

PERMA (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments)

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PERMA (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Positive Psychology, Psychology

Proponents: Martin E. P. Seligman

1. Core Principles

The **PERMA model** is a foundational framework within positive psychology, offering a comprehensive and measurable theory of well-being, or "flourishing." Developed by Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, a prominent figure in the field, PERMA shifted the focus from merely alleviating psychological distress to understanding and promoting the factors that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Unlike earlier models that might have centered predominantly on subjective happiness, PERMA proposes that well-being is a multifaceted construct composed of five distinct, yet interconnected, elements.

Each component of PERMA is considered a building block, an end in itself that people pursue for its intrinsic value, rather than merely a means to another end. While these elements are often correlated and can enhance one another, they are also independent and can be cultivated individually. The model posits that for an individual to experience true flourishing, they do not necessarily need to excel in all five areas simultaneously, but rather to find a balance and strength across these domains that contributes to their overall sense of purpose, satisfaction, and vitality. This holistic approach makes PERMA a powerful tool for both theoretical understanding and practical application in various contexts.

Seligman asserted that a life rich in these five elements leads to a state far more robust than simple happiness; it leads to enduring well-being. The acronym PERMA stands for **Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments**. These five pillars collectively represent the essential ingredients for a life lived fully and meaningfully, transcending the transient nature of fleeting positive moods to encompass a deeper and more sustainable state of thriving.

2. Historical Development

The PERMA model emerged from a significant evolution in the field of psychology, particularly within the burgeoning discipline of positive psychology. Prior to the late 1990s, mainstream psychology had predominantly focused on pathology, diagnosing and treating mental illness. However, Martin Seligman, as president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, spearheaded a new movement aimed at understanding and fostering human strengths and virtues. This initiative laid the groundwork for positive psychology, which sought to answer the question:

"What makes life worth living?"

Initially, Seligman's work culminated in the "Authentic Happiness Theory," outlined in his 2002 book "Authentic Happiness." This earlier model proposed that happiness could be achieved through three components: the pleasant life (focused on positive emotions), the engaged life (experiencing flow), and the meaningful life (using strengths in service of something larger than oneself). While influential, Seligman later recognized limitations in this model, particularly its reliance on the subjective feeling of "happiness" as the ultimate goal. He observed that individuals might pursue engagement or meaning even when these activities did not directly lead to an immediate increase in positive emotions.

This critical reflection led to a refinement and expansion of his theory, culminating in the introduction of the PERMA model in his 2011 book, "Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being." The shift from "happiness" to "well-being" or "flourishing" was pivotal. Seligman argued that well-being is a construct, composed of several measurable elements, each chosen because it contributes to flourishing, is pursued for its own sake, and can be defined and measured independently of the other elements. The addition of **Relationships** and **Accomplishments** to the existing pillars of Positive Emotions, Engagement, and Meaning provided a more comprehensive and robust framework for understanding and cultivating a fulfilling life, moving beyond a purely individualistic pursuit of happiness to include social and achievement-oriented dimensions.

3. Key Concepts and Components

Positive Emotions (P)

This element encompasses a wide range of subjective feelings such as joy, gratitude, serenity, hope, inspiration, amusement, and love. It's not merely about experiencing pleasure, but also about cultivating an optimistic outlook and a sense of contentment. According to Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions, these feelings do more than just make us feel good; they broaden our momentary thought-action repertoires, encouraging us to explore, learn, and connect. Over time, these broadened perspectives and actions build enduring personal resources, such as social connections, coping skills, and environmental knowledge, ultimately leading to greater well-being and resilience. Cultivating positive emotions helps individuals see possibilities, bounce back from adversity, and engage more fully with the world around them.

Engagement (E)

Engagement refers to the experience of being completely absorbed, focused, and involved in an activity, often to the extent that one loses track of time and self-awareness. This state is famously

described as "flow" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow occurs when an individual's skills are perfectly matched with the challenge of the task, leading to deep concentration, a sense of control, and intrinsic enjoyment. Activities that induce engagement can range from hobbies, sports, and creative pursuits to demanding intellectual tasks or work. The joy derived from engagement is not necessarily a conscious positive emotion at the moment of experience, but rather a profound sense of intrinsic satisfaction and vitality that contributes significantly to overall well-being. It is about being fully present and utilizing one's signature strengths.

Relationships (R)

Humans are inherently social beings, and positive, authentic relationships are crucial for flourishing. This element emphasizes the importance of feeling connected, supported, and loved by others. It encompasses various forms of social connection, including family ties, friendships, romantic partnerships, and community bonds. Strong relationships provide a buffer against adversity, offer emotional support, and contribute to a sense of belonging and identity. Engaging in acts of kindness, showing gratitude, and fostering genuine connections with others not only enriches one's own life but also contributes to the well-being of those around them, creating a virtuous cycle of mutual positive regard. The quality, rather than just the quantity, of these interactions is paramount.

Meaning (M)

Meaning involves having a sense of purpose in life and belonging to something larger than oneself. This can manifest in various ways, such as religious or spiritual beliefs, commitment to a social cause, devotion to family, or dedication to a particular profession or artistic pursuit. Individuals often seek to understand their place in the world and to contribute to something they perceive as significant and enduring. Discovering and living in alignment with one's values and beliefs provides direction, resilience, and a profound sense of significance, especially during challenging times. It is about finding a deeper reason for existence and striving towards a noble objective that transcends immediate self-interest.

Accomplishments (A)

The Accomplishments component refers to the pursuit of mastery, achievement, competence, and success. This element acknowledges the human drive to set and achieve goals, to improve skills, and to experience a sense of accomplishment. It involves striving for excellence, working hard, and taking pride in one's efforts and outcomes. While external rewards or recognition can be associated with accomplishments, the primary focus in PERMA is on the intrinsic satisfaction derived from meeting challenges and developing one's capabilities. Whether in academic pursuits, professional careers, personal hobbies, or daily tasks, the pursuit and attainment of goals contribute to self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a sense of progress, which are vital for sustained well-

being.

4. Applications and Examples

The PERMA model has found widespread application across diverse fields, demonstrating its versatility and practical utility in fostering well-being. In **education**, the concept of Positive Education integrates PERMA principles into curricula and school environments. For instance, schools might implement programs that teach students about positive emotions, resilience, and gratitude, encourage deep engagement through project-based learning, facilitate strong peer and teacher relationships, help students find meaning through community service, and foster a sense of accomplishment through goal-setting and celebrating effort. The Geelong Grammar School in Australia is a pioneering example, embedding positive psychology into all aspects of school life, leading to improved student well-being, academic performance, and reduced behavioral issues.

In the **workplace**, PERMA provides a framework for enhancing employee well-being, engagement, and productivity. Organizations utilize PERMA to design initiatives that cultivate a positive work culture, promote work-life balance, and support professional development. This can involve fostering positive team dynamics (Relationships), creating opportunities for employees to utilize their strengths in challenging tasks (Engagement), recognizing achievements (Accomplishments), and articulating a clear organizational mission that provides a sense of purpose (Meaning). Companies like Google, with its focus on psychological safety and team dynamics, or Zappos, known for its emphasis on strong company culture and employee happiness, inadvertently align with many PERMA principles, leading to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover.

Furthermore, PERMA is extensively applied in **clinical psychology, coaching, and personal development**. Therapists and coaches use the model to help individuals identify areas of strength and areas for growth, guiding them to build specific skills and habits that enhance their well-being. For example, a coach might help a client develop strategies to increase positive emotions through mindfulness, identify activities that lead to flow, work on improving communication in relationships, articulate personal values to find greater meaning, or set realistic and challenging goals for accomplishment. Even in contexts such as military resilience training, PERMA-informed interventions help soldiers cope with stress and build mental toughness, emphasizing the practical and transformative power of these principles in demanding environments.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

While the PERMA model has significantly advanced the understanding and promotion of well-being, it is not without its criticisms and recognized limitations. One common critique revolves around the potential for **oversimplification of human experience**. Critics argue that human well-

being is an incredibly complex and nuanced phenomenon that might not be fully captured by just five discrete elements. There is a concern that focusing too rigidly on these five pillars might inadvertently neglect other crucial aspects of a fulfilling life, such as physical health, spirituality beyond an explicit sense of meaning, financial security, or environmental factors, which undoubtedly impact an individual's capacity to flourish.

Another significant debate centers on the ****cultural applicability**** of the model. Positive psychology, and by extension PERMA, largely emerged from Western philosophical traditions and psychological research. There are questions about whether the emphasis on individual accomplishment, positive emotions, and a specific conceptualization of meaning translates perfectly across diverse cultures, particularly those that prioritize collectivism, harmony, or different spiritual frameworks. What constitutes "meaning" or "accomplishment" can vary drastically across societies, suggesting that the model may require adaptation or careful interpretation in non-Western contexts to avoid imposing a culturally specific definition of flourishing.

Finally, the ****measurement challenges**** associated with some PERMA elements pose practical limitations. While certain aspects, like positive emotions, can be assessed through self-report scales, and accomplishments through objective metrics, concepts such as "engagement" or "meaning" can be more elusive to quantify accurately and consistently. The subjective nature of these experiences means that their measurement often relies on self-perception, which can be influenced by various biases. Furthermore, critics also ponder whether the model implicitly suggests a "tyranny of positivity," where individuals might feel pressured to always be happy or engaged, potentially invalidating authentic human experiences of sadness, struggle, or existential doubt, which are also integral parts of life and can sometimes foster growth and deeper understanding.

Further Reading

[Positive Psychology Center - University of Pennsylvania](#)

[Martin Seligman - Wikipedia](#)

[Positive psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being by Martin E. P. Seligman](#)

[Flow \(psychology\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi - Wikipedia](#)

[Barbara Fredrickson - Wikipedia](#)