

Wellbeing Series

Wellbeing language & definitions guide



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Introduction





The NSW Wellbeing Collaborative is an initiative of the NSW Mental Health Commission and was formally launched in June 2015. Members of the Wellbeing Collaborative believe in the value to the community of organisations working together to pursue wellbeing goals. Common, inclusive wellbeing language and definitions are needed to provide leadership and encourage the formal promotion of wellbeing across government and non-government sectors.

The overarching objective of the Wellbeing language and definitions guide is to provide a resource to enable cross agency and community level collaboration on wellbeing—considering wellbeing at the community, organisational and individual levels. It also provides guidance on the accepted literature on the science of wellbeing, or a starting point if there is no accepted literature. The guide, developed following stakeholder consultations with diverse representation from government and non-government sectors, translates more technical definitions and language into accessible language and references everyday descriptions.

The long-standing knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be the starting point in considering notions of wellbeing. Significant benefits can be gained for the Australian community from utilising the vast wisdom in Aboriginal cultural knowledge. This knowledge, however, needs to be handled appropriately and sensitively.

The concept of social and emotional wellbeing requires people to think holistically and collectively when describing what makes life good. The meaning of social and emotional wellbeing, or healing, to Aboriginal people is distinct.

The “Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural, and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing. This holistic concept does not merely refer to the ‘whole body’ but in fact is steeped in the harmonised inter-relations which constitute cultural wellbeing. These inter-relating factors can be categorised largely as spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these inter-relations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill-health will persist.”¹



The word wellbeing is used in many places and in many different ways. Some definitions emphasise feeling good, while others stress meaning, purpose or functioning well. The terms wellbeing, quality of life and happiness are often used interchangeably. People also tend to describe wellbeing broadly in terms of domains, descriptions or examples of when or why they experience wellbeing, such as when they are with family or feeling physically fit.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests three main groups into which the huge range of wellbeing definitions can be grouped:



General or global definitions

that do not detail the possible components of wellbeing.

Component definitions

that break down wellbeing into its constituent parts, dimensions or domains, or identify key characteristics considered essential to evaluate wellbeing.

Focused definitions

that either explicitly or implicitly refer to just one or a few components, of wellbeing.²



This Guide does not give a definitive answer to the meaning of terms, nor is it a strict rule book. Rather, it helps to better understand the array of language used, the debates that exist behind that language, and how the language may have different meanings and effects in different contexts.



Some considerations in using the guide





Context

The term “wellbeing” may be used within health services, in schools, the workplace, or at home, or it may refer to a whole city or community. For this reason, the Guide uses examples from several settings to enable a more nuanced and flexible understanding of the language and meanings of wellbeing. It is important to understand the established language of the setting you are working in and the partners you are collaborating with. You may need to come to an agreed definition to design and measure the aims of your project.

Domains

People often describe the different domains in which wellbeing may exist without defining wellbeing itself. In the section *Domains of wellbeing* we provide a list and definitions for established wellbeing domains. These are the adjectives that are placed before wellbeing, such as financial wellbeing, social wellbeing or physical wellbeing. While domains of wellbeing can be considered independently, in one’s day-to-day life they are experienced in combination with one impacting another.

Levels

Wellbeing may be conceptualised at multiple levels of analysis which has implications for definition, use, assessment and evaluation. For example, wellbeing at the level of the individual, couple, group, organisation, community, city, region, nation or world may all require consideration. For example, the word “strength” could refer to community resilience or personal strengths.

Negativity Bias

Negativity bias is an established, scientifically supported idea that as humans we sometimes pay more attention to the negative. When many people talk about wellbeing, they slip into talking about the absence of negative states. But wellbeing is more than and/or different to this. It is a positive outcome that is more than the absence of negative experiences and it may exist alongside some experiences of illness or disadvantage.

Dynamism

Wellbeing is not a static concept. It exists on a continuum where starting points differ and movement is part of a dynamic process. Wellbeing language needs to facilitate the richness of personal experience, the different ways of knowing and a dynamic context.



Established definitions of wellbeing





There are many established definitions of wellbeing drawn from a range of disciplines including economics, psychology and philosophy. An established definition is one that has been published previously in scientific, scholarly or policy documents or that has been developed by expert advisers for this Guide.

This section summarises some of the established wellbeing and related definitions, and provides links to common terms and metaphors used in wellbeing conversations.

This section also provides examples of frequently used domains (or aspects of life) associated with the term wellbeing. You can expect broader definitions to have more associated domains.





Wellbeing

Established definitions

Most definitions focus on the perspective of the individual:

“Wellbeing can be understood as how people feel and how they function both on a personal and social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.”³

How well someone’s life is going for them.⁴

The following are key constructs of research:

Wellbeing consists of the nurturing of one or more of five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (abbreviated as the acronym PERMA). These elements are the best approximation of what humans pursue for their own sake.⁵

Eudaimonic wellbeing “focuses on meaning and self-realisation and defines wellbeing in terms of the degree to which a person is fully-functioning”. *Hedonic wellbeing* “focuses on happiness and defines wellbeing in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance”.⁶

Other terms and metaphors

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| A balance of all the things that determine health (determinants) | Functioning well |
| Living well | Being the best you can be |
| Positive health | Quality of life |
| Wellness | Living life |
| Holistic | Feeling safe and secure |
| Positive outlook | Feeling understood |
| Balanced lifestyle | Feeling valued |
| Control over life | Acceptance |
| Feeling good | Productive |
| | Empowered |

Key associated wellbeing domains

- Psychological
- Mental
- Emotional
- Social
- Physical
- Cognitive
- Financial
- Spiritual
- Environmental



Social and emotional wellbeing

Established definitions

The “Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing. This holistic concept does not merely refer to the ‘whole body’ but in fact is steeped in the harmonised inter-relations which constitute cultural wellbeing. These inter-relating factors can be categorised largely as spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these inter-relations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill-health will persist.”⁷

“Connection to country” is a fundamental basis for Aboriginal concepts of physical, cultural and spiritual health. “Country” in this context is understood to mean more than simply living on or near land. It also has a spiritual and cultural element that means an individual could reside at a distance from their physical homeland but still be “connected to country”.

Other terms and metaphors

Healing
Connection to country

Key associated wellbeing domains

Covers many domains that must be considered in harmony.	Spiritual
Mental	Environmental
Physical	Ideological
Cultural	Political
	Social
	Economic



Mental health

Established definitions

“A state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”⁸

A syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life.⁹

Other terms and metaphors

- Mental illness prevention
- Mental health promotion

Key associated wellbeing domains

- Psychological
- Mental
- Emotional
- Cognitive



Resilience

Established definitions

“Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors.”¹⁰

Other terms and metaphors

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Bounce back | Resilience levels |
| Bounce forward | Strength |
| Recover/recovery | Energy management |
| Stress management | Hardy |
| Coping | Reserves |
| Ability to cope with life’s setbacks | Looking on the bright side of life |

Key associated wellbeing domains

- Physical
- Psychological
- Emotional
- Mental
- Social



Happiness or subjective wellbeing

Established definitions

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) “is most often interpreted to mean experiencing a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one’s life ... The concept of SWB, assessed in this way, has frequently been used interchangeably with ‘happiness’”.¹¹

Other terms and metaphors

- | | |
|--------------|------------------|
| Satisfaction | Positivity |
| Pleasure | Light in my life |
| Joy | Jumping for joy |
| Contentment | |

Key associated wellbeing domains

- Psychological
- Mental
- Emotional
- Social



Flourishing/ thriving

Established definitions

“High levels of wellbeing”.¹²

“To be *flourishing* in life, individuals must exhibit a high level ... of emotional wellbeing and high levels ... of positive functioning”.¹³

Other terms and metaphors

Flourishing
Growing
Productive
Participating
Engaged
Learning
Growing a plant
Blooming
Mushrooming
Expanding

Key associated wellbeing domains

Psychological
Mental
Emotional
Social
Physical
Cognitive
Financial
Spiritual
Environmental



Health

Established definitions

The World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.¹⁴

Other terms and metaphors

- | | |
|------------------|------------|
| Feeling good | Well |
| Functioning well | Good shape |
| Vital | Fit |
| Strong | All right |
| Active | |

Key associated wellbeing domains

- Physical
- Mental
- Emotional
- Social



Recovery

Established definitions

“Recovery is described as a deeply personal, unique process of changing one’s attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills, and/or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one’s life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness”.¹⁵

Other terms and metaphors

- Meaningful life
- Functioning
- Freedom
- Journey
- Reclaimed land

Key associated wellbeing domains

- Mental
- Emotional
- Social
- Spiritual



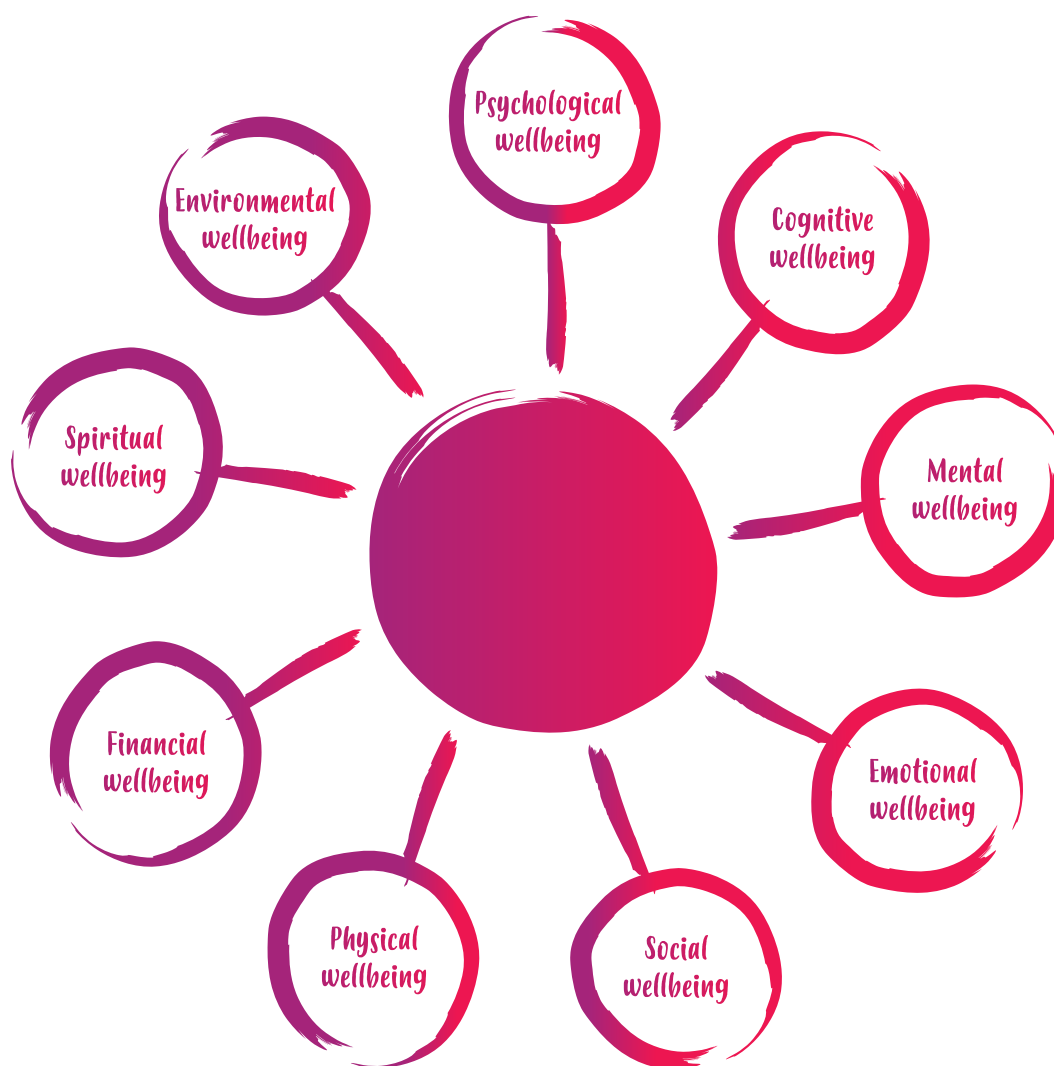
Domains of wellbeing





The term wellbeing will often be applied to certain domains, components or aspects of life. These are literally the adjective that is placed before wellbeing, for example financial wellbeing, social wellbeing, or physical wellbeing. In understanding the language used around wellbeing, it is important to clarify whether there is a specific domain being assumed and make it explicit.

This section includes a list of frequently used domains of wellbeing. In reality these may overlap. For greater understanding it is useful to consider each independently.





Psychological wellbeing

Established definitions

Authors have presented “a multidimensional approach to the measurement of PWB (psychological wellbeing) that taps six distinct aspects of human actualisation: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery and positive relatedness. These six constructs define PWB both theoretically and operationally and they specify what promotes emotional and physical health”.¹⁶

Associated terms and metaphors

Choice

Flourishing

Positive outlook

Capacity

Openness

Contributing

Control

Emotional intelligence

Satisfaction



Cognitive wellbeing

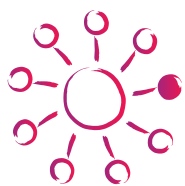
Established definitions

“Cognitive wellbeing is associated with achievement and success. It includes how information is processed and judgments are made. It is also informed by motivation and persistence to achieve. Cognitive wellbeing is important for attaining knowledge and experiencing positive learning.”¹⁷

Associated terms and metaphors

Computer processing

Cognitive functioning



Mental wellbeing

Established definitions

“Mental wellbeing is a dynamic state in which people are able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build positive and respectful relationships with others, and meaningfully contribute to the community”.¹⁸

Associated terms and metaphors

Strength	Calm mind
Positive outlook	Inner strength
Confidence	Balance
Growth mindset	Reflective
Ability to cope with life's setbacks	Peace of mind
Resilient	



Emotional wellbeing

Established definitions

Emotional wellbeing refers to the ratio of positive to negative affect (affect balance) or more generally to the construal of one's wellbeing in the emotional domain.

It is sometimes used in reference to emotional self-regulation—how well one regulates emotions and uses them to understand the world.

It is often related to emotional intelligence: self-awareness and self-management of emotions.

Associated terms and metaphors

Self-worth

Harmony, peace, calm

Self-compassion

Caring

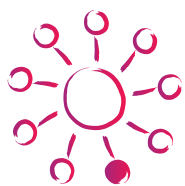
Emotional intelligence

Kindness

Safety

Tranquil lake

Strength



Social wellbeing

Established definitions

Social wellbeing has been described as having five components: “social integration, social contribution, social coherence, social actualisation and social acceptance. These five elements, taken together, indicate whether and to what degree individuals are overcoming social challenges and are functioning well in their social world (alongside neighbours, co-workers and fellow world citizens)”.¹⁹

Associated terms and metaphors

Personal and social capability

Inclusion

Collaboration

Feeling appreciated

Contributing

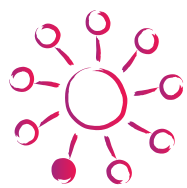
Meaningful relationships

Connections

Supportive community

Caring, kindness

Trust



Physical wellbeing

Established definitions

A sense of wellbeing related to the physical aspects of one self.

Associated terms and metaphors

Physically healthy

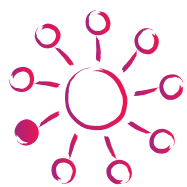
Self-care

Feeling well

Safety

Adequate sleep

Strong as an ox



Financial wellbeing

Established definitions

Economic wellbeing is often synonymous with material living conditions “which determine people’s consumption possibilities and their command over resources”.²⁰

Financial wellbeing may be thought of as having a sense of control over day-to-day finances, freedom of financial choice, being on track to meet goals and capacity to absorb short-term shocks.²¹

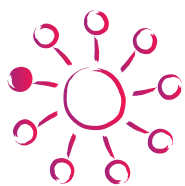
Associated terms and metaphors

Financial health

Having money in the bank

Savings

Making ends meet



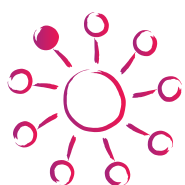
Spiritual wellbeing

Established definitions

Spiritual wellbeing is defined as an “ability to experience and integrate meaning and purpose in life through connectedness with self, others, art, music, literature, nature and/or a power greater than oneself”.²²

Associated terms and metaphors

Purpose	Connectedness	Strong sense of self
Meaning	Values	Light at the end of the tunnel
Direction	Relatedness	Moral compass
	Being on a path	



Environmental wellbeing

Established definitions

“Environmental wellbeing includes trying to live in harmony with the Earth by understanding the impact of your interaction with nature and your personal environment, and taking action to protect the world around you. Protecting yourself from environmental hazards and minimising the negative impact of your behaviour on the environment are also central elements”.²³

Associated terms and metaphors

Environmental sustainability	Positive physical environment	Being green
Social sustainability	Ecological health	



Population- level definitions





Some definitions of wellbeing explicitly refer to the wellbeing of groups of people. In these contexts wellbeing is often measured as an aggregate of individual subjective wellbeing ratings or may be measured via a collection of objective indicators such as unemployment, health status, educational attainment or economic output.



Community wellbeing

Established definitions

“Community wellbeing is the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential”.²⁴

Other terms and metaphors

Community resilience

Sense of community

Liveability

Connectedness

Sustainability



Workplace wellbeing

Established definitions

The wellbeing of a group of workers in a work setting as often measured by worker-rated indicators such as organisational culture, civility, respect and workload management, and objective measures such as absenteeism, turnover and injuries.

Other terms and metaphors

Stress management

Work health and safety

Psychological health and safety



Population wellbeing

Established definitions

Population wellbeing may be based on the concept of population health. “The health outcomes of a group of individuals, including the distribution of such outcomes within the group ... a hallmark of ... population health is significant attention to the multiple determinants of such health outcomes.”²⁵

Other terms and metaphors

Population health



Measurement and evaluation— what you need to consider





The array of wellbeing evaluation and measurement resources and tools grows as the science of wellbeing continues to develop. Definitions can be very important for evaluation. Many wellbeing concepts can be measured by existing measurement tools. Definitions and corresponding tools for measurement need to be tested among stakeholders for appropriateness. Therefore the starting point for the evaluation of wellbeing is to:

Select and define

the key wellbeing definitions and purpose for their use, including levels and domains.

Test

the definitions and language with a range of key stakeholders.

Understand

what you are already doing, using and measuring.

Review

what is working well for you, what is not, and where the key gaps are.



Tips for understanding wellbeing and associated language





- 1 Do not assume that there is a single agreed definition of wellbeing.

- 2 Explore the different definitions of wellbeing and be clear on your preferred definition.

- 3 When others are discussing wellbeing ask them how they define wellbeing.

- 4 When others are discussing wellbeing consider whether they are being influenced by a negativity bias.

- 5 Remember that wellbeing is multifaceted.

- 6 Keep in mind that wellbeing can be discussed at different levels, for example individual, group, organisational, community or societal. Clarify which level is being discussed before assuming the individual level.

- 7 Think about the context in which you will discuss wellbeing. Be clear about which words or phrases are likely to be more helpful.



*When might you
need to discuss
what language
you will use?*

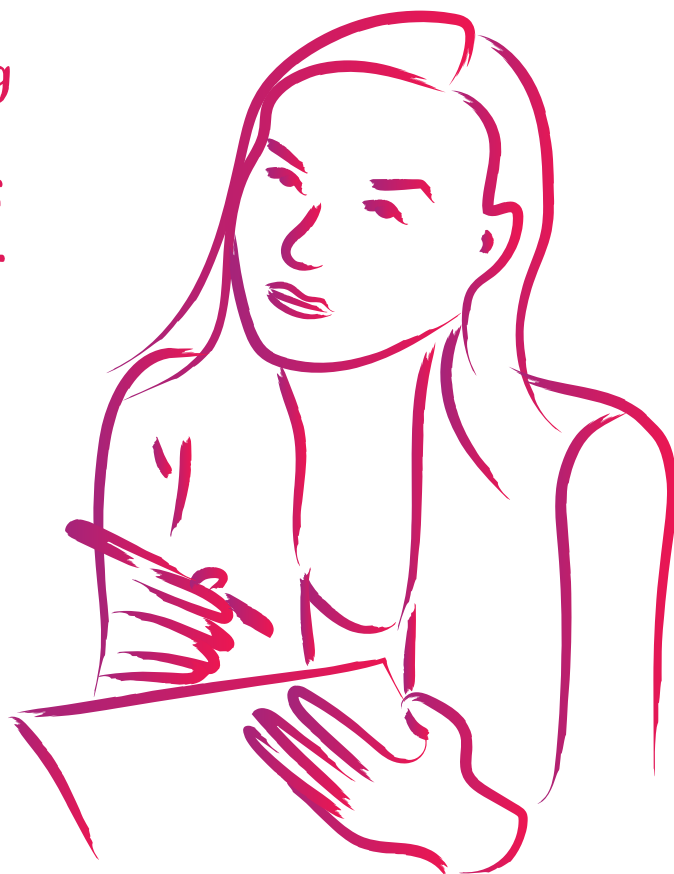


Scenario one

A key debate among sociologists and psychologists in determining wellbeing outcomes relates to the relative importance of structural factors of society (for example, economic inequality) versus individual choices to act (for example, the willpower to maintain exercise). Both are often important but it can be easier to focus on individual behaviour change.

In deciding how to make a difference to individuals and communities, wellbeing program designers need to think about at what level they can intervene and what would be most effective. Different organisations collaborating to improve wellbeing will need to agree on how they think wellbeing is created and how they can improve it. In doing this they will need to understand the meaning of one another's language and the assumptions it contains.

Different organisations collaborating to improve wellbeing will need to agree on how they think wellbeing is created and how they can improve it.





Scenario two

Resilience has become a widely used term in education, health, psychology and business. A key challenge underpinning the use of the term relates to whether resilience is a process over time that a person, team, organisation or community demonstrates or whether it is a stable trait of a person, team, organisation or community at any point in time. Are you demonstrating resilience over time in response to an adversity or are you resilient?

The idea that resilience is a stable trait has sometimes been referred to as resiliency. When using these words, program designers will need to understand how they are using the term resilience, and the implications of this.

Are you demonstrating resilience over time in response to an adversity or are you resilient?





Scenario three

Most academic literature on wellbeing will probably lead to reading about the difference between hedonic wellbeing (maximising pleasure over pain) and eudaimonic wellbeing (living one's full potential with virtue, purpose and meaning). This can be understood more simply as pleasure and purpose.

Understanding the language and debates about pleasure and purpose will enrich the understanding of wellbeing-related language. Assessing wellbeing will usually involve measuring how much pleasure is being experienced and how much meaning and purpose is being found.

Understanding the language and debates about pleasure and purpose will enrich the understanding of wellbeing-related language.





Scenario four

In some mental health contexts, wellness may be reduced to not having symptoms or having reduced or fewer severe symptoms. Likewise, in common usage the word recovery may mean cure or return to a previous level of functioning. However, in contemporary mental health contexts recovery has other meanings to do with living a full and contributing life with or without clinical symptoms of a mental illness.

This meaning is probably closer to recent understanding of the term wellbeing. To measure success for an individual as the absence of symptoms would be showing negativity bias. The person deserves more than this and can score well in many domains of wellbeing, even while living with ongoing symptoms.

In contemporary mental health contexts recovery has to do with living a full and contributing life with or without clinical symptoms of a mental illness.





Further reading





NSW Wellbeing Collaborative

The Wellbeing Collaborative is a group of government and community organisations that are working towards wellbeing. The Wellbeing Collaborative supports wellbeing initiatives, shares knowledge about wellbeing and promotes innovative and successful wellbeing activities.

www.wbcnsw.net

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet - Social and Emotional Wellbeing

This resource provides access to research and other knowledge that supports people working, studying or interested in addressing issues that influence the social and emotional wellbeing (including mental health) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/other-health-conditions/mental-health

New Economics Foundation

The New Economics Foundation is a British think tank developing research and strategies in areas including wellbeing. Topics include national indicators of success and the Five Ways to Wellbeing campaign.

www.neweconomics.org/search/?sft_issue=wellbeing

Office of National Statistics

The Office of National Statistics is the UK's national statistical institute. This website includes reports and data sets on wellbeing measures.

www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing

What Works Centre for Wellbeing

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing shares information and resources about the promotion of wellbeing and commissions research in areas including work and adult learning, community wellbeing, and culture and sport.

www.whatworkswellbeing.org



Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Better Life Initiative

Measuring wellbeing and progress is a key priority that the OECD is pursuing as part of the Better Life Initiative through various streams of research and ongoing work. Resources on this website include data on the wellbeing of Australians.

www.oecd.org/statistics/better-life-initiative.htm

Community Indicators Victoria

Community Indicators Victoria (GIV) provides a framework of community wellbeing measured by local level data. GIV is a collaborative project by the McCaughey VicHealth Centre and the University of Melbourne.

www.communityindicators.net.au

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy is a peer reviewed site that publishes accessible summaries by expert academics on prominent issues in philosophy. It includes explanations of the capability approach to social justice and Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia.

www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach

www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics



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