

CHAPTER 1

THE WELLBEING WORRY

It started with me staying back late at work one night to meet a deadline. Then I began working late every Friday night, to clear my plate and my head so that I could relax on the weekend. This then turned in to 6 am starts every Monday morning so that I could get my week set up before everyone else came into the office. I didn't notice when 80-hour working weeks became my new norm. During the global financial crisis, every task became a priority, and every decision became the difference between someone having enough work versus losing their job. I stopped sleeping, because my overactive mind was on a 24/7 problem-solving cycle. Living with exhaustion and surviving on adrenalin, caffeine and sugar made getting out of bed each morning a battle. I was at the doctor's every week with a cold, stomach pains, headaches or skin inflammations. I was constantly irritated, quick to anger and easily upset, with unbalanced moods.

However, the blood tests came back month after month saying that I was in the 'normal range'. It took two years of living like this before I found a holistic doctor who gave me a diagnosis of

adrenal exhaustion, leaky gut syndrome – and burnout. It took another two years of hard work to get back to being well.

Our busy lifestyles aren't working anymore. Globally, lifestyle diseases such as depression and anxiety have overtaken heart disease and cancer as the leading causes of disability. Nowadays, at any given point in time, one in five people is living with a mental illness.

**We don't need to hit burnout or wait
for total collapse to improve the way we live
and increase our wellbeing.**

So, what to do?

FIGHT OR FLIGHT?

Our bodies can't tell the difference between a real or imagined threat, or a major or minor stress. Our busy lifestyles are keeping us in a constant fight-or-flight state, continuously pumping out adrenalin and cortisol. We are living in our sympathetic nervous system (SNS) – wired and overtired as we attempt to 'do it all'.

Change is happening faster, more frequently and more dramatically than we are used to. Neurologically, we are wired to view change as a threat.

**Experiences like the COVID-19 pandemic disrupt
how and where we work, which brings uncertainty
and stress for many, and the potential for burnout for
those trying to manage it all.**

Our brains like certainty. They are designed to predict and anticipate what will happen next. They continuously look for patterns

or 'prescriptions' that make it easy to see what comes next and to run as much of our mental system on autopilot as they can.

Cast your mind back to when you first learnt to ride a bike. It was a mammoth task just staying upright! Eyes ahead, foot slipping off the pedal, other toe on the ground balancing you, pushing off, both feet up, wobbles, trying to avoid people, veering off course, trying to avoid the tree, heart thumping, squeezing hard on the brakes, skidding stop, foot down, bike topples. Rinse and repeat.

While learning to ride a bike was an exciting rite of passage, it could also be a stressful, exhausting and slow learning experience with constant challenges to your safety.

Now, years later, take a moment to replay in your mind the last time you rode a bike to do an errand. You probably don't recollect much of the experience between wheeling the bike out, heading off and then arriving at your destination. Riding a bike now feels hardwired into your subconscious, only interrupting your conscious mind occasionally if there is a hazard or potential danger.

When patterns play out the way we expect, our brain experiences a reward – ease and flow.

When patterns do not play out the way we expect, our brain experiences a threat and needs extra processing time and energy for vigilance. And our brain doesn't naturally distinguish between an immediate urgent danger, like our caveman ancestors fleeing for their lives from a sabre-toothed tiger, and the worry of missing an important deadline for our boss.

So, we are wired to find ambiguity and uncertainty distressing, because it means we cannot rely on our typical patterns to predict what will happen next. This gives us a sense of lacking control and can trigger our fear response. When we face significant

uncertainty and feel that too much is out of our control, we can experience high levels of stress.

We want good balance, health and wellbeing, but stay stuck frantically pedalling our hamster wheel and juggling multiple balls in the air.

We rarely shift back to a state of calm, to rest and replenish before the next amygdala hijack.

We are running highly complicated and busy lives with caveman neurological operating systems. No wonder we are getting run-down and burning out!

Many of us recognise that we can't operate like this anymore, that we need to take control of our health and wellbeing. We can do this by reassessing our values and priorities and developing our resilience skills.

It is up to us to take charge of our lives and wellbeing. So, the question is:

**Are you the driver, or a passenger
on someone else's bus?**

NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH

Google 'how do I improve my wellbeing?' and around 149 million results are returned. So, how can we know what to do when we're given so much information – and misinformation – about wellbeing?

First, we start with the definition of wellbeing, and then we build a plan to improve it. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Not really.

**There is no consensus across health bodies
or among academics around a single definition
of wellbeing.**

The word ‘wellbeing’ is used in many places and in many different ways. Some definitions emphasise feeling good, while others stress meaning, purpose or functioning well. And the terms ‘wellbeing’, ‘quality of life’ and ‘happiness’ are often used interchangeably.

Then there is the multitude of factors that influence wellbeing. Think of your own life. The way you feel and function is most likely affected by what’s going on with your friends, family, health, financial circumstances and the level of choice you do or do not have in certain situations.

Wellbeing to a mum with a brand-new baby will most likely involve more sleep and help around the house. Wellbeing for an 18-year-old starting their first full-time job will be about the mastery of work skills and fitting into social networks.

So, people tend to describe wellbeing broadly in terms of domains, areas, descriptions, or examples of when, why or how they experience wellbeing. It is often easier to provide a list of parts of life that are important to our wellbeing – things like income, education, work, family and community life, values, environment, and physical and mental health.

It is also important to understand that wellbeing is not static. It exists on a continuum, where starting points differ, experiences are personal and wellbeing moves in a dynamic process. For example, a student’s wellbeing can shift significantly during a week of delivering assignments and sitting for exams.

With so many moving parts, your wellbeing can change from one moment to the next. For example, if you are under a lot of stress at work, your wellbeing might be better at home than in the workplace.

What's more, wellbeing is subjective.

No two people have the exact same values, beliefs, life goals or personality traits, so certain aspects of wellbeing may be more or less important to one person than they are to another.

A senior executive working 70-hour weeks may rate getting home early during the week to spend time with their kids as a high wellbeing priority. A new mum returning to work may value the opportunity to do an interesting project with flexible hours working from home.

This is why my favourite formal definition of wellbeing is from Michaelson and Mahony in *Measuring Well-being: A guide for practitioners*: 'how people feel and how they function both on a personal and social level, as well as how they evaluate their lives as a whole'.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to wellbeing. A personal trainer will emphasise physical health and provide wellbeing advice on fitness, exercise and often nutrition. A counsellor may focus on the mental health or relationship aspects of wellbeing. An executive coach will focus on work and career support. A workplace wellbeing program may focus on moving more via a step count competition or lunchtime yoga.

Many of us hope or expect a one-size-fits-all approach to wellbeing, and when we don't find it quickly, we give up.

When you go to a café to get lunch, you don't ask for a serve of lunch. You choose a sandwich, or perhaps a salad. You select a protein and a combination of other fillings like salad ingredients or cheese. You add seasoning, your favourite dressing and maybe some condiments, such as mustard.

A standard pre-made lunch may be good enough, but a freshly prepared meal with your favourite ingredients in just the right proportions is mouth-watering and can transform your afternoon. And your perfect lunch combination will be different to the person next to you.

Hence, the best definition of wellbeing is yours.

YOUR INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING ASSESSMENT

Often people will describe their need for improved wellbeing as better 'work-life balance'. I don't find this a helpful framework for a couple of reasons.

First, it is a black-and-white statement. Either-or assessments only provide a one-dimensional rating of what is a personal, nuanced view. Judging by tipping a work-life scale means you are forced into a bucket of either 'you have it' or 'you don't'. You have either got it right or wrong, and the scales are loaded towards the extremities, which very rarely balance.

At any point in time, we are all experiencing some level of wellbeing, and there are usually some parts of our lives that are

working well. But the either-or approach doesn't recognise positives or small wins.

Second, looking at wellbeing through a balance lens assumes there are only two parts to our wellbeing scale: work and life (or work and home).

So, taking a scales approach doesn't reflect our unique and differing needs or values, or take into account shifts in our priorities.

The best definition of wellbeing is yours. That's why it is important to work out what wellbeing means to you and be able to apply it in a way that is meaningful.

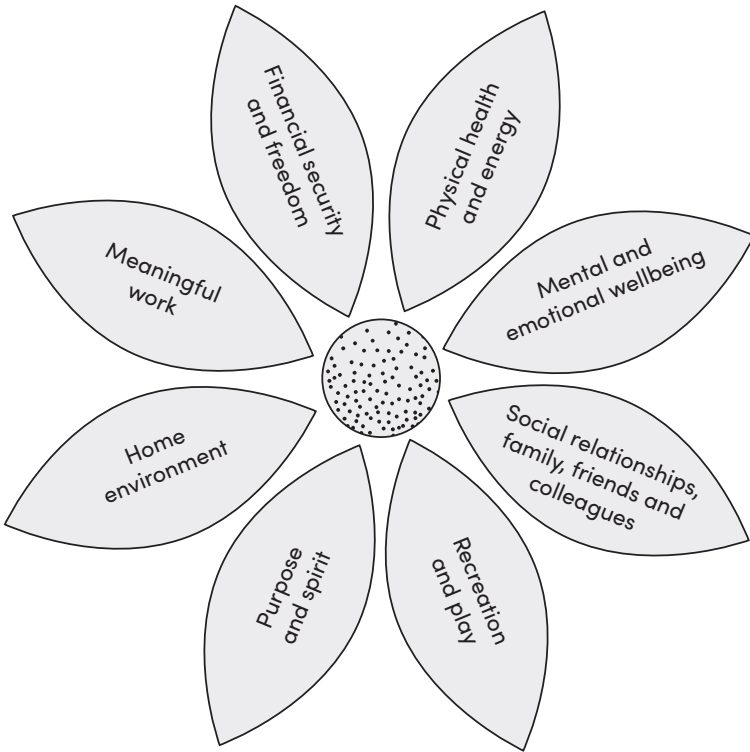
So, before you set out on making some changes to your life, you first have to decide what wellbeing looks like for you.

In this chapter, we will work through four simple steps and a helpful framework to understand what contributes to your happiness, health and wellbeing.

Rather than a scale, think of your wellbeing as a wheel, or a pie, or a flower, where the aspects of wellbeing that are important to you are included in the segments. There are some evidence-based resources that support this approach.

Figure 1 shows the eight aspects or domains of wellbeing that are important to me.

Figure 1: The wellbeing wheel



Here are my domains and definitions:

1. **Physical health and energy** means having the fitness, flexibility, strength and health to create and live my best life.
2. **Mental wellbeing** means managing my thoughts and mental chit-chat to be helpful and supportive, instead of getting stuck in a downward spiral of negative storytelling and self-criticism. **Emotional wellbeing** means having a healthy balance of positive and negative emotions, and bolstering my mood.

3. **Social wellbeing** means having a mix of family, friends and colleagues who boost my energy, who I can ask for help, and who will accept me regardless of how I show up and help me to be a better person. It means having mutually loving, generous and respectful relationships.
4. **Recreation and play** means a mix of rest, time out, adventures, creativity, lightness, discovery and playfulness.
5. **Purpose and spirit** means aligning what I do with my vision of making the world of work a better place. When the going gets tough, I know that my energy, care and time is worth it.
6. Having a light-filled, warm, welcoming and nurturing **home environment** gives me a safe place to retreat from the world to replenish and soothe my soul.
7. **Meaningful work** means work that makes a positive contribution to people's lives. The achievement of figuring out new and better ways of interacting with the world is motivating.
8. **Financial security** for me represents **freedom** – freedom from worry, freedom of options and choices, and freedom to choose where I spend my time.

**My personal definition of wellbeing is:
'feeling good, functioning well, living with purpose,
having fun and positively contributing'.**

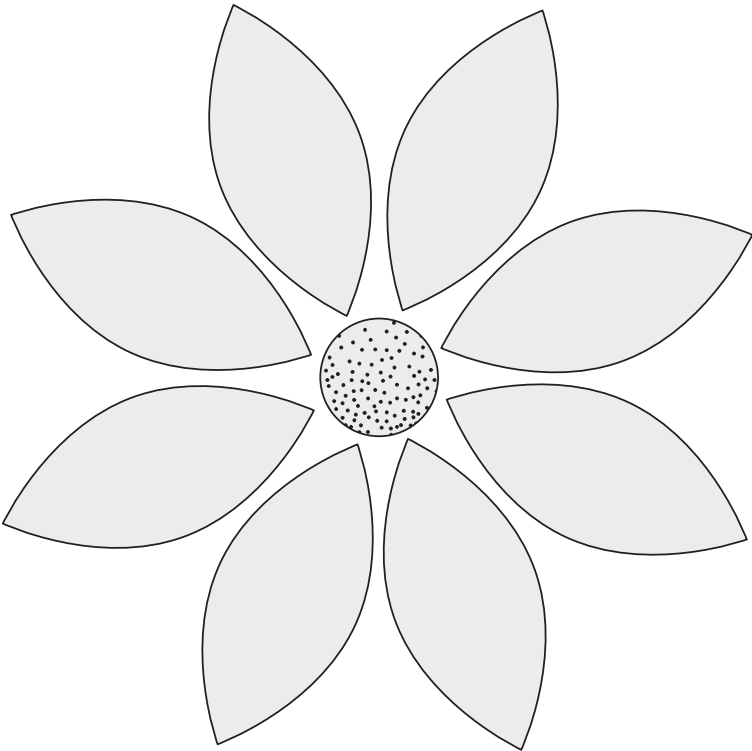
So, before we go any further, it's your turn to assess which six to eight areas in your life are important to you and how you feel.

Step 1: Identify what's important to you

Limiting yourself to somewhere between six and eight areas of wellbeing will bring you clarity and enable you to focus.

Identify the domains of wellbeing that are important to you. Write them on Figure 2.

Figure 2: Your personal wellbeing wheel



RESILIENCE RECIPES

Then write your personal definition for each domain:

Area 1: _____

Area 2: _____

Area 3: _____

Area 4: _____

Area 5: _____

Area 6: _____

Area 7: _____

Area 8: _____

For extra ideas and inspiration, here are some popular wellbeing domains:

- Friends and social connectedness
- Family and relationships
- Lifestyle behaviours, such as daily exercise and regular sleep
- Emotional health
- Mental health
- Physical health and fitness
- Finances
- Meaningful work and career
- Sense of value and purpose
- Contribution to others, such as volunteering or giving
- Personal growth and learning
- Creativity
- Spirituality or religiosity
- Community
- Climate and nature.

Step 2: Rate how well you think you're doing

Taking the time to define what is important to you and rate how well you are living your priorities gives you greater self-awareness and more opportunities to make different choices.

Rate how satisfied you are with each of your domains of wellbeing on a scale from 1 to 10 on Figure 2.

To provide a guide on how to approach your rating, I suggest 1 means deeply unsatisfied, 5 means a neutral state and 10 means flourishing. It is important to apply your rating scale consistently to each of your wellbeing domains.

Here are some reflection questions to consider when assigning your ratings:

What is present when you are at your happiest?

What conditions are in play when you experience flow – when you are lost in the moment and lose sense of time?

What values are being met when you are happy?

What values are not being met when you are unhappy?

What are the dynamics going on when you feel dissatisfied, unhappy or miserable?

Step 3: Clarify your strengths and weaknesses

Identifying the areas of your wellbeing that are strengths and those that need attention will provide you with direction and clarity for your wellbeing definition and plan.

Based on your ratings, identify and write down:

- Your top two or three sources of wellbeing strength.
- The one or two areas of wellbeing that you would like to give more attention to.

Your sources of wellbeing strength:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Your wellbeing areas needing attention:

1. _____

2. _____

Human beings come with an inbuilt negativity bias, with our brains constantly scanning the environment for potential risks, dangers and threats, ready to activate our fight-or-flight system and keep us safe. So, we have a natural tendency to look for what is wrong, missing or not going well and we focus on the gaps.

However, we learn best and are more likely to experience flow and accomplish more by focusing on what is working, seeing best practice modelled and using our strengths. Research shows that

leveraging our strengths builds positive emotions, which in turn opens up possibilities, builds confidence and increases wellbeing.

So, I encourage you to take stock of the aspects of wellbeing that are working well for you and list as many strengths and resources that you have at your disposal as possible.

Conversely, dwelling on what isn't working can trigger a downward spiral of negative thinking, narrowing our pathways and perspectives. So, just choose the one or two wellbeing gaps that are most important for you to improve.

**Leveraging our strengths builds positive emotions,
which in turn opens up possibilities and increases
our options for improving wellbeing.**

Step 4: Define your wellbeing

Now have a go at creating your definition of wellbeing.

There is no right or wrong, just a stake in the sand that you can start from. As your understanding of what is important to you evolves, feel free to come back and edit your definition of wellbeing as many times as you want.

Your definition of wellbeing:

Now that you have chosen the areas of wellbeing that are most important to you, rated your satisfaction with each area and created your wellbeing definition, it is time to decide what you want to do about it.

YOUR WELLBEING COMMITMENT

Imagine you are trying to fit a mix of big rocks, pebbles and sand into an empty jar.

If you start filling the jar by first adding the sand and then the pebbles, you will not have room for your rocks.

The big rocks symbolise the things that are the most important in your life. They represent the things that have real value: your health, your family, your partner. Even if everything else (the pebbles and the sand) was lost and only they remained, your life would still have meaning.

The pebbles represent the things in your life that are meaningful and matter but are not as critical, such as your job, house and hobbies.

The sand represents everything else, the small stuff: material possessions, chores and filler things such as watching television or browsing social media. These things don't mean much to your life as a whole and are more like time fillers.

I look at sand in two ways:

1. the internal blocks that you think, feel or do that stop you from focusing on what is important
2. the external demands or barriers that take up your time or resources.

Internal blocks could include procrastination, time-wasting activities or limiting beliefs about your value or abilities. External demands or barriers include the commitments you make to others.

Some of these activities serve us, like spending Saturday at our kids' sport. We have chosen to forgo personal time because it supports our prioritisation of family. But some of our activities don't serve us, such as a tendency to stay late at the office fixing someone else's work because they rush their tasks and make errors so they can get home early.

Take some time to list your key blocks and barriers. This will help you better identify and make choices about the sand in your life.

Your internal blocks:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Your external barriers:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Cast your mind back to how you defined wellbeing and rated the areas of wellbeing that are important to you. How does your wellbeing jar look?

If you start by putting sand and pebbles into the jar, you will not have room for rocks. This holds true with the things you let into your life. If you spend all your time on the small and insignificant things, you will run out of room for the things that are important.

**Not everything can have the same priority,
so you need to be deliberate about your two or
three big rocks and be honest about what
should be your sand.**

Do you need to prioritise your health and wellbeing differently?
What is the balance between your big rocks and your sand?

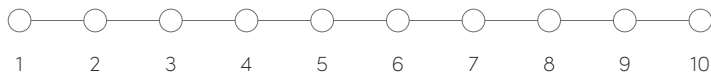
What are your big rocks? What are your pebbles?

Are your rocks covered in your wellbeing domains?

Are there pebbles that are hijacking your wellbeing?

What is the sand that is getting in your eyes and blurring your focus?

On a rating of 1 to 10, what is your commitment to making a positive change to your wellbeing?



1 = deprioritise; 4 = do nothing; 5 = plan to change;
6 = start small; 10 = full steam ahead.



QUICK BITE

1. Be clear on your definition of wellbeing. You can't improve it unless you know what it is!
2. Identify and prioritise your wellbeing rocks.
3. Deprioritise your energy drainers and your investment in the busyness of the sand.



RESILIENCE RECIPE #1

WELLBEING THAT WORKS

A small, tight-knit, high-performing factory team of 45 people located on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia, struggled with seasonal blues every year. In the winter months, people arrived at work in the dark, the days were grey and working on the lines was cold work. And this was reflected in the team's low mood and energy, occasionally punctuated by bursts of irritation and bickering.

The factory manager, Cameron, was part of the resilience and leadership training program I was running across the company to support healthy high performance and address burnout. Cameron asked me to run a wellbeing workshop with his team to show that the business cared about them.

We reorganised the canteen area into small break-out tables, brought in a projector and speakers, and spent the morning talking about wellbeing. Initially there was skepticism about allocating three hours to feelings.

We discussed the research for how good wellbeing levels boost personal relationships, energy, creativity, innovation and productivity. Then we moved on to a series of short wellbeing exercises. Each person spent five minutes reflecting on what wellbeing meant to them. They then took turns sharing their definitions with their small groups. And as they spoke, the energy in the room bubbled up.

Then each group, with a set of coloured markers, drew on butcher paper a collective picture of what wellbeing meant

to them. A spokesperson for each small group presented their wellbeing artwork to the full factory team, who asked questions and engaged in the sharing. They covered the canteen wall with their wellbeing pictures.



Cameron called me two weeks later to share that the place was still buzzing with energy. Their wellbeing pictures stayed up on the canteen walls, and they maintained their collective positive mood and goodwill throughout the full bleak winter season.

Why wouldn't you invest a few minutes to map out and share what wellbeing means to you when there is such a huge pay-off?