

Salutogenesis: Central to Wellbeing

Aaron Antonovsky referred to **Salutogenesis**, the origin of health, in the late 1970s. He described it as a movement toward wellness in understanding and managing our lives with greater resources, developing stronger resistance and creating a solid sense of coherence. It is the experiences that people have, which help shape the resources and meaning brought to their lives. A Salutogenic life deviated from a pathogenic perspective, and was described as one that was health promoting, meaningful to the individual and added years to life. **Neural Resilience** is the next developmental stage. It is the alignment of neuroscience to the application of psychology. It is about proactive mental health, building reliable strategies to better respond to challenges, and the promotion of optimal lives via insights in brain research and brain function.

Wellbeing is the focus of psychological science which investigates human potential, positive health, emotional competency and the ability to thrive and flourish. The main difference between the clinical and health methodology is that the latter applies a strengths-based approach to identifying and improving wellbeing rather than a deficit-based approach to solely treat illness. It does not ignore the symptoms or afflictions, but simply does not use the absence of deficits to describe the presence of an optimal quality of life. This framework magnifies the influence of **relational resilience** and the critical importance of character and connectedness to build **strong social-emotional capital**. The investigation of Resilience has attracted biological, psychological and neurological interest with pioneering research into fields such as affective neurobiology, neurogenesis and plasticity. The theory describes tools and resources that enable people to make better choices about their wellbeing. It is an organic approach to living the best life possible.

In the last decade, Salutogenesis was reinvented and then extended out into the study of positive psychology, which, as a label sits uncomfortably with me. For a paradigm that has invited some of the greatest insights into positive human functioning, the title falls short of the characteristics it espouses. This is the title, however, coined by Seligman, and who are we to argue with the big blue genie? The media has latched onto a narrow view that positive psychology grants all your happiness wishes. It is consistently reported that time and valuable taxpayers' money is being "wasted" on trying to make people "happy", or "happier". Newspapers and their editors fused the words "happy" and "psychology", and went on a rampage to argue social engineering and people's right to be sad. Some of this is true, most of it wasn't. We fear what we don't know.



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However, some journalists became bored with the defensive reporting and, like oppositional adolescents, moved on to take in what science was actually finding. Even Richard Eckersley, positive psychology's best critic has stated, "Once skeptical, I now agree we need these school-based programs...when social conditions are hostile to wellbeing, as they are today, individuals and schools on their behalf, need to take more responsibility for looking after it." Positive psychology is not a program, it is a philosophy. However, we need school programs, and as Norrish and Vella-Broderick [2009] point out, "a priority is to develop, test, and refine positive psychology interventions so that they cater specifically for adolescents." We are onto it. Maturity is a wonderful thing; it's taken almost ten years for Australia to warm to the idea that wellbeing, not happiness, is fundamental to human health. Well, that's not true either, is it? Some people, perhaps most people, already knew that, explicitly or subconsciously. Research is providing security. Welcome neuroscience.

The science of wellbeing has given us language to label what we know about wellness, and a framework with which to use this language. This allows people to approach life with confidence, "ah, Flourish, is that what you call it!" is a common phrase to the newly converted. In the same way that beyondblue raised a nation's awareness about depression, resilience has opened our perceptions to optimism, connectedness and a strengths-based mindset that gives us permission to engage deeply in both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Through this philosophy, CBT [cognitive behavioural theory] has been given a face lift. Now moved from being used solely as a therapeutic intervention, it is currently being taught as a primary prevention skill: Put it in the drinking water, and as with fluoride, you prevent the decay. The trick is to encourage tap and not bottled water.

One of our greatest learnings about optimal emotional health in traditional psychology is strongly linked to our habits of internal language - our internal dialogue: the ability to modify unhelpful to more helpful and rational thinking. **Emotional fitness has highlighted that when we experience unpleasant emotions optimistically we move into resilience, but if we experience unpleasant emotions pessimistically we are at risk of depression.** In the long term. Not only are unpleasant emotions a biological human condition, they are necessary to build protective defences - that all depends on the lens you have chosen to view your situation. Are you donning the grumpy glasses or the Dame Edna specials? Resilience says the choice is yours. Not only can you choose it, but you can learn it. At any age. I'm partial to the Choose Life t-shirt.



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In the book, Love 2.0, Barbara Fredrickson [2013], invites us to "upgrade". If you are a convert from her former publication Positivity in 2005, then, like me, you will be shooting your arm up in the air like an over-eager student, wiggling your fingers, saying, "Pick me! Pick me!" Her Broaden and Build theory has become famous for its science which clearly demonstrates neurochemical benefits to the brain and body. Under the influence of pleasant emotion, Fredrickson showed broader and deeper cognitive processes that increases cognitive capacity. A positive outlook makes you smarter because you can attend to, synthesise, recall, problem solve, and spark creativity at higher capacity than if you were to operate negatively. It adds longevity to your life. The medical scientists have supported these findings, which include increases in clients' immune systems, decreases in blood pressure, increases in organ health and decreases in cortisol levels under acute mental stress. This is mindfulness training at its best: Focus on the present, with intent, on purpose. Take a 5 minute dose three times a day.

If you upgrade to Love 2.0, or simply choose to read it, there is an explicit dedication and scientific devotion to unravelling the ancestral emotion of love.

This time Fredrickson drills down and, I believe, has found diamonds. She calls it our "supreme emotion". Her research has found that, "...love, and it's absence, fundamentally alters the biochemistry...[it] can alter the very ways your DNA gets expressed within your cells. The love you do or do not experience today may quite literally change key aspects of your cellular architecture...that affect your physical health, your vitality, and your overall wellbeing".

In summary, your ability to thrive will depend on your supply of love. Buy it in hard copy and, as an ultimate gift of gratitude, get one for a friend. This is one of the golden tools of wellbeing. If you activate and express, in real time, genuine appreciation, managed with loving kindness and do not expect anything in return, you are giving someone a gift of gratitude. This is a formal acknowledgement of meaningful connectedness. John Hattie, Professor of Education and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, puts it into an Aussie perspective, he calls it "giving back". This is becoming comfortable.



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Salutogenesis for me is personal; it has to be if I am to be authentic in my training both clinically and organisationally. My parents are migrant Italians who arrived here between 1952 and 1956; father first to hunt the wild rabbits, and mother later to cook them. They facilitated community. Their horticultural and agricultural skills were applied with great prudence and we ate with heart. My interest in psychology was a no-brainer - I have known it all my life. My father was robust, militant and unforgiving. My mother was socially driven and blindly optimistic. I just ended up being over-empathic to compensate for the conflict. There were no genies in my life to grant me any wishes. The work ethic was a fundamental value but so too was spirituality. Family was paramount. Complaining didn't work, nor did avoidance - you dealt with it even when it felt bad. Then we ate. This is the methodology with which I approach my strengths-based practice with both my clinical clients and organisations. It must be personal, it must be intimately real and it must make sense to people before they see the value in introducing to others.

Under this pandemic, we are an unforgiving audience and so we should be. Community energy has been consumed in being protective and keeping people safe. We are tired and vexed. This **is** the road less travelled and we want to get back on track. We are seeking to be replenished and need this to happen with the least amount of effort. The ongoing change without the prospect of an endpoint is daunting and consuming. People yearn for certainty, for security and for the freedom to create predictable patterns of daily life.

Homes have become incredibly busy spaces. Adults, parents and young people are placed under tremendous pressure to be highly skilled to manage these blended spaces, to operate fluidly and with seamless self-regulation. Schools have been asked to develop learning plans and deliver online curriculum that responds to the shifting demands of a delivery platform, which at its best, fails to capture the true capability and potential of students and, at its worst, diminishes the learning that organic curiosity offers in face to face interactions. Teachers must adhere to anti-bullying policies, teach programs that promote prosocial development, deal with challenging interactions, disengaged students, overfilled curriculum, and manage an ever-growing divide between IT and the classic textbook. At the same time there is pressure to cater for those who are ahead and behind the pack, and tolerate frequent late-night meeting and bad coffee.



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These are the pandemic conditions under which our teachers are expected to deliver learning to Australia's students and inspire the leaders of tomorrow. Inspiration is not found in the depth of despair, nor in places where deficits are magnified and resolution seems unachievable. Applying the lens of Salutogenesis suggests that we have much to learn from a growing number of incredibly talented, committed and passionate educators, and schools that have a vested interest in student connectedness, student voice and learning relationships. These professionals lead with heart and engage with purpose. These are the teachers who seem to know resilience, and their students think so too.

Wellbeing empowers. Since 2008 I have had the absolute privilege of training hundreds of people, organisations and school communities including parent groups. The response is palpable: Neural Resilience is finally describing the processes of everyday experiences and interactions, and giving people insight into human concepts that help explain the micro moments of life. This enables people to take better control of habits that have gone unattended, and offers simple suggestions that embrace the human spirit.

Christopher Peterson, the foundational researcher of Character Strengths, had a famous quote: "Other People Matter". And they do. An important feature of exploring the human assets of Salutogenesis is through character strengths - the basic elements of positive and functional behaviour. In their active state, character strengths form a foundation for productive coping and link identity to purpose. In understanding and working with our strengths, we have a greater sense of our "present" selves, our "productive" selves and our "potential" selves. In their active state, strengths have the ability to perform and to transform us toward wellbeing. Buy a journal and describe how you have activated a strength every day. Writing is key; keeping it in your head is not. Assign yourself reflection conversations with a trusted peer and check your progress. This becomes **relational resilience** - someone else also benefits from your positive risk-taking stories.



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This work is pivotal in organisations. It is being authentically led by managers and executives, who immerse their teams within a Salutogenesis approach in providing opportunity for wellbeing to be constructed through the explicit teaching of the domains of resilience; the active building blocks. This is a paradigm shift toward teaching proactive mental health and bringing connecting conversations in line with the development of neural resilience. Salutogenesis is the development of human assets and mental fitness is the explicit teaching, at any age, at any time, from one individual to another. It is the invitation to connect with hope, empathy and optimism. It is the cultivation of civil society and positive human relationships.

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