PERMA Model of Wellbeing

What makes a good life, at home and at work? For many years, psychology focused mainly on fixing problems. The psychologist Martin Seligman, a founder of positive psychology, asked a different question: what helps people flourish? In his book Flourish, published in 2011, he described five building blocks of wellbeing, known by the letters PERMA. Each element matters on its own, and each one can be built with small, everyday actions.

1. Positive Emotion

Positive emotion is the P in PERMA: feeling good, with joy, gratitude, hope and calm. It does not mean being happy all the time or ignoring problems. Positive feelings help us think more widely, recover from stress and connect with others. We can build them on purpose, for example by noticing what went well or by looking forward to something. Small moments of positive emotion add up over a day and a week.

Example: A student writes down three good things every night before sleeping. This simple habit of positive emotion helps her end the day calmer and sleep better.

At work: Adham, a software developer, has met every target for months, yet work feels flat. He starts each team meeting by sharing one small win from the week, a simple step toward positive emotion. Soon the meetings feel lighter, and his colleagues start sharing their wins too.

2. Engagement

Engagement is the E: being fully absorbed in an activity that uses our strengths. Psychologists call this state flow, when time seems to pass quickly and we forget ourselves in the task. Flow often happens when a task is challenging but matches our skills. Too easy, and we get bored; too hard, and we feel anxious. Knowing our strengths helps us find more moments of engagement.

Example: A retired teacher loses track of time while repairing old clocks. This deep engagement in a skilled task leaves him relaxed and proud.

At work: Adham notices that he feels most engaged when he solves difficult technical problems, not when he answers routine requests. He asks his manager for one challenging project each month. In those weeks he enters flow again and finishes his work with more energy.

3. Relationships

Relationships are the R: warm, supportive connections with other people. Seligman notes that most of our best moments happen with other people. Strong relationships give us support in hard times and make good times even better. At work, trust and friendly contact with colleagues are important sources of wellbeing. Building relationships takes time, attention and real interest in others.

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Example: Two neighbours start walking together every Friday evening. This new relationship gives each of them someone to talk to, and both feel less alone.

At work: Adham realises that he eats lunch alone at his desk every day. To build relationships, he invites two colleagues from another team to lunch once a week. They become friends, and they also solve problems faster because they ask each other for help.

4. Meaning

Meaning is the M: belonging to and serving something bigger than ourselves. It can come from family, community, faith, a cause or the purpose of our work. Meaning helps us keep going when things are difficult. It answers the question of why our efforts matter. Even routine tasks feel different when we see how they help other people.

Example: A volunteer at a food bank spends hours packing boxes at the weekend. The meaning is clear to her, because each box feeds a family, so the work never feels boring.

At work: Adham's team builds an app for a hospital, but he has never met its users. He visits the hospital and sees nurses save time with his app, and this gives his work new meaning. Back at his desk, he feels that his code really matters.

5. Accomplishment

Accomplishment is the A: working toward goals, mastering skills and achieving things. Seligman added it because people often pursue success for its own sake. Accomplishment builds confidence and a sense of progress. It works best when goals are clear, realistic and our own. Celebrating progress, not only the final result, keeps motivation alive.

Example: A beginner runner sets a goal of running five kilometres within three months. She tracks her progress every week, and on race day her accomplishment fills her with pride.

At work: Adham has reached many targets, but he never stopped to notice them. Now he keeps a monthly list of accomplishments and reviews it with his manager. Seeing his progress in one place gives him confidence and new goals.

Conclusion

In summary, Martin Seligman's PERMA model describes five building blocks of wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. No single element is enough on its own, and each person finds a different balance. Adham's story shows that reaching targets is not the same as flourishing. Small, regular actions in each area can make work and life richer. Wellbeing is not something we wait for; it is something we can build.

Sources

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