

Well-being

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Well-being

One way of considering well-being is through the Well-being framework (figure 1). This is not based on any specific theory or research as such but is a useful way of thinking about and assessing well-being.

Ideally a person should be developing in most of the areas to ensure their well-being; in reality very few people, if any, develop in equal measure in all areas and some develop in one area to compensate for a deficiency in another.

Physical well-being

Initially our physical well-being depends on the nourishment we receive from our mothers both in the womb and in the immediate aftermath of our birth. Thereafter environmental factors like the amount and quality of the food and exercise we get, the quality of the water we drink and the air we breathe begin to play a part in our physical development.

However, if we have a physical disability, that can affect our ability to make social, emotional and sexual relationships and thus affect the quality of our well-being in other areas.

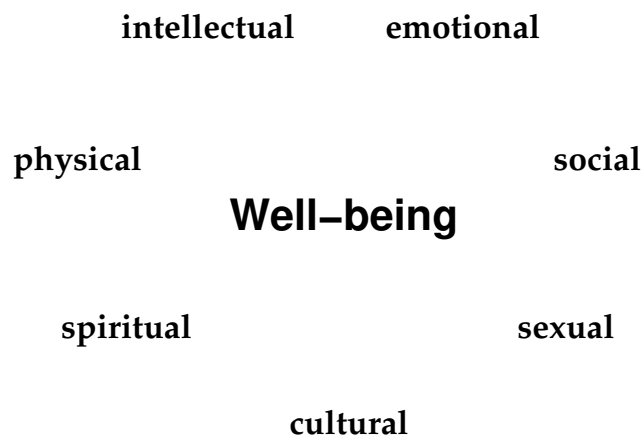


Figure 1: Well-being framework

Emotional well-being

Our emotional well-being depends on the quality of the close relationships we have, first of all with our carers and then with others in our lives. Those who do not have a satisfying relationship with their initial carers often have difficulties with emotional relationships throughout the rest of their lives (Ladd, 2005). The good news is that these can be overcome if they have a satisfying close relationship later in their lives; the bad news is that those who are prepared to enter into such a relationship are often subject to extreme testing before the person is willing to believe that this relationship is for real.

Social well-being

Our social well-being depends on the number of social relationships into which we can enter. This depends at first on the number of social relationships to which our initial carers introduce us. If we have enough experience of social relationships we begin to learn social skills which enable us to make more social relationships when we start school. The more social relationships we make, the more likely we are to become popular and thus gain more social relationships.

As with emotional relationships, those who do not have the experience of positive social relationships can have difficulties with social relationships throughout the rest of their lives. And, as with emotional relationships, these difficulties can be mitigated through a positive experience of social relationships in a group but sometimes at the expense of extreme testing of the group to ensure that they are going to be reliable friends.

Intellectual well-being

Our intellectual well-being depends on the intellectual stimulation which we have; our intellectual capacity increases rapidly during childhood and youth before the rate of increase slows down in adulthood. However, at all ages, the quality and variety of the intellectual stimulation to which we are exposed influences our intellectual growth and those who continue to be intellectually stimulated into their eighties continue to grow intellectually (so far no-one has tested people in their nineties but we have no reason to think that this is not true for them too) (Schaie and Willis, 2001).

People with learning disabilities follow the same pattern albeit at a slower pace which is why older people with learning disabilities can surprise people because, if they continue to receive intellectual stimulation, they can learn to do things in their fifties which they could not do, say, in their twenties.

Cultural well-being

Our cultural well-being is linked to our sense of identity; part of that sense of identity comes from our family and community but it also comes from the rituals, fairy tales and ceremonies in which we take part. Cultural identity is influenced by a number of factors (Hofstede, 1980) and can be linked with ethnicity, language, behaviour and so on; when it is positive, it leads to respect, solidarity and support for common values; when it is negative, it leads to disrespect, aggression and divisiveness.

Some people, such as the Québécois who speak French and English, are bi-cultural and can move comfortably between French and English culture. Studies show that positive bi-

culturalism has benefits for children. Others find themselves torn between two cultures as each vies for their adherence and this can have an adverse effect on their cultural identity.

Spiritual well-being

Human beings have a part of their brains which appears to be devoted to spirituality; from an evolutionary perspective this suggests that a spiritual life has benefits for human beings. From a Christian perspective, this is only to be expected if God created us!

Studies show that having a settled belief system (not necessarily Christianity) is associated with fewer illnesses and a longer life (Williams and Sternthal, 2007).

However, one problem in thinking about the development of spiritual well-being over our lifetimes is that the New Testament says almost nothing about it. The disciples were convinced that the return of Jesus was imminent and so did not discuss in any detail how our spiritual life might develop over 60 or 70 years.

Sexual well-being

Of the seven areas, this is the one which is not essential for our well-being. People have lived satisfying and self-fulfilling lives for centuries without having any sexual experiences. There was a pernicious view in the 1960s that people were entitled to satisfaction of their sexual needs which led to a lot of abuse but we are probably better guided in this area by Paul's observation that it is better to satisfy our sexual needs in marriage (1 Cor 7:9), or according to modern research a stable relationship whatever legal form that might take, than not to satisfy them.

That said, recent scientific research has shown that around one in ten of us are born with a preference for same sex relationships; the question for Christians is whether those born with a preference for same sex relationships are better satisfying their sexual needs in a stable same sex relationship than not at all. Whatever the case, if they do have a sexual life, it is important to understand its development in the context of the other relationships in their lives, all of which contribute to their well-being.

Relationships

All seven areas normally involve relationships with others; few people eat and exercise in total isolation; indeed, eating is often a social activity. Emotional, intellectual, cultural, spiritual and sexual development (if any) all rely on relationships with other people. So it is worth looking at the main types of social and emotional relationships we have with others:

1. *attachment* through which we develop an emotional system,
2. *affiliation* through which we develop shared interests, mutuality, affection, respect and loyalty,
3. *nurturance* through which we invest in the well-being of another,
4. *collaboration* through which we share a commitment to the achievement of a goal with a colleague, teammate or partner which brings mutual respect and a sense of personal worth,

5. *persisting alliance* through which we identify connections which are independent of aims and goals and develop feelings of obligation to help and of rights to help from others and
6. *help obtaining* through which we receive guidance (Weiss, 1986).

Being able to nurture or collaborate with others affirms our value; being affiliated to or helped by others enables us to achieve things we would otherwise be unable to achieve. A relationship may involve more than one of these types of interaction at the same or at different times but no relationship includes all these types. So people need relationships with several different people in order to experience all types of interaction.

This happens in both directions; we need several different people with whom to experience all these types of relationships. We may even need different people at different times to experience the same types of relationships. At the same time, the people with whom we have relationships will need to have relationships with other people in order to experience all the types of relationship.

Relationships as the heart of well-being

At the centre of our Christian faith are two relationships: with God and with our neighbour. We may have one relationship with God which develops over a lifetime of Christian service but we need to have a great many relationships, and different types of relationships, with our neighbours both because it benefits us in giving us all the types of relationships we need in order to develop and because it benefits our neighbours in giving them the types of relationships which they need. And, like our relationship with God, those relationships will develop over our lifetimes.

Relationships as the heart of creation

We should not be surprised that human relationships are at the heart of human well-being because relationships are at the heart of creation. Margulis and Sagan (1995) argue that, as over 98% of known species are extinct, we need to understand why the ones that have survived have survived. Their argument is that, from the bacteria which are in our DNA to those which allow us to see colour to the ‘friendly bacteria’ which help us to digest vitamins, the answer is cooperative relationships. We, like everything else in creation, survive because we have relationships of cooperation with other organisms.

Just as our well-being depends on our relationships, so the well-being of the planet and ultimately of the universe depends on the relationships which all the different parts of creation have with each other. If you read the whole of Leviticus 19, you will see that ‘You will love your neighbour in the same way as yourselves’ is not a command but a comment on a whole series of commands about relationships with other people. As Jesus says, on this comment and the command to love God hang all the law and the prophets (Mt 22:40), that is, all the important parts of the Old Testament.

Promoting our well-being

All the aspects of our well-being are interconnected — an improvement in one area will lead to a improvement in others while a decline in one area will lead to a decline in others. If we receive oxygen, food, water, shelter, love and approval, our well-being will improve. While it

is may appear obvious that we need oxygen and food, love and approval are just as important. If we do not receive love, we will not take care of ourselves; if we do not receive approval, we will not value ourselves. We will also lack the resources to sustain our our relationships with others and therefore what we receive from our relationships will decline as will our well-being.

And just as we do ourselves no good by eating one type of food, we do ourselves no good by having just one type of relationship. We need to have a wide variety of food to nourish us and we need to have a wide variety of relationships to support our well-being. So relying on one person in a relationship to provide all our relationship needs is a recipe for emotional disaster in the same way as relying on one food for all our nourishment is a recipe for physical disaster.

Similarly, there has been much talk in recent decades about the need for work-life, or life-work, balance and Hofstede (1998) has researched how cultures vary from being work-focused to being family-focused with Japan the most work-focused and Sweden the most family-focused culture and the UK towards the work-focused end of the spectrum.

Jesus' advice to love our neighbour in the same way as ourselves gets to the core of our physical well-being. If we do not love ourselves well enough to care for our physical well-being, we will never be fit enough to care for our neighbour. For example, you would not want to be rescued by a lifeboatman or woman who did not take the trouble to familiarise themselves with their equipment, go on training exercises and learn to work as a colleague in a team — in other words, love themselves enough to make sure that they are going to return from the rescue mission as well as you. Paul says that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), the vessel through which the Holy Spirit reaches out to those we meet and to whom we express our love.

Our emotional and social well-being depends on the availability of positive relationships; if no-one loves us enough to give us the time of day, our well-being will decline and we will go into a downward spiral. This is unlikely to happen to those who have been given a positive start in life through positive close relationships with their carers and with their peer groups but it is very likely to happen to those who have not experienced positive close relationships with their carers and with their peer groups. Similarly those who are brought up in an intellectually stimulating environment are likely to experience a continuing increase in their intellectual capacity. More importantly, a study of childhood development found that children whose circumstances changed for the better experienced positive intellectual development while those whose changed for the worse fell behind (Fogelman, 1976).

Because we can develop in all areas throughout our lives, we also find that what we need and what we gain from relationships changes and we both make new relationships and abandon earlier ones as the types of relationships they offer better meet or fail to meet our needs. Parents notice this most during their children's adolescence when what the child wants in a relationship with a parent changes but friends also change as individuals' relationship needs change and couples can find that they get out of step with each other and turn to others for the types of relationships they might have expected to obtain from each other. Some relationships fall apart because people have unrealistic expectations of the types of relationships the other can offer and find it difficult to accept the other as a person in their own right rather than as an inexhaustible source of relationships for themselves.

More recently two studies into physical (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and mental (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018) well-being have shown that more equal societies benefit everyone in that society even the most wealthy. Wealthy people in unequal societies have more physical and mental ill-health than wealthy people in more equal societies, even though they have the money to buy the best health care available. The UK has become a less equal society over the past

50 years; so we should not be surprised that the overall well-being of UK society has declined. However, we can still improve the well-being of local communities by promoting greater equality and positive social relationships within our community — or loving our neighbour in the same way as ourselves.

Some issues linked to our well-being

Children are born selfish in the sense that they are unaware of anyone else in the world and so see themselves as the centre of the universe. Only gradually do they become aware of other people and their dependence on other people; however, if they end up in entirely dependent relationships, they will never develop as people. They have to move from dependence to inter-dependence, not independence as some people think.

When the serpent says to Eve, ‘you will be like gods,’ (Gn 3:5), he is describing the one sin which encompasses all others, the idea that we can be the centre of the universe. This is the ‘original sin’ with which all children are born and which they need to renounce if they are to succeed as human beings by making constructive relationships with others in which they are no longer at the centre of the universe.

This process is clearer for girls who move through stages of caring for themselves, caring for others and, hopefully, reaching the stage of caring for themselves and others (Gilligan, 1993). However, women are often encouraged and praised for remaining at the second stage, caring for others, rather than moving to the final stage of caring for themselves and others — or loving themselves in the same way as their neighbour. Some boys take a similar route while others take a slightly different route to a similar understanding of the need to care for themselves and others but men who do not reach that understanding may never completely throw off the idea that they are the centre of the universe or get stuck in the view that they will always be a subordinate, often ending up as bullies to compensate for their own feelings of inadequacy.

At the heart of these developments is access to secure relationships; if, for whatever reason, children do not have access to secure loving relationships whether with their parents or with other adults in their lives, they will fail to develop and they will remain ‘behind’ in their development compared with children who have experienced a secure loving relationship (Ladd, 2005).

Children develop a sense of gender identity over time; however, boys who do not develop a secure male identity are more likely to express that identity in exaggerated expressions of masculinity such as dominant roles and sexual harassment. Men who sexually harass women were found to be no different from other men except in their exaggerated attempts to be masculine (Lundberg-Love and Marmion, 2003). Likewise, girls who do not develop a secure female identity may express that identity in exaggerated sexual behaviour.

As with gender identity, children develop an ethnic identity over time; during primary school minority ethnic children often identify with the majority ethnic group, only coming to identify with their own ethnic group in their teenage years (Vaughan, 1987); this can cause considerable anxiety to ethnic minority parents who think that their child is being sucked into the majority culture but the situation is normally resolved in the teenage years when the young person begins to take a real interest in their cultural identity.

Of course, in both these cases, positive regard for their gender and ethnic identity from others in their relationships with them will encourage children to develop positive gender and ethnic identities. Interestingly, positive regard from their fathers when they are growing up has a particularly powerful positive influence on girls.

In all these cases the answer to addressing feelings of dependence or inadequacy or inappropriate sexual or racist behaviour is to give people relationships in which they feel secure as women and men. More generally, once our physical well-being has been secured by adequate food, clothing and housing, everything else that contributes to our well-being comes from our relationships. For example, once you get to a salary of around £25,000 a year job satisfaction does not increase with further salary increases (Judge et al., 2010). That does not mean to say that people do not take pride in larger salaries or do not become concerned that they are falling behind in more unequal societies where ‘keeping up with the Jones’ is important; it is just that salary increases beyond a certain level don’t make people any happier or more motivated at work. Other things do that.

Unconnected with the development of a gender identity is a preference for opposite sex or same sex emotional relationships; just as around one in ten children are born left-handed, so around one in ten children are born with a preference for same sex emotional relationships. As with left-handed children who inevitably have to have relationships with right-handed children, children born with a preference for same sex emotional relationships will have lots of social relationships and possibly some emotional relationships with the opposite sex.

There are cultures in which left-handedness is considered undesirable and for just over 150 years in English culture having a preference for same sex emotional relationships was considered undesirable and criminalised, not just in the UK but in most of its former colonies. Interestingly, Jesus says absolutely nothing about this even though we know that same sex emotional relationships were part of Greek and Roman culture in his time.

Mental health

Nearly 2,000 years ago the Roman poet, Juvenal, mentioned the desirability of ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body.’ However, he was thinking of mind and body as intimately connected; the idea that the mind and the body might be separate did not develop until the 18th century when people began to make specific provision for those with mental health problems. It has only been in the past 50 years that it has become clear that this artificial division between the mind and the body is very unhelpful. The chemical messages that flow round our bodies are inextricably linked with the electrical impulses that represent what we are thinking and, apart from the fact that what we feel in our bodies affects what we think in our minds, what we think in our minds also affects our bodies (Osterweis et al., 1984).

Many years ago, a hospital manager was puzzled as to why patients undergoing a routine operation recovered much more quickly in some wards than in others. When he investigated, he found that in the wards where patients recovered more quickly, the doctors talked to the nurses; in the wards where they did not, the doctors did not talk to the nurses. So, when patients asked nurses the sorts of questions which they were afraid to ask the doctors, the nurses were able to reassure them on some wards and could tell them nothing on others. This affected the patients’ rate of recovery.

Lack of relationships has been found to be associated with the development of mental ill-health (Brugha et al., 1993). Mental ill-health is also much greater in unequal societies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018) not only because people are relatively poorer and more vulnerable but also because even the better off are driven by anxiety about ‘keeping up with the Jones.’ When Alaska decided to distribute its oil revenues among its citizens, thereby reducing inequality in the state, rates of mental ill-health in the state plummeted.

Given the attention currently being given to sexual abuse, it may be worth noting that the most common precursor to becoming a sexual abuser is not sexual abuse but emotional abuse (Rodriguez-Srednicki and Twaite, 2006) which undermines the capacity of a person to make satisfying emotional and social relationships. The cure is to provide a long term benign environment with access to satisfying emotional and social relationships.

Well-being and morality

Philosophers will tell you that you cannot get an ‘ought’ from an ‘is,’ that is, you can look at something that ‘is’ the case and develop a logical argument that something ‘ought’ to be the case. Politicians looking at the same situation rarely agreed on what ought to happen to deal with the situation!

However, there is a remarkably good fit between ‘loving your neighbour in the same way as you love yourselves’ and Jesus’ description of the actions of the righteous:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

We must look after ourselves physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, culturally, spiritually and sexually in order to maintain our well-being and be in a fit state to help anyone else and, in loving our neighbour in the ways Jesus outlines — and in many others, we contribute to the well-being of others which in turn enables them to contribute to our well-being and others.

There is a virtuous circle when we heed Jesus’ commands which contributes to the well-being of all and enables those whose well-being has suffered to recover from whatever harm they may have suffered.

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