

What are the dimensions of positive mental health?

Reference: Iasiello, M., van Agteren, J. (2025). [Development of a Taxonomy of Positive Mental Health](#) (advance copy). Victorian Department of Health, Wellbeing Promotion Office.

Introduction

This digest summarizes a research project that tackled the question: what are the unique building blocks of positive mental health, also known as wellbeing? The research was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Health's Wellbeing Promotion Office and led by Dr Matthew Iasiello and Dr Joep van Agteren from [Be Well Co.](#) The study also involved partnership with (SAHMRI), The University of Adelaide and Flinders University.

A taxonomy was developed that included a) 4 wellbeing categories) 19 wellbeing dimensions c) a range of questions to measure the dimensions of wellbeing.

Aim and Purpose

The aim was to establish a clear and consistent framework (or taxonomy) for defining positive mental health, so that efforts to promote it across research, practice, and policy are cohesive, effective, and widely understood.

The purpose was twofold:

1) Promoting the importance of mental wellbeing

The taxonomy was created to provide focus to positive mental health. Historically, mental health efforts have focused on treating and managing illness and often overlooking the importance of promoting mental wellbeing. Over time, this imbalance has prompted growing recognition of the need to understand and foster positive mental health, drawing on ancient philosophies, modern science, and decades of research that highlight its role in helping individuals and communities not just avoid illness, but truly thrive.

2) Clarifying the core dimensions of mental wellbeing

Despite decades of research, the meaning of mental wellbeing remains unclear. There are hundreds of overlapping definitions and measurement tools which can create confusion and slow progress. To address this, the development of a taxonomy, a clear classification of the core dimensions of positive mental health was developed to offer a practical way to unify the field and strengthen research, policy, and practice.



Methods

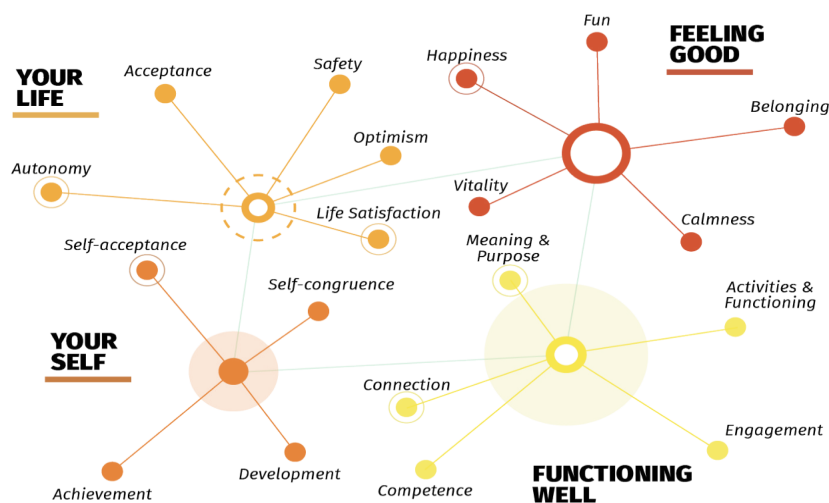
The methods involved:

- 1) A *comprehensive literature* review of existing wellbeing measures. Key elements and a list of distinct dimensions were identified, then each dimension was matched with targeted questions, drawn from established tools, to guide measurement
- 2) A *Delphi study*¹ with 122 experts from a range of academic fields: For this study, the preliminary dimensions identified were presented to the experts to assess their importance. Responses were compiled anonymously, summarized, and recirculated for refinement over three rounds of data collection, until agreement on the key dimensions for a taxonomy of positive mental health was reached (see more on this process on p. 18).
- 3) A *validation study* whereby 800 respondents from Australia and the United States were surveyed using the measurement questions. Statistical analyses of their responses confirmed that the dimensions were indeed distinct from one another.

Findings and Analysis

19 dimensions of positive mental health

The study identified 19 distinct dimensions of positive mental health. These are presented in the network diagram (below). This format was chosen over other (eg. a list) to reflect the reality that positive mental health is a dynamic and interconnected domain. For example, life satisfaction can go hand-in-hand with self-acceptance.



The links between elements in the diagram are meant to show possible relationships, not strict rules. And while the diagram focuses on key clusters, it doesn't cover everything.

¹ The Delphi method is a structured approach for gathering expert opinions to reach consensus on a specific topic.

Many other factors like physical health, spirituality, cultural background, and life circumstances also shape mental wellbeing, often beyond a person's control. Indeed, in relation to the dimensions, we need to consider:

1. People can experience wellbeing without being high in every area.
2. Different aspects of wellbeing matter more or less to different people.
3. Wellbeing looks different for everyone—for example, the need for belonging might come from family or community, and both are valid.
4. Cultural background and life experience shape how wellbeing is understood and expressed.

Categorizing, defining and measuring the dimensions of positive mental health

The researchers organised the 19 dimensions in the diagram above into four clusters:

- 1) YOUR LIFE: Refers to life evaluation or how individuals assess their lives.
- 2) FEELING GOOD: Refers to emotional wellbeing or the quality of one's feelings.
- 3) FUNCTIONING WELL: Refers to functional wellbeing or perceived effectiveness in daily functioning.
- 4) YOUR SELF: Refers to self-perception or one's view of oneself.

See the table in Annex A for the taxonomic approach to grouping the 19 dimensions into these 4 clusters, and also the definitions and measurements for each dimension.

Challenging the 'mental health spectrum'

The study proposes a "dual continua model of mental health".

This model challenges our current way of thinking of mental health as a continuum with wellbeing and illness on opposite ends. The dual continua model holds that rather than sitting somewhere between flourishing and unwell, people can *experience aspects of mental illness and of wellbeing at the same time*. For instance, a person can feel mentally well even if they have symptoms of mental illness. The dual continua model of mental health proposes that we group people into four quadrants:



Rather than thinking about moving people from the left to the right, we need to move people up the vertical axis, from experiencing low to high wellbeing, whether you have a mental health condition or not.

Beyond single-score wellbeing models

There are many well-established tools for measuring positive mental health, widely used in research and population studies. Most provide an overall wellbeing score, which can be useful for tracking general improvements. However, these tools are often brief and only cover a few dimensions of wellbeing so they may miss changes in other specific areas. If wellbeing is measured according to separate dimensions, we can capture things such as when a program might boost someone's sense of personal growth without shifting their overall wellbeing score.

Salutogenic over psychiatric

The taxonomy/map aligns more closely with 'salutogenic' models of health than the conventional scope of psychiatric disorders and distress. That is, it emphasises wellbeing promotion, and incorporates cross-cultural perspectives, such as Indigenous Social and Emotional Wellbeing frameworks.

As an aside, I looked up what a salutogenic models of health is and found that it focused on what supports human health and wellbeing rather than what causes disease. The term comes from *salus* (Latin for health) and *genesis* (Greek for origin) and was introduced as a term by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky.

A living model with benefits to all organisations

As it was developed to support governments, workplaces, educators, and communities, this taxonomy offers a practical and valuable foundation for emergency management organisations design programs, policies, and initiatives for better mental health. Because it provides a shared language and conceptual framework for mental wellbeing, it can enable more coherent and targeted action in our sector. It is designed to evolve and will continue to be refined through future research and complements broader efforts, such as the new Victorian Department of Health's 10-Year Wellbeing Strategy.

Annex A

The table below shows how the researchers grouped the 19 dimensions of positive mental health into clusters, along with clear definitions and details on how each one is measured.

Dimensions	Definition	Measured (questions asked in the context of the past two weeks and answered on a seven-point likert scale)
YOUR LIFE		
Self Acceptance	Experiencing different aspects of oneself (e.g. one's body, personality, thoughts and feelings) in a positive, tolerant, receptive or non-judgmental way. Experiencing positive self-worth.	- I was satisfied with the way my body looked - I felt that I had many positive qualities
Sense of safety	The feeling of relative security in one's daily life.	- I generally felt safe in the place I live - I was free from worries about my physical safety
Optimism	Having a positive outlook on life, and positive expectations about the future.	- I expected my future life will be ideal for me - I look forward to each new day



Life Satisfaction	The degree to which a person positively evaluates the overall quality of their life as a whole. In other words, how much the person likes the life they lead.	• In most ways my life was close to my ideal. • I was content with my life •
Autonomy	The perception that we have ownership over our behaviour and choices, and the ability to express oneself	• I was in control of my own life • I was confident to think or express my own ideas or opinions
YOUR SELF		
Achievement	Having done something successfully, using one's own efforts and skills.	• I was satisfied with the achievement of my personal goals • I felt my life has been productive
Self Congruence	The perception that our actions and behaviours are compatible with our interests, values, and beliefs.	• I felt my behaviour was congruent with my values • Most of my time was spent doing things that are meaningful
Acceptance	Experiencing different aspects of oneself in a positive, tolerant, receptive or non-judgmental way, experiencing positive self-worth.	• I tried to take life as it comes • I did not dwell on things that I could not do anything about
Development	Experiencing growth and improvement	• I sought opportunities to learn new things • I welcome changes in my life as my chance to grow
FEELING GOOD		
Happiness	States that are characterised by moderate-activation pleasant feelings, such as feeling happy, cheerful and pleased.	• I often felt happy • I was often good in a good mood, even without a specific reason
Fun	Experiencing light-hearted pleasure, enjoyment, or amusement, entertainment.	• I often smiled • I laughed easily
Vitality	States characterised by high activation pleasant feelings, such as feeling energetic and lively.	• I could continuously work for a long time without feeling tired • I had enough energy for everyday life
Belonging	The feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences.	• I felt close to other people in my community • I felt that I belong to a community
Calmness	States characterised by low activation pleasant feelings, like serenity and peacefulness.	• I felt a sense of harmony in my life • I felt calm
FUNCTIONING WELL		
Activities and Functioning	Overall satisfaction with our activities and leisure and our ability to undertake these tasks.	• I was satisfied with my ability to manage my hobbies or recreational activities • I could rely on myself to be ready for what I needed to do each day
Engagement	Having an absorbing experience in which the individual is completely focused on	• I was absorbed in what I was doing



	the task at hand or experiencing a state of mindful awareness.	I had the ability to enjoy the moment
Competence	Feeling and perceiving oneself as effective and able to overcome challenges and stressors and achieving desired outcomes.	- I knew how to reach my goals - I met the goals that I set for myself
Connection	Involves the feeling of mutual caring, love, and closeness to friends, family and loved ones.	- I got along well with others - My close relationships were satisfying
Meaning and Purpose	Having clear goals, a sense of direction, and a larger aim in life and/or the feeling that what we do is worthwhile, rewarding and valuable.	- My life had a clear sense of purpose - I believed i knew what I was meant to do in life