2011) developed a framework for the routes or building blocks to consider when one wants to develop and care for well-being. He called this framework PERMA, and argued that well-being can be actively developed through pursuing five measurable building blocks:

- 1) **Positive emotions.** Experiencing happiness, joy, love, gratitude, etc. in the here and now.
- 2) **Engagement.** Being highly absorbed or *experiencing flow* while engaged in the activities of one’s life.
- 3) **Relationships.** Having the ability to establish and maintain positive, mutually beneficial relationships with others, characterized by experiences of love and appreciation.
- 4) **Meaning.** The experience of being connected to something larger than the self or serving a higher purpose.
- 5) **Accomplishment.** Experiencing a sense of mastery over a particular domain of interest or achieving important or challenging life/work goals.

In 2018, Seligman refined the PERMA framework and argued that these five building blocks are not exhaustive, and acknowledged that additional evidence-based building blocks might improve the framework. Donaldson (2019), Donaldson and Donaldson (2021b), and Donaldson et al. (2020) conducted an extensive systematic literature

review, meta-analysis, and a range of qualitative assessments in order to determine if and how the framework could be extended, making it especially relevant for work-related contexts and for individuals living in challenging environments (e.g., poor physical and psychosocial conditions with challenges of inequity and poverty). Their main aim was to determine which additional elements seemed likely to contribute to well-being and positive functioning over and above the original five elements. They found that four additional building blocks could explain additional variance in well-being and positive functioning and could thus be considered for inclusion into the PERMA framework (Donaldson and Donaldson 2021b; Donaldson et al. 2020). These four new building blocks included:

- 1) **Physical health.** Operationalized as a combination of high levels of biological, functional, and psychological health assets.
- 2) **Mindset.** Adopting a growth mindset characterized by an optimistic, future-oriented view of life, where challenges or setbacks are seen as opportunities to grow. This may also be a function of positive psychological capital, perseverance, and/or grit.
- 3) **Environment.** The quality of one's physical environment (which includes spatiotemporal elements, such as access to natural light, fresh air, physical safety, and a positive psychological climate), aligned to the preferences of the individual.
- 4) **Economic security.** Perceptions of financial security and stability are required to satisfy individual needs.

The expanded framework (Figure 1.1) is referred to as PERMA+4 (see Donaldson et al. 2022 for a detailed account of the development and validation of PERMA+4).

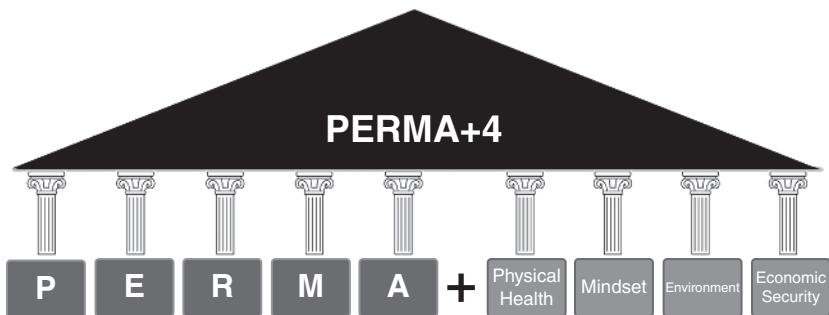


Figure 1.1 PERMA+4.

PERMA and PERMA+4 Frameworks

The evidence continues to mount for the value of the PERMA and PERMA+4 frameworks for guiding future positive psychology research and practice (Cabrera and Donaldson 2023; Donaldson et al. 2022). For example, more than a decade's worth of empirical research underpinning the relationships between the individual elements of PERMA and well-being (e.g., Kern et al. 2014; Kern et al. 2015; Seligman 2018), often measured by the PERMA-Profiler (Butler and Kern 2016), provided the foundational base from which to extend and build the more holistic framework PERMA+4.

The PERMA+4 framework has also been subjected to rigorous empirical investigation. Donaldson (2019) and Donaldson and Donaldson (2021b) developed and evaluated the Positive Functioning at Work (PFW) scale, which aimed to measure the nine building blocks of the PERMA+4 model. The results demonstrated the convergent, discriminant, criterion, predictive, and incremental forms of validity with other related measures (Satisfaction with Life: Diener et al. 1985; PsyCap: Luthans et al. 2007) and performance measures (Positive Work Role Performance: Griffin et al. 2007), as well as measurement invariance across job function (Donaldson and Donaldson 2021b).

PERMA+4, as measured by the PFW Scale, has also been found to predict essential work outcomes, such as turnover intentions, job-related affective well-being, plus individual, team, and organizational adaptivity, proactivity, and organizational proficiency (Donaldson and Donaldson 2021a,b), as well as academic success (Weiss et al. 2024). Furthermore, a series of multi-trait multi-method (MTMM) studies have been conducted to further validate PERMA+4 as an evidence-based framework, and clearly showed that PERMA+4 scores predict well-being and positive functioning beyond self-report and mono-method bias (see Donaldson and Donaldson 2021a; Donaldson et al. 2021).

Although more empirical work is ongoing to test the generalizability of the framework, the research on PERMA and PERMA+4 has been encouraging so far (Cabrera and Donaldson 2023). This evidence-informed framework shows great potential to help determine the needs of students, workers, leaders, and organizations, and to guide the design and evaluation of future positive psychology interventions and applications (Donaldson and Chen 2021).

It is important to keep in mind Mihaly's wise quote when applying PERMA+4 to your life:

A joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe.

(Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Preface)

The PERMA+4 building blocks of well-being and positive functioning provide an evidence-informed framework from which people can pick and choose which dimensions to strengthen and care for at any given time in their lives. Some of these building blocks are likely to be more valuable to some individuals than others at a particular point in time. The next wave of positive psychological science would greatly advance the field if it could sort out the interconnections and interactions between the PERMA+4 building blocks (see Cabrera 2024).

Flow 2.0, Optimal Experience, and Beyond

In the new PERMA+4 framework, which draws on and integrates many of the positive psychology research findings to date, engagement (including flow and optimal experience) has been shown to be a powerful building block of well-being and positive functioning. In the remaining chapters this book, we are going to focus in-depth on what we have learned about the engagement building block of well-being and positive functioning. Specifically, we are going to review what Mihaly has taught us about being fully engaged in our lives and living a good life with a healthy amount of flow and optimal experiences. In addition, we are going to explore ways the world has changed since the concept of flow was first developed and studied, and provide some of the latest research and insights about living in Flow 2.0 in our new high-paced, rapidly changing, and largely hybrid world.

We first review what Mihaly has taught us about the basics of flow and optimal experience. This chapter is intended to be an introduction for those who have not read his classic *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), or a refresher for those who read this work long ago and would like to apply it more in their lives now

and in the future. The third chapter explores how we flow together. Social, team, or collective flow has important implications for both our complex social and work lives in our changing societies. Next, we take a deep dive into how Mihaly influenced the world of work through positive psychology and flow. Many of his contributions teach us about what is good work and positive career development, as well as how we can function at our best and experience high levels of well-being and peak performance at work.

Finding flow in sports and leisure pursuits is another area that Mihaly thought and wrote a lot about. We share a range of examples of peak performance emerging when people find flow and get into what many athletes know as the ultimate optimal experience – the *zone*. Our new digital societies often require us to live in a world of multitasking and fragmented attention. In Chapter 6, we explore the future of flow in our hypercomplex and fast-paced digital societies. Finally, the last chapter shares what Mihaly's insights, those shared with us personally in our conversations and professionally in his writings and teaching, mean to us and our lives. We also explore how his insights are relevant for teaching others how to have meaningful optimal experiences, live a good life filled with well-being and positive functioning, and ultimately how to experience human flourishing at both the individual and societal levels in the years ahead.

The main purpose of this book is to honor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's legacy, and to make many of his ideas about flow and positive psychology more accessible and usable now and in the years ahead. The following chapters focus on both what we have learned about flow during the past two decades during the development of positive psychological science and how we can apply those findings and principles to help people lead a good life and flourish in the complex and dynamic environments we are likely to find ourselves in (Flow 2.0). We hope you become fully engaged in Flow 2.0 and enjoy many optimal experiences as you navigate and apply the concepts and advice in the chapters to your own life. And, please keep in mind along the way:

People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.

(Csikszentmihalyi 1990)

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