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WHEN MIND & BODY MEET: LIFELONG LEARNING FOR FLOURISHING

Article by Rachel Blair

Abstract

Flourishing is a modern term which, when used in the field of Positive Psychology, communicates positive growth both in oneself and in one's interactions with the world. Flourishing is the goal of lifelong learning in terms of Positive Psychology. Though there are established models of flourishing, including Martin Seligman's PERMA theory, none of these theories account for the role of the body in wellbeing. In this paper, the author will explain the reciprocal relationship between the body and the mind, bringing in evidence from multiple disciplines which suggests that full, optimal functioning/flourishing extends beyond mental health and must include physical functioning. The author argues that mindfulness and embodiment will result in further flourishing and supports this stance by reviewing past and current research. Lifelong learning for flourishing through mindfulness and embodiment must be adopted by the individual personally and professionally. They will develop certain qualities including, but not limited to, self-discipline and persistence through this process. Other skills that may be developed will be discussed. Assessment in terms of wellbeing has been covered almost entirely in the direction of brain to body. Reliable tools need to be developed to assess the direct effects of the body on the brain.

Introduction

What do you think of when you hear the word *flourish*? Some may think about their children, growing and thriving in each aspect of their development. Others may envision a lush, healthy garden full of strong plants and vibrant flowers. Though these are certainly great mental images of flourishing, the word *flourish* takes on a slightly different meaning in terms of Positive Psychology. The word *flourish* has been defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Flourish, n.d.) as "to grow luxuriantly; to achieve success; to reach a height of development." In the field of Positive Psychology, flourishing is better defined by a handful of choice elements.

In 2011, Seligman published *Flourish*, in which he proposed a new theory called Wellbeing Theory (WBT). WBT, now one of the most influential theories within its field, has five elements (PERMA):

1. Positive emotion (e.g. pleasure, comfort, warmth)
2. Engagement (e.g. a task completely captivated your attention)
3. Relationships (simply put, other people)
4. Meaning (belonging to and serving something bigger than yourself), and
5. Accomplishment (pursuing achievement or mastery for its own sake, though it may bring no positive emotion or meaning) (pp. 16-20)

The goal of Positive Psychology in terms of WBT is flourishing, and the way to flourish is to exhibit each of these elements.

Additional models of flourishing include the Mental Health Dual Continua Model (Keyes, 2002, 2005, 2006) and the Mental Health Spectrum (Huppert, 2005; 2009), each of which differ slightly in their interpretation of what it means to flourish. According to the Mental Health Dual Continua Model, flourishing is synonymous with mental health and an individual is considered to be flourishing if he or she is “thriving, prospering, and faring well in endeavors” (as cited in Hefferon, 2013, p. 3). Flourishing is assessed using a tool that breaks down certain indicators of mental health into three categories:

1. Functional psychological wellbeing: self-acceptance, personal growth, life purpose, autonomy, positive relationships, and environmental mastery;
2. Functional social wellbeing: social acceptance, social growth, social contribution, social coherence, and social integration; and
3. Emotional wellbeing: positive affect and life satisfaction.

High scores in these categories indicate flourishing for an individual.

The Mental Health Spectrum (Huppert, 2005, 2009) is concerned with *groups* rather than individuals and defined flourishing as possessing the core features of positive emotions, engagement, and meaning, as well as three of six additional features: self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, and positive relationships (Huppert & So, 2011). This theory makes the claim that by addressing and improving these indicators of mental health within a *population*, more *individuals* would begin to flourish.

Flourishing is not the same as happiness and Seligman (2011) clearly stated this. Happiness is generally thought of as being in a cheerful mood and has been measured in terms of life satisfaction. Although certain elements – positive emotion, engagement, and meaning – are included in the definitions of both happiness and flourishing, one may be flourishing though he or she is not in a cheerful mood. Flourishing theories take into account the fact that there is great potential for development and enlightenment through hardship. Positive emotions are only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to flourishing (Hefferon, 2013, p. 7).

Together, the three theories discussed acknowledge the complexities of the human experience and of human emotions; however, none of these theories consider the role of the body in wellbeing. The focus of these established theories is purely psychological. Nevertheless, the body and the mind have a reciprocal relationship that cannot be ignored.

Literature Review

Somatopsychic is a term that suggests that the body has a reciprocal effect on the mind just as the mind affects the body. Evidence from many fields has examined this somatopsychic reciprocity. Much research has demonstrated that physical activity helps alleviate stress, improves one's mood, increases experiences of positive emotion, improves self-esteem, alleviates mild anxious and depressive symptoms, and boosts cognitive function (Biddle, Fox, & Boucher, 2000; Dunn, Trivedi, Kampert, Clark, & Chambliss, 2004; Health Development Agency, 2000). Research in the modern field of Positive Health has found that positive emotions increase longevity and improve physical functioning. Additionally, positive emotions have been linked to lower cortisol levels, higher resistance to illness, and decreased likelihood of coronary heart disease (Taylor, 2012). Other research has demonstrated that psychological stress is an important determinant of low heart rate variability (HRV), a risk factor for disease and mortality (Verkuil, Brosschot, Tollenaar, Lane, & Thayer, 2016). Further studies have shown that having a distressed personality (characterized by high co-occurrence of negative affect and social inhibition) puts one at risk for psychological distress that correlates with disease promoting mechanisms (Mols & Denollet, 2010). More research has discovered that simply receiving a 45-minute massage decreases blood cortisol, enhances immune function, and moderates psychological stress (Massage produces positive, 2010). These findings, though they are just a few of myriad examples, suggest that full and optimal human functioning – flourishing – extends beyond mental health and includes physical functioning as well.

The body is not just a vessel in which an individual's spirit and mind reside. The body plays a central role in one's experience of and interpretation of the world; the body is also shaped and altered according to the world around the individual. Individual senses of touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing help people to navigate their immediate surroundings, avoid pain and injury, feel pleasure, and discover unique likes and dislikes. Parents may watch their children playing in the yard and feel joy; people may taste their favorite type of cake and feel satisfied; a child may listen to lullabies before

bedtime and become sleepy. People's choices of what to eat, how to use their bodies, and where to spend their time will inevitably alter and mold their physical form. A good example of this phenomenon lies in bodybuilding. By taking in specific amounts of key nutrients, engaging in strenuous exercise, and ensuring proper amounts of rest, a person's body will become lean, strong, and muscularly developed. A person's physical appearance can even affect how others treat him, thus altering his worldview.

If the body is so central to one's life experience and mental state, should not everyone prioritize bodily awareness and make consistent efforts to reconnect with and nurture their body? It seems that the average person deals with the stressors and challenges of daily life without much consideration for what exists below the shoulders. Furthermore, what benefits would there be to increasing one's bodily awareness? Hefferon wrote (2013):

If we are indeed embodied creatures who rely on the body to engage and interact with the outside world, it seems impossible and indeed naïve to continue a discipline so detached from the body and its facilitation in wellbeing. Becoming aware of, reconnecting with, and treating the body in a positive way will inevitably set us up for success and flourishing over time. (p. 15)

But how does one become aware of and reconnect with his body? And what does this have to do with lifelong learning?

Learning Throughout the Lifespan

Flourishing is, in and of itself, a process of lifelong learning as human beings are complex and dynamic. Anytime the bodily aspect of flourishing is emphasized, one must remember that the body is constantly changing. An individual is not the same – physically or otherwise – as they were a year ago. They certainly will not be the same at age 50 as they were at age 18. Each person will have unique physical needs and a variety of choices about how to fulfill those needs. For example, children's bodies and brains grow rapidly. Physical movement and exercise plays a central role in cognitive development and the maintenance of a child's brain (Sibley & Etnier, 2003; Sylwester, 2010). In fact, intellectual development and physical activity are intertwined for children (Montessori, 1967). Sleep is another important factor in physical and mental development, with infants needing about 16 hours per day and toddlers needing about 11 hours per day (Frank, Issa, & Stryker, 2001; Wilson & Conyers, 2013). Finally, proper nutrition encourages learning ability by supporting physical activity and social engagement in children while helping to prevent fatigue (Barnet & Barnet, 1998).

Children primarily learn from observing their parents, which means learning is more a process of "absorbing" than an active attempt at engaging in or altering certain health behaviors like an adult would do. Parents have a significant responsibility for their children's healthy (or unhealthy) choices. In the preschool years, children will copy the eating habits and physical activity levels of their family (Boobier, 2008). Once in school, children will be exposed to other environments where they will learn about health

behaviors, such as the cafeteria or playground at school and a friend's house during a play date or sleepover. Several studies have found that there is a steep decline in physical activity from childhood to the teen years, especially for girls (Boyd & Yin, 1996). It is imperative that parents encourage their children at a young age to be active and that parents model an active lifestyle so that their children form positive health habits. This modeling of exercise is, simultaneously, a learning process for the parents because they must take the children's developmental stage (e.g. cognitive, emotional, or physical capabilities) into consideration.

Adolescence can be a challenging phase of life for many girls and boys. Peer pressure and physical changes associated with puberty (coupled with an increased focus on body image) can lead to depression, the onset of eating disorders, experimentation with one's diet, and alcohol consumption – each of which may have detrimental effects on the teen's body, self-esteem, and cognitive development (Boobier, 2008). Additionally, adolescence is a time when certain internalizing (e.g. depression, anxiety) and externalizing (e.g. aggression, law breaking) symptoms may appear (Asfour, Koussa, Perrino, Stoutenbery, & Prado, 2016). This makes adolescence a critical time for physical education and learning, often organized and provided by parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, or other professionals. Teens may glean helpful advice about puberty and their sexual development through open discussion with parents and professionals. A survey of high-school freshman girls revealed that the girls believed the best way to prepare for puberty was by getting emotional support and practical information from their mothers about their soon-to-come physical and emotional changes (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Research on boys showed similar findings: boys are more comfortable with and less confused by the changes puberty brings when they were prepared early (i.e. age 9 or 10) (Stein & Reiser, 1994).

Learning about proper activity levels and nutritional needs is important for adolescents as many teens are now overweight, putting them at risk for not only health problems (e.g. hypertension, diabetes) but also social discrimination and bullying, which contributes to depression and low self-esteem (Segel, 2011). As cited in the previous paragraph, activity levels decrease significantly from the end of childhood through adolescence; however, physical activity has numerous physical and cognitive benefits for teens that should not be ignored in conversations regarding flourishing. Sports and other activities such as dancing, hiking, biking, and skateboarding help adolescents engage in social relationships, learn teamwork, increase self-confidence, and strengthen character and self-discipline (Boyd & Yin, 1996). Studies have found that athletes have a more positive body image, higher self-esteem, and greater wellbeing than non-athletes, especially for women (Hausenblas & Downs, 2001; Snyder & Kivlin, 2013). In addition to sports and the activities listed above, teens may learn about their bodies and wellbeing through the internet, television, and their friends. However, these sources may not accurately inform teens. Thus, properly educating adolescents about the myriad benefits of physical activity and nutrition is crucial.

Adults have different physical and cognitive needs than children. They also learn how to fulfill those needs in different ways than a child since they are not fully dependent upon

someone else to teach them; however, the main requirements for optimal physical performance are essentially the same. For the body to function at its best, it needs proper nutrition and hydration, rest and shelter, and physical exercise. Life will place new demands on the body that will certainly have an effect on one's physical as well as mental health. A few such demands include illness, injury, stress, poor nutrition, and sleep deprivation. As previously discussed, flourishing requires the presence of factors such as emotional stability, vitality, optimism, resilience, self-esteem, engagement, meaning, positive emotion, and positive relationships. Our physical and mental health take a toll when we are ill, stressed, or have not gotten enough rest, making it increasingly difficult to feel positive emotions, be optimistic, and maintain emotional stability. As an adult, an individual is personally responsible to engage in habits and activities that support these and the many aspects of flourishing. It is not always easy to do so, however, and the process requires patience and continuous adaptability to the ever-changing nature of life.

Adults learn about the effects the body has on their minds and how to promote flourishing through the body in both traditional and nontraditional ways. Traditional methods of learning may include coursework, books, and information and advice from physical trainers, physicians, nutritionists, and other professionals. Nontraditional methods might include yoga, meditation, dance, weight lifting, sports, or other hands-on activities. Regardless of the means by which an individual learns to flourish, the central practices they must follow to keep the process of learning going are mindfulness and embodiment.

Mindfulness and Embodiment

Mindfulness is, simply put, being aware of the present moment. Another definition of mindfulness is "a state of psychological freedom that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, without attachment to any particular point of view" (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Thus, this awareness is the result of one's intentional focus on the present moment, refraining from judgment and simultaneously accepting the experience as it unfolds. Though mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism, the practice of mindfulness does not need a spiritual/religious context and anyone can reap its psychological, cognitive, and physical benefits. Studies have found that those who practice mindfulness have reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, increased positive affect, greater emotional balance, increased compassion, and greater mental and physical wellbeing. Mindfulness has been successful both in fostering better health, improved physical immunity, lowered stress arousal, decreased cortisol levels, and reduced hypertension. In addition to these benefits, mindfulness allows one to explore the nature of their self as well as their perception to others by taking on an observer's role to their own thoughts and feelings (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Young-Jones, Sands, Hayden, & Byrket, 2016).

Though it may seem quite simple, mindfulness can be challenging to achieve in this increasingly distracting world. There are few moments throughout the day when people are able to be still, disconnect, and be fully *present*. Many people are nearly always

connected to their phones, receiving notifications, responding to emails, and being bombarded by information. In the first six months of 2015, adults in the USA spent an average of almost six hours per day on their cell phones, computers, and other devices (Allen, 2015). It is not uncommon to see people check emails while they are driving, talk on the phone when they are running errands, or scroll through Facebook while they are eating a meal. Even when an individual does have a moment of solitude or peace, they may find their mind wandering, thinking about a list of things to do, or preoccupied with stress.

Psychologists and counselors are becoming more aware of the benefits of mindfulness and are incorporating its practice into their own, teaching adults how to integrate mindfulness into their lives. Benefits in therapy include increased emotion regulation, better working memory and attention capacity, and decreased negative affect and depressive symptoms (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Interventions that mental health professionals may use with patients can include asking patients to scan their bodies for sensations, then telling the patients to allow and accept the sensations without a reaction to them. In couple therapy, individuals may be asked to look into each other's eyes and notice what reactions, feelings, or thoughts arise. Practicing mindfulness can be done without professional help as well. An exercise that anyone can incorporate is mindfulness breathing meditation, which involves sitting comfortably and bringing full attention to one's breath for 10 minutes. Another way to incorporate mindfulness into one's daily life might be to give full attention to enjoying a meal without distractions such as television or smartphones: What is the texture like? What flavors are present? When do you begin to feel full or satiated?

Embodiment is a second practice that is central to learning about one's individual needs for flourishing. To embody something means to express or to be an example of an idea or principle, to give bodily form to an abstract concept, or to unite [some things] in a comprehensive whole (Embody, n.d.); thus, embodiment for physical wellbeing refers to one's living expression of the principles that they have learned to support their wellbeing. In layman's terms, embodiment is doing what you know is good for you! An individual can be mindful of their physical or mental state consistently; however, unless they incorporate positive changes and choices into their daily lives, there will be no improvement in their flourishing. Examples of embodiment may be simple and practical. Consider for example that an individual becomes mindful that he is stressed due to a conflict that arose at work a few days ago. He has been feeling anxious, tense, and irritable. Due to these feelings, he hasn't been able to sleep well at night and stays up tossing and turning. This causes him to wake up tired and the cycle of stress continues. This person might practice embodiment by turning his phone off during dinner so that he is not distracted by checking his work emails. He might decide to leave the phone in another room when he goes to bed so that there is no temptation to check it in the middle of the night. Also, he might take 10 minutes before going to bed to do some meditative breathing exercises (like discussed in the previous paragraph). He notices the following morning that he slept more soundly and, thus, repeats this routine the next evening.

Without mindfulness and embodiment, a person would be unable to recognize the positive or negative effects that an activity, an event, or even a food has on their body. Additionally, they would be unable to put what they learn about themselves into action. With the elements of mindfulness and embodiment, a person is able to engage in a task and fully commit their body and mind to its completion; they are able to feel their body and mind's response to a certain food they ate or a type of exercise they completed; and they are more likely to continuously practice healthy habits that support their physical and mental health. Nonetheless, there are numerous barriers to embodiment, especially when it comes to health behaviors.

Skills Developed

Stress, physical limitations, lack of interest, lack of social support, poor accessibility, and poor self-efficacy are just some of the many barriers to engaging in health behaviors. Additional barriers can include obesity, feeling too old, poor health, fear of embarrassment, a lack of energy, a lack of enjoyment of physical activity, unaffordability, work demands, inconsistent childcare, and more (Tucker et al., 2011). Mental health professionals develop skills in identifying patients' unique barriers to health behaviors as well as identifying the strongest motivators for patients to engage in health behaviors. This can be challenging because what motivates one patient may be a barrier for another. For example, an obese patient diagnosed with diabetes may fear embarrassment if he tries to exercise and thus avoid physical activity; however, another patient may be *motivated* to exercise due to the diagnosis. A patient may find his past experiences with alcohol-related violence and abuse as a motivator in avoiding alcohol use; another patient may use alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with psychological trauma and thus the traumatic history may be considered a barrier to avoiding alcohol use (Nagelhout, Hogeling, Spruijt, Postma, & de Vries, 2017).

A promising technique that is often used within the domains of sports therapy and complementary/alternative medicine is biofeedback training. Biofeedback training (BFT) helps people become aware of physiological processes and enables them to reconnect with their body to promote self-empowerment, self-regulation, and embodiment. Primarily, BFT considers heart rate variability (HRV) and provides HRV coherence feedback, based on an analysis of heart rate patterns that occur as a result of changes in one's emotional state. Negative emotions in particular may result in a disordered heart rate pattern (McCraty & Rees, 2009). BFT has helped individuals relieve headaches, digestive issues, asthma, hypertension, epilepsy, and psychological distress. BFT can be learned by professionals as well as other individuals and can be utilized in both formal and informal settings.

Yoga has been covered quite extensively in modern research and evidence suggests it can increase wellbeing. Studies have shown that yoga decreases stress, increases mindfulness and self-compassion, improves mood and energy, and helps increase sense of life purpose, life satisfaction, and self-confidence (Hefferon, 2013). Additionally, yoga can reduce anxiety, increase feelings of gratitude and acceptance,

and encourage centeredness and empowerment. Yoga is an excellent skill to utilize to promote flourishing.

Throughout this process of learning about oneself across the lifespan, there are many personal skills that one may cultivate:

1. **Patience:** learning what works for one's unique physical and mental chemistry is a process. An individual may have to try numerous times to discover what is most effective.
2. **Self-compassion:** showing the same warmth, care, acceptance, and loving kindness that one might show to a good friend during a difficult time; recognizing that there is no such thing as perfection and refraining from judging and criticizing oneself.
3. **Self-awareness:** becoming aware of certain things that trigger stress, anxiety, or a negative mood as well as those things that help one to relax, to decrease stress, and to induce feelings of happiness and gratitude.
4. **Honesty:** as a person becomes aware of their needs and how to meet them, he will become honest with himself about those needs. He will also become more comfortable sharing what those needs are with others.
5. **Persistence:** change and improvement does not usually happen overnight. Many of life's challenges will last a week, a month, or even a few years. An individual must be determined to improve despite setbacks and challenges in order to flourish.
6. **Self-discipline:** oftentimes the choices that make the biggest difference in how one feels do not come easy. It takes self-discipline to exercise regularly, eat nutritious foods, and engage in positive relationships when life gets busy.
7. **Confidence:** when people feel good physically, they become more confident.
8. **Asking for help:** relationships are one of life's greatest blessing and social support is crucial to a person's wellbeing. When people experience challenges or need encouragement, they learn that it is ok to ask for help – and of course learn to return the favor!

Assessment of Somatopsychic Flourishing

Assessment measures of the somatopsychic side of flourishing are limited. A few scales have been developed to measure flourishing but, because traditional models of flourishing do not consider the role of the body in wellbeing, those scales fail to glean in-depth information about one's physical wellbeing or incorporate measures that address the various physical facets of wellbeing. Seligman's PERMA flourishing scale (Authentic

happiness, n.d.) does ask questions such as “how satisfied are you with your physical health?” and “compared to others of the same gender and age, how is your health?”; however, these questions are quite general and their responses point to one’s psychological perception of one’s health rather than assessing one’s actual physical health. One scale that measures mindfulness is the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003) but, again, this tool does not directly measure physical wellbeing and just barely skims the surface of mindfulness, presenting statements such as “I snack without being aware that I am eating” and “I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention” (Hefferon, 2013, p. 217). Database searches for “assessment and flourishing” and “assessment and flourishing and the body” offer no studies that incorporate physical considerations. Additionally, only one publication discussed nutrition as a factor that influences wellbeing. Further search for assessment tools unearths scales that measure wellbeing in terms of psychological, social, and emotional factors (Petrillo, Capone, Caso, & Keyes, 2014). Some of these acknowledge that physical health is related to wellbeing yet still fail to assess physical health in a formal and direct fashion. Lastly, there is a significant pool of research covering topics such as the effects of positive emotions, happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction on physical health; however, the author was unable to uncover research that investigates these topics in the opposite direction – the effects of physical health and physical flourishing on the brain. It is clear that more research is needed to fill this gap.

Final Remarks

Flourishing is the ultimate goal for one’s health and wellbeing. Although current models of flourishing do not pay enough attention to the role of the body in wellbeing, sufficient research evidence demonstrates the reciprocity of the body and mind, the benefits of physical activity, and the importance of physical health at each stage of life (Biddle et al., 2000; Dunn et al., 2004; Hausenblas & Downs, 2001; Health Development Agency, 2000; Hefferon, 2013; Montessori, 1967; Sibley & Etnier, 2003; Snyder & Kivlin, 2013; Sylwester, 2010; Taylor, 2012). It is crucial that individuals are mindful of their bodies on an ongoing basis, habitually participate in physical activities and exercise, engage in lifelong learning to support flourishing, and consistently put into action what they learn. Taking care of our physical self offers countless ways to enhance our wellbeing.

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