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A Fresh Look at the Science of Well-Being and Positive Functioning

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

—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—Flow, 1990



A Fresh New Look at Feeling and Doing Well in Life

I'm really sorry to admit that after more than 25 years of positive psychological science research (Donaldson et al., 2020), and many more years of study in other fields, we've come to an evaluative conclusion about what makes a good life—it depends. That is, it depends largely on how you live, not just what you read.

PERMA+4: Building Blocks for Human Flourishing, First Edition.

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We will be encouraging you to learn, explore, and care for many of the most effective ingredients that seem to comprise a life worth living. And we will help guide you toward how you can best combine these ingredients with your values so that you can be your best self more often during your precious time on Earth. We aspire to provide you with a range of useful ideas, scientific findings, and evidence-informed activities and tools that will inspire you to work on your individual creation, your engaging and meaningful life, on a regular basis.

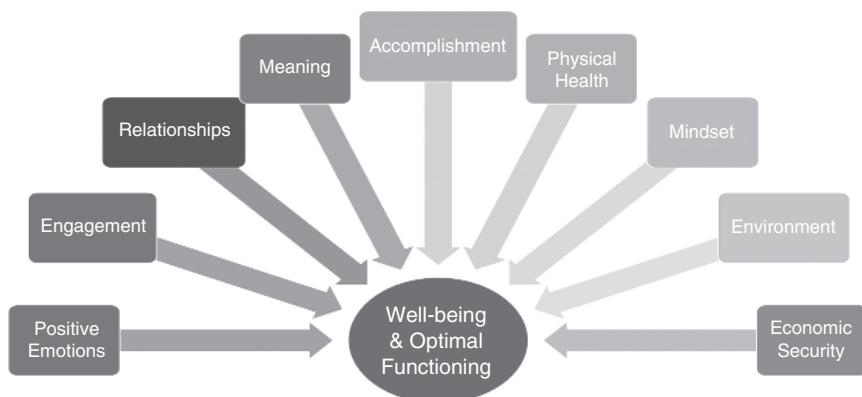
People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.
—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990)

Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi taught us that in order to be truly happy, we must learn to control the direction of our attention. Even in the face of a bad day (which we all have), suffering, trauma, tragedy, or death of a loved one, once we experience and navigate the normal grieving process, it is what we choose to place our attention on that makes us happy or sad.

It is better to look suffering straight in the eye, acknowledge and respect its presence, and then get busy as soon as possible focusing on things we choose to focus on.
—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997)

So what should we focus our attention on? More likes on our social media? Fast cars? Big homes? Money? Beer? Good wine? Sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll? How about ways to flourish more often in our lives through developing and caring for our PERMA+4 Building Blocks of Well-Being and Optimal Functioning?

PERMA+4 Building Blocks of Well-Being and Optimal Functioning



During the past 25 years, scientists inspired by the vision for a new science of positive psychology have been conducting rigorous peer-reviewed research to discover how to help people flourish more often throughout their lifespan (see Donaldson et al., 2020). These positive psychological scientists have determined with great confidence that there are at least nine building blocks of well-being that we can develop and care for that will make us feel and do well in our lives. The first five were introduced by Professor Martin Seligman in his 2011 book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, and the additional +4 were added based on extensive empirical research by Professor Stewart Donaldson and colleagues (Donaldson & Donaldson, 2020; Donaldson et al., 2021, 2022).

- 1) **Positive emotions:** Experiencing happiness, joy, love, gratitude, etc. in the here and now.
- 2) **Engagement:** Fully using your strengths, skills, and attention, and being highly absorbed or *experiencing flow* while engaged in the activities of your life.
- 3) **Relationships:** Having the ability to establish and maintain positive, mutually beneficial relationships with others, characterized by the 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.
- 6) **Physical health:** Having optimal physiological functioning, being able to carry out daily physical activities, and feeling in control and optimistic about your health.
- 7) **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 having positive psychological capital (hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience), perseverance, and/or grit.
- 8) **Environment:** The quality of one's physical environment (which includes spatiotemporal elements, such as access to natural light, fresh air, and physical safety), aligned to the preferences of the individual.
- 9) **Economic security:** Perceptions of financial security and stability required to satisfy individual needs.

We will discuss each of these PERMA+4 building blocks in much more detail in the chapters that follow. You will learn about the theory, research, and most importantly how to develop and care for each of these building blocks to promote your own well-being, as well as how to help other people in your life feel well and do well. But, before we go deeper into the PERMA+4 building blocks, let me first discuss why we think these applications of the science of positive psychology are so important for your life and for the lives of your colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

Human Flourishing

PERMA+4 has been found to be one of the strongest predictors we have ever discovered to indicate who is flourishing in life. The latest positive psychological science research identifies well-being and optimal functioning (two essential indicators of human flourishing) across a wide range of cultures and domains such as work, school, higher education, community service, and everyday life (see Cabrera & Donaldson, 2024).



Human flourishing refers to living a life in which individuals thrive, experience happiness, and achieve their fullest potential (Keyes, 2002). It goes beyond simply being free from illness or hardship; flourishing encompasses a deep sense of well-being, fulfillment, and purpose.

At its core, human flourishing means living in alignment with our values and capabilities, where physical, emotional, and mental health are all in balance. It involves positive emotions like joy, love, and gratitude, as well as meaningful relationships that provide connection and support. Flourishing individuals often feel engaged in their daily activities, are optimistic about the future, and pursue goals that align with their passions and skills.

Importantly, flourishing also involves resilience—the ability to bounce back from setbacks (Donaldson & Villalobos, 2025; Luthans et al., 2007). Life isn't free from challenges, but those who flourish find ways to grow through adversity, learn from their experiences, and find strength in difficult times.

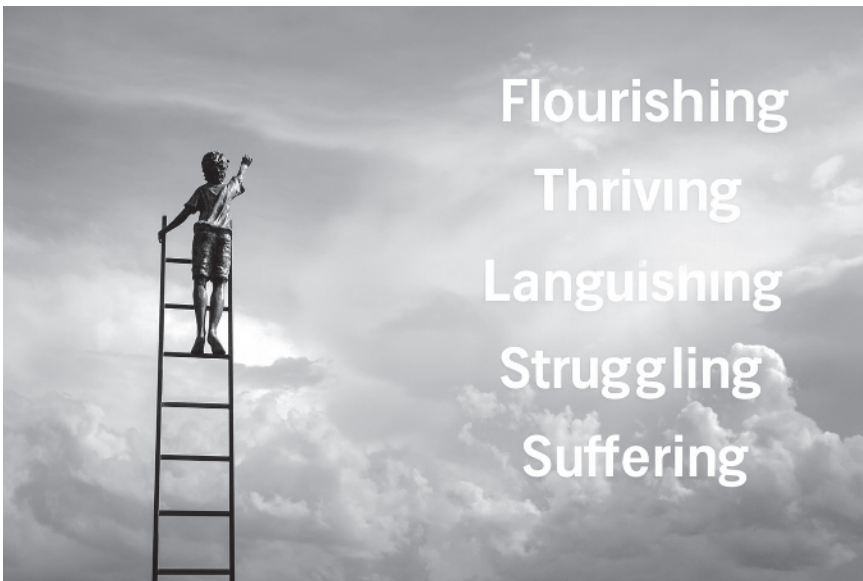
In addition to personal factors, flourishing is influenced by external conditions. Supportive environments, such as safe communities, opportunities for education

and meaningful work, and access to healthcare, play a crucial role. Flourishing often involves contributing to the well-being of others, creating a ripple effect of positivity and growth.

Psychologists, philosophers, and researchers have studied flourishing for centuries, linking it to concepts like Aristotle's idea of "eudaimonia" (living a virtuous and meaningful life). Modern science-based frameworks, such as PERMA+4, provide tools to understand and foster flourishing.

Ultimately, human flourishing is about living a rich and rewarding life—not perfect, but deeply satisfying and impactful. It is the aspiration to not just survive but thrive, to find joy and purpose in the every day, and to leave a positive mark on the world around us.

One approach for better understanding when you are flourishing is to compare it to other states of being along a flourishing–suffering continuum. For example, we can think of a flourishing ladder that anchors suffering at the bottom, and as you move up, you go through struggling, languishing, and thriving until you arrive at flourishing. We imagine most people experience all of these states at various times in their lives. But we also know that there are practices we can all develop and follow that improve our chances of flourishing more often.



Human Suffering



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Unfortunately, most people experience suffering throughout their lives. However, it has been found that people who are low on PERMA+4 and well-being tend to experience more suffering than those with higher levels. The good news is that effective PERMA+4 practices and interventions have the potential to significantly reduce the amount of suffering in people's lives. To better understand what it feels like to be in a flourishing versus suffering state, we will briefly describe human suffering.

Human suffering and human flourishing are two very different experiences, like being lost in a storm versus walking in sunshine. While flourishing is about living a life full of joy, purpose, and connection, suffering involves deep pain, struggle, and a sense of being stuck or overwhelmed.

When people flourish, they feel positive emotions like happiness, love, and gratitude. They have meaningful relationships, a sense of accomplishment, and a purpose that gives their life direction. In contrast, suffering often feels heavy and dark. It may include sadness, fear, or loneliness, and it can seem as though the good things in life are out of reach. Where flourishing feels energizing and uplifting, suffering can drain energy and make even simple tasks feel difficult.

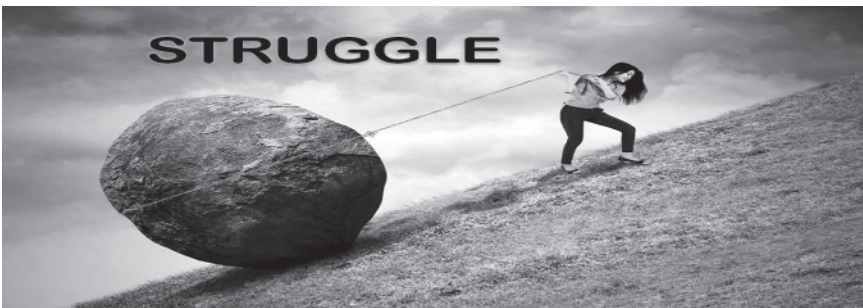
Flourishing also means being resilient—able to handle challenges and bounce back from setbacks. Suffering, on the other hand, can leave someone feeling overwhelmed, without the strength or tools to cope. Flourishing is about feeling connected to others, while suffering often brings isolation, making people feel alone in their struggles.

Despite these differences, suffering and flourishing are part of the same human journey. Everyone experiences suffering at times, whether from loss, illness, or

hardship. But these moments of pain can also lead to growth. They can teach us lessons, build empathy, or help us find new meaning in life.

Ultimately, suffering and flourishing highlight the ups and downs of life. While flourishing is about thriving, suffering reminds us of the importance of support, healing, and the possibility of hope. Even in times of suffering, the seeds of flourishing can be planted, showing that brighter days can follow the storm.

Human Struggling



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Human struggling and human suffering are closely related, but they are not the same. Both involve challenges and hardships, but struggling often contains the possibility of movement and hope, while suffering can feel heavier and more overwhelming.

Suffering is like being caught in a storm without shelter, where everything feels uncontrollable, and the pain is deep and consuming. It's marked by feelings of despair, helplessness, and sometimes a loss of purpose. In contrast, struggling is more like climbing a steep hill. It's hard, it's exhausting, and there may be moments of doubt, but there's often a sense that progress is possible, even if it's slow.

When people are suffering, they might feel stuck or defeated, as if the weight of their problems is too much to bear. Struggling, on the other hand, involves effort and perseverance. Someone who is struggling is still actively trying to cope, solve problems, or find their way forward, even if it's difficult.

Struggling can be a step toward growth, while suffering often feels like a state of being. For example, a person struggling with a tough job or a difficult relationship may feel stressed and challenged but still holds onto hope for improvement.

A person suffering, however, may feel completely drained or hopeless, as though no solution exists.

Importantly, struggling and suffering can overlap. Struggling can lead to suffering if challenges become too much to handle, but it can also lead to strength and resilience when the effort pays off. Struggling shows that a person is still fighting, still moving, and still holding on to the possibility of change.

In many ways, struggling represents the bridge between suffering and flourishing. It's the hard but meaningful work of turning pain into progress and building the resilience needed to thrive.

Human Languishing



Human languishing and human struggling are different ways people experience challenges in life, but they feel distinct (Keyes, 2024). Struggling is about actively facing difficulties, even if it's hard and exhausting, while languishing is a quieter, less visible state—a feeling of being stuck in neutral, neither fully engaged nor completely in despair.

When someone is struggling, they are trying to move forward despite obstacles. Struggling can be draining, but it's also a sign of effort and determination, with the hope that things might improve. Languishing, on the other hand, is like treading water: You're not drowning, but you're not swimming toward anything

meaningful either. It's a feeling of emptiness, stagnation, or lack of purpose, even if life isn't outwardly falling apart.

Struggling often comes with strong emotions—stress, frustration, or even anger—but these emotions reflect engagement with life. In contrast, languishing feels like a dull haze. People might feel disconnected, unmotivated, or indifferent, going through the motions of daily life without a sense of progress or excitement. Where struggling feels hard but active, languishing feels passive and stuck.

One key difference is that struggling holds the potential for growth. By pushing through tough times, people often gain strength, resilience, or a clearer sense of purpose. Languishing, however, can persist for long periods, quietly sapping joy and fulfillment without dramatic ups or downs. It's often described as the absence of both flourishing and suffering, a middle ground where nothing feels particularly bad—but nothing feels particularly good either.

Languishing can be harder to recognize because it doesn't come with the urgency of struggling. But it's just as important to address, as it can lead to deeper struggles if left unchecked. Finding ways to reconnect with meaning, purpose, or joy is key to breaking free from languishing.

Human Thriving



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Human thriving and human flourishing are closely related, both representing positive states of well-being. However, while flourishing is about achieving a deeply fulfilling, purposeful, and balanced life, thriving focuses more on growth, progress, and actively navigating life's challenges with strength and resilience.

Flourishing is the full bloom of well-being—a state where all aspects of life are in harmony. It includes feeling positive emotions, being deeply engaged in meaningful activities, having strong relationships, and living with a clear sense of purpose. Thriving, on the other hand, emphasizes the journey more than the destination. It's about being in a dynamic state of growth, where a person is actively improving, learning, or adapting, even if they haven't yet reached full flourishing.

Thriving often occurs in contexts of challenge or change. For instance, someone thriving in their career may still face obstacles but feel energized by the opportunities to learn and grow. Thriving doesn't require everything to be perfect; it's more about how people respond to situations—finding ways to adapt, overcome setbacks, and seize opportunities for progress. Flourishing, by comparison, feels more settled and enduring, reflecting a life that is balanced and deeply fulfilling.

In a way, thriving is a pathway to flourishing. When people are thriving, they're building the habits, skills, and resources that lead to a flourishing life. Thriving is the active process of striving toward goals, building resilience, and cultivating a positive outlook, even amid life's ups and downs.

While flourishing is the full expression of well-being, thriving highlights the journey of growth and momentum. Together, they remind us that life's most rewarding experiences come not just from achieving balance but from the effort and energy we put into becoming the best versions of ourselves.



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Measuring Human Flourishing

One of the great advances positive psychological scientists have made over the past couple of decades involves developing a wide range of reliable and valid ways to measure well-being (Ackerman et al., 2018). VanderWeele et al. (2025) have

developed one of the newest ways to measure human flourishing and are using it to study more than 200,000 people across more than 20 diverse countries during a five-year period. In Chapter 11, we are going to share a variety of measurement tools that can be used in future research, as well as to improve your own well-being and positive functioning on a daily basis.

One of the most widely used assessments of the “life satisfaction” component of well-being is known as the Cantril ladder. This measure consists of just two questions, is easy to understand, practical to implement, and as common as the 10-point pain scale.

The Cantril Ladder (Cantril, 1965) measures life satisfaction, which has been used as an indicator of well-being throughout the globe for more than two decades. For example, the annual World Happiness Report uses the Cantril Ladder to assess well-being across different countries every year (Helliwell et al., 2025). It’s a simple universal measure of well-being that you can try for yourself.

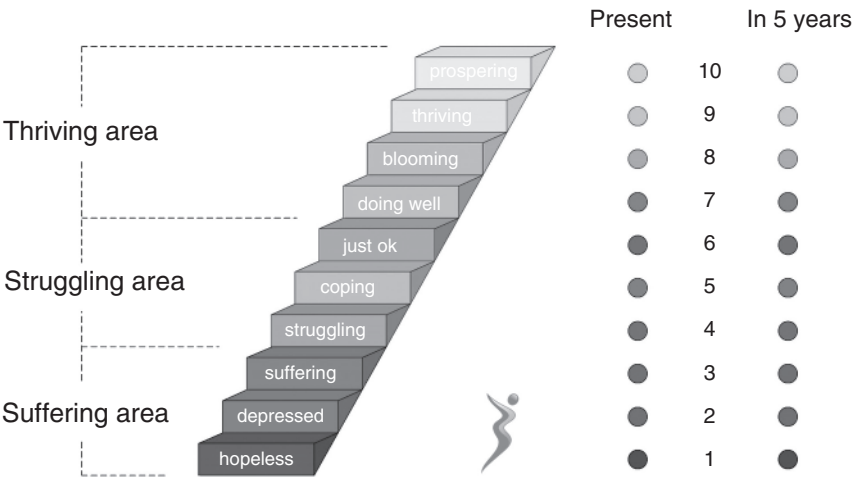
To quickly gauge your own well-being, take a moment now to take the Cantril ladder:

- 1) Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?
- 2) Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now?

Measuring Happiness: Cantril Ladder

10	Best possible life for you
9	
8	
7	
6	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	
0	Worst possible life for you

To calculate your score, take these two numbers and calculate the average. Your score will place you in one of three categories: suffering, struggling, or thriving (Gallup, 2009).



For a more detailed discussion on what these categories mean and how to interpret your score, please refer to Chapter 11. You can also see how your score compares to the average scores in each country on the Our World in Data website (<https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction>). This quick and easy tool (Roser et al., 2024) has been shown to be highly correlated with many of the more in-depth measures of well-being and with measures of performance at school, work, and across other domains of life (Gallup, 2009). This means that these two questions, when answered honestly, can give a rough estimate of how people are feeling at a particular point in time. Furthermore, this validated measure of well-being can be predicted by your PERMA+4, which means that the more each PERMA+4 building block is doing well, the higher your level of life satisfaction or well-being. This is why it is important to intentionally develop and manage your PERMA+4 building blocks on a regular basis.

Why Is Well-Being Important?

Well-being is crucial because it fosters resilience, enhances our ability to cope with stress, and improves relationships. It also boosts work, school productivity, and creativity, contributing to overall happiness. When individuals experience

well-being, they are more likely to engage in positive behaviors and pursue goals effectively. Societal well-being, in turn, promotes healthier communities and economies. Prioritizing well-being ensures that we lead fulfilling lives and contribute positively to the world around us.

For example, Kansky and Diener (2020) report that positive psychological science shows that people who feel well and are satisfied with their lives:

- 1) perform much better at work and in their careers;
- 2) perform much better at school and achieve higher levels of academic success;
- 3) earn more income and generate more wealth across their careers;
- 4) tend to have better physical health;
- 5) tend to have more fulfilling and satisfying social lives; and
- 6) are more resilient in life.

One of the most robust findings across many positive psychology research studies is that well-being is strongly linked to positive functioning at work (Donaldson et al., 2022; Lester et al., 2021; Moscoso & Salgado, 2021). This means that people who feel well are able to function optimally and perform better at work. The US Surgeon General makes this link even clearer in his recent National Report on “Workplace Mental Health & Well-being” (2022). Work and career are important aspects of our lives, and for many, most of our waking hours are spent on work or work-related activities. Workplaces powerfully influence our health, wealth, and well-being. Research shows that efforts to foster better workplace well-being can have great public health benefits as well as organizational productivity and effectiveness benefits (Office of the Surgeon General, 2022).

More recently, Walsh et al. (2023) reviewed and updated the available evidence on the topic and concluded that well-being causes positive functioning and success rather than the other way around. They based this claim on cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies that persuasively and robustly showed that relative to their less happy peers, happy people experience superior success at work, including more job satisfaction, better work performance, enhanced productivity, more work engagement, less burnout, better supervisor evaluations, higher income, more effective negotiations, and more creativity. They concluded that rather than pressuring employees to act happy—an approach that has previously led to both legal problems and backlash against “toxic positivity”—organizations should foster greater employee well-being by measuring it, building more supportive and thriving corporate cultures, and through positive activities in the workplace, which you will learn more about in this book.

How to Use This Book

I (Dr. Stewart Donaldson) have been conducting research, mentoring graduate students, and teaching about positive psychological science for more than two decades. I have published most of my work in rigorous peer-reviewed scientific journals. With the great help of my co-author and former PhD student (Dr. Vicki Cabrera), we have attempted to share the findings from 25 years of positive psychology research more widely and in a more engaging and accessible way in this book. That is, we wrote this book with the hope that it would help make the science of well-being and human flourishing more understandable, accessible, and easy to apply for anyone who is interested in learning how to use positive psychology to better their well-being and the well-being of others. Although people with a scientific background may also find our book useful, scientific training is not a requirement to understand this book. We wrote it to serve as a guide and helpful resource for everyday people, parents, students, and employees.

This book is not meant to be read from cover to cover, although you can choose to take that approach if you would like to. Instead, we want you to think of this book as more of a menu or guide with practical information and resources to help you learn more about and apply the PERMA+4 framework. Therefore, feel free to skip sections and read the chapters that feel most relevant to you and your goals. We also included a lot of science-based tips, activities, and tools that you can choose from, so we also hope this book will serve as a handy reference for you in the future. Chapters 2 through 10 introduce you to each PERMA+4 building block. Chapter 11 discusses the science behind the PERMA+4 framework and provides tools for measurement and assessment. Chapter 12 provides evidence-informed activities and practices that are designed to strengthen the PERMA+4 building blocks of human flourishing for yourself and others. And finally, if you would like to learn more and dig deeper into the topics introduced in this book, we also provide more resources for you in Chapter 13.

Conclusion

The scientific evidence is clear that feeling well is one of the most important components of doing well at work, school, and throughout our complex lives in 2025 and beyond (Donaldson & Dubin, 2025). A quarter century of positive psychology science has begun to solve the mystery of how we can feel well and do well on a daily basis, and throughout our professional and personal lives. Using the PERMA+4 building blocks to develop your own unique individual creation of a flourishing life, where you show up as your best-self more often than not, and to help those you work with, friends, family, and those you love dearly to do the

same is what we hope you will gain from this book. The chapters are intended to be educational, not prescriptive, and informed by the best evidence we have available at this time about ways to flourish. Please keep in mind some of the ideas and activities we discuss may work very well for you, and others may not. It is up to you to explore and try to discover what works best for you on a regular basis at each stage of your development.

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