



Holistic Well-Being

Grounded in evidence-informed
dimensions to meet individuals' needs.

WebMD
HealthServices



What is Holistic Well-Being?

Our Definition

Holistic well-being is not easily or consistently defined across the research literature due to the complexity of the concept and recognition that dimensions of well-being have evolved over time.¹



However, it's imperative that we define holistic well-being in order to:

1

Effectively measure one's current well-being and their changes in well-being over time, and

2

Support employees in positively changing their well-being behaviors.

We define Holistic Well-Being as feeling positive, healthy, and satisfied with one's life. Holistic well-being encompasses the "whole person" and recognizes the interdependent role of well-being dimensions. We also acknowledge that an individual's perception of their well-being is influenced by a variety of sources including individual value systems, how they interact with others, and the societal and cultural norms in which they live.

¹ Jordan, A., & Roache, A. (2023). What is wellbeing? International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(6), 5006.



Holistic well-being is:

Personal

An individual's well-being journey is unique, and interventions designed to support that journey should reflect that person's unique needs. There is no "one size fits all" well-being journey.

Subjective

Holistic well-being reflects how people think and feel² and, as such, is based on an individual's perception of their life circumstances.

Dynamic

Well-being is a journey or process, not a static destination we achieve. It can (and will) change as the individual develops and changes over time.

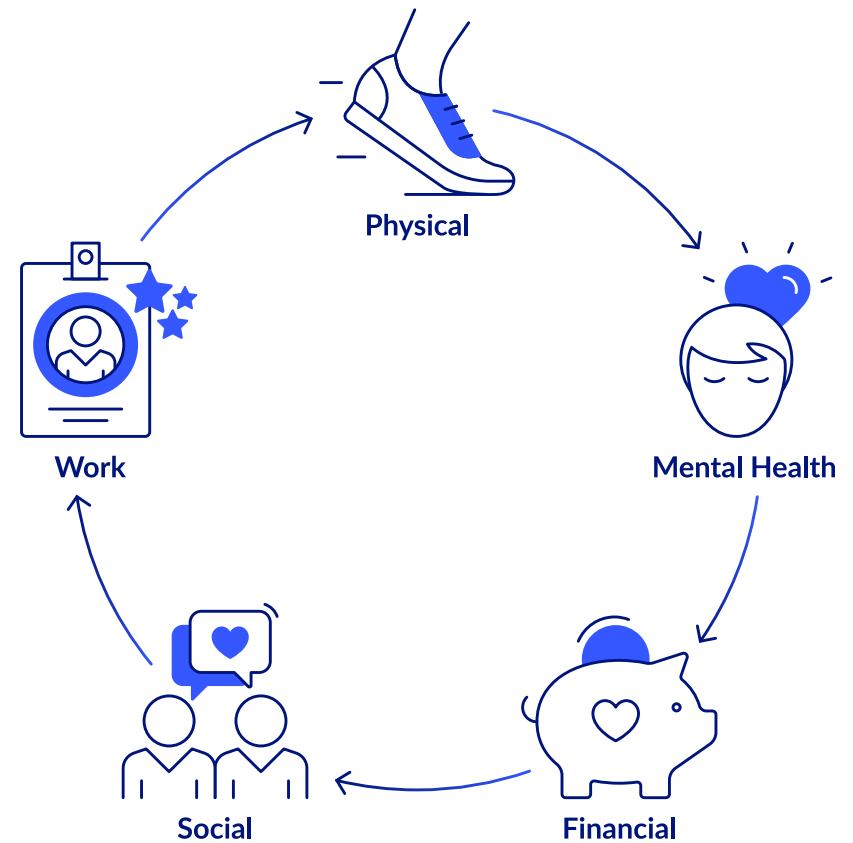
Multidimensional

Holistic well-being consists of many dimensions which evolve over time to reflect changes in our society and changes in individual needs.

² Diener, E., & Ryan, K. (2009). Subjective well-being: A general overview. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 39(4), 391-406.

Dimensions of Holistic Well-Being

Based on research conducted by the Center for Research and current well-being research, we have identified a core set of well-being dimensions. These evidence-informed dimensions are reflective of the well-being needs reported by our clients,³ and are frequently cited by the Business Group on Health (BGH) as integral to employer well-being strategies.⁴ In recent years, social connectedness and community have also been cited as key dimensions of well-being.⁴



³ WebMD Health Services Center for Research, June, 2024, "Workplace and Employee Survey" [Powerpoint Slides].

⁴ Business Group on Health (2023). 14th Annual Employer-Sponsored Health and Well-Being Survey: Well-Being's Path Forward. Business Group on Health.



Physical Well-Being

Physical well-being is an evaluation of how one's body feels and is functioning. Commonly measured areas of physical well-being include physical activity (exercise), nutrition, and sleep, all of which should be measured on a spectrum, such as low to high or infrequent to frequent.

Individuals with higher levels of physical well-being exhibit behaviors like making healthy food choices and getting regular physical activity. With these individuals we often see an absence of unhealthy behaviors, such as alcohol consumption and tobacco use.



Mental Health

The World Health Organization states “there is no health without mental health.”⁵ The American Psychological Association defines Mental Health as a state of mind that is characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioral adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life.⁶ Frequently measured areas of employee mental health include the use of healthy and unhealthy coping behaviors, symptoms of anxiety and depression, stress, and substance use. Mental health can be measured by the strength of one's state of mind and their behaviors, such as positive behavioral adjustment to unexpected circumstances. These attributes and behaviors are frequently measured on a continuum that ranges from low to high or frequent to infrequent.

⁵ World Health Organization. (2024). The Global Health Observatory: Health and Well-Being. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/major-themes/health-and-well-being>

⁶ American Psychological Association (2018). APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/mental-health>



Financial Well-Being

We define financial well-being as an individual's perception about their ability to sustain desirable living standards and their perception of control over their finances (also known as financial freedom)^{7,8}. Financial well-being can include topics such as financial literacy or education, one's feelings about financial topics, and financial behaviors.

Like other dimensions of holistic well-being, financial well-being knowledge, perceptions, and behaviors are frequently measured on a spectrum. As such, employer support services for financial well-being can and should vary based on the needs of their employee population. Interestingly, recent research also highlights how financial well-being needs change depending on age.⁹ Consequently, we recommend employers measure the financial well-being of their employees, in addition to other dimensions, at regular intervals to identify changes in employee needs.



⁷ Aubrey, M., Morin, A.J.S., Fernet, C., & Carbonneau, N. (2022). Financial well-being: Capturing an elusive construct with an optimized measure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 935284.

⁸ Brügggen, E. C., Hogreve, J., Holmlund, M., Kabadayi, S., & Löfgren, M. (2017). Financial well-being: a conceptualization and research agenda. *Journal of Business Research*, 79, 228–237. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.03.013r>

⁹ Riitsalu, L., Sulg, R., Lindal, H., Remmik, M., & Vain, K. (2024). From security to freedom: the meaning of financial well-being changes with age. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 45(1), 56–69.



Social Well-Being

Recent reports have recognized the increasingly relevant role of social well-being in employer-sponsored well-being programs.¹⁰ Social well-being focuses on the important role of relationships and community for holistic well-being. This dimension includes topics such as forming new relationships, maintaining current relationships, social acceptance, and social or community contributions. Social well-being can also include multiple levels of social systems ranging from one-to-one relationships with friends and family to our many-to-one relationships and the roles we hold within our community.

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 report on the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation calls out the negative health impacts of social isolation and poor relationships, such as premature death, increased risk of morbidity from heart disease and stroke, greater likelihood to develop high blood pressure, and cognitive decline.¹¹ Furthermore, our research finds one's social well-being is correlated with their physical well-being, mental health, work well-being, and financial well-being.¹²



Work Well-Being

Work well-being often focuses on how employees feel and interact with their jobs and places of employment. This dimension can include a range of topics that exist at the individual and organizational level, such as organizational culture, role clarity, work/life balance, employee engagement, manager support, workload, job satisfaction, person-organization fit, psychological safety, employee burnout, workplace belongingness, and creating a welcoming and respectful work environment. Like occupational well-being, work well-being explores environmental conditions of work and alignment with one's career goals. Topics within work well-being are often positioned as contributors to business outcomes such as productivity and turnover.

Not surprisingly, work or career well-being is often closely linked with other dimensions of holistic well-being such as physical well-being, mental health, financial well-being, social well-being, and community.¹³

¹⁰ Business Group on Health (2023). 14th Annual Employer-Sponsored Health and Well-Being Survey: Well-Being's Path Forward. Business Group on Health.

¹¹ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2023). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. US Department of Health and Human Services.

¹² WebMD Health Services Center for Research, June, 2024, "Workplace and Employee Survey" [Powerpoint Slides].

¹³ The Gallup Organization. (2024). Workplace Wellbeing. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/215924/well-being.aspx>

Emerging/Future Dimensions

While we monitor and conduct research on our five core dimensions, we recognize that holistic well-being dimensions will evolve over time as our understanding of employee well-being and our societal needs change. The Center for Research has identified three dimensions that are gathering momentum and may emerge as core dimensions in the next five years: Sense of Purpose, Environmental Well-Being, and Brain Health.

Sense of Purpose

One's sense of purpose is frequently classified under spirituality or religiosity, but sense of purpose extends beyond these terms. A sense of purpose can help someone make meaning out of their life and may influence one's life satisfaction. Our values can also guide our sense of purpose. We favor the term spirituality over religiosity in this context to accommodate the vast range of beliefs and practices found in our global population, where individuals may behave in ways that align with their values but don't define themselves as religious.

Environmental Well-Being

Environmental well-being focuses on ensuring the spaces we engage in are safe, comfortable, and supportive of our holistic well-being. Physical spaces (such as the natural world) are often cited, but environmental well-being may include studies of one's social and human-made environments (such as workspaces).

Brain Health

Brain health focuses on how the brain functions across cognitive, sensory, social-emotional, behavioral, and motor areas. Research and interventions for this dimension frequently aim to optimize an individual's brain functioning across their lifespan. This dimension might include topics such as the presence or absence of disease that impacts cognitive functioning, the role of neurodiversity, and cognitive functioning itself (for example, memory, ability to problem solve, and creativity). Although mental health can be related to brain health, we identify these two concepts as distinct based on the current literature.

How We Address Holistic Well-Being

Our Solutions

WebMD Health Services' solutions are designed to recognize and leverage the power of these dimensions to support employees on their journey of well-being.

Our approach to holistic well-being recognizes that:

An organization's well-being strategy should be an extension of their culture.

Employer- and health plan-sponsored well-being programs are only effective when they align with the organizational culture in which they are embedded. Across levels of the organization, well-being program implementation must fit within the norms, practices, and expectations of the organization. For instance, an unlimited paid time off (PTO) benefit can support employees in taking time off from work, but departments that discourage the use of this benefit create a culture clash between the well-being strategy and organizational culture.

Many areas of well-being require additional monitoring and support that extends beyond the individual.

We frequently find that some dimensions, such as physical well-being and mental health, require more clinical support services. For example, individuals with a chronic health condition may need ongoing support for medication adherence and adjustments to medications. We apply this lens to our holistic well-being definition and our well-being solutions.



Other perspectives and approaches to holistic well-being can co-exist with our WebMD Health Services definition.

We believe engaging in transparent and open dialogue about how we and our clients define holistic well-being can help us best support the needs of the organizations we serve. This belief is enacted through our Client Success Team, as we engage in ongoing conversations about the current and changing well-being needs of our clients.

A range of individual-level and environmental barriers can prevent one from successfully improving their well-being.

We recognize that barriers such as low motivation, a lack of intrinsic motivation, limited social support, or an unsupportive workplace environment can significantly stall well-being efforts.¹⁴ As such, we encourage employers and health plans to consider how and when these barriers might impede participants' well-being progress.

Social determinants of health (SDOH), or the circumstances and systems in which people live, impact well-being.¹⁵

SDOH include a variety of individual and systemic factors such as access to healthcare, safe housing and nutritious food options, exposure to environmental pollutants, and racism or violence. Factors stemming from SDOH can become significant obstacles to holistic well-being and sustained well-being behavior change.

Well-being dimensions are culturally situated and must be culturally reflective.

We've identified five dimensions that encapsulate holistic well-being, all of which reflect our current understanding of the well-being needs of society. Even so, the ways in which a well-being dimension is influenced, measured, and supported may vary by employee population. Therefore, well-being dimension assessment and subsequent support services should be implemented through a cultural lens that understands the nuances, value systems, and behaviors of a given population.

¹⁴ WebMD Health Services Center for Research, November, 2024, "Behavior Change Framework POV" [Point of View].

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). Healthy People 2030. <https://health.gov/healthypeople>



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