

# LIGHT UP YOUR WORKFORCE WITH POSITIVITY:

*How Psychological Well-Being Revolutionizes Employee  
Wellness & Organizational Culture*

WELCOA WHITEPAPER BY MJ SHAAR



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## ABOUT **MJ SHAAR**



MJ Shaar is one of the most sought-after experts applying positive psychology to health promotion. Trained by the National Speakers Association, she is one of the first 50 in the world to obtain a Master in Applied Positive Psychology from University of Pennsylvania. In recent years, MJ facilitated sessions for small and Fortune Companies, governmental institutions, wellness and coaching organizations, as well as various universities. She has worked in 10 countries over 4 continents and her trainings have been delivered in 4 languages. She co-authored *Smarts and Stamina: The Busy Person's Guide to Optimal Health and Performance*, and contributes to the *Huffington Post* and *Psychology Today*.

## ★ Introduction

We are in the Age of Transcendence.<sup>1</sup> Growing numbers are reaching midlife and feel an increasing concern for personal significance. Simultaneously, the Millennials are entering the workforce with the same desire. Whatever the cause, employees want more than a better car, bigger house, or the newest iPhone. They want to leave a mark, feel that they make a difference, and experience meaning at work. They want work that is emotionally engaging, socially meaningful, and psychologically rewarding.

Competition for talent is fierce.<sup>2</sup> Good workers have more ways than ever to learn about hiring opportunities and to make their interest known. More and more talented individuals are also opening their own businesses.

In this context, it is not surprising that 82% of business and HR leaders worldwide believe that culture is a potential competitive advantage,<sup>3</sup> yet 79% also believe that they have a significant engagement and retention problem.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, organizations try harder to rank amongst the best places to work and the role of the wellness program or department is greatly expanded. Offering a few physical activity or nutrition campaigns is no longer sufficient to meet modern challenges. We need to do more and do it better.

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## ★ Beyond Food and Exercise

While many people who work in health promotion are sincere about wanting to promote wellness, that's not always the perception of the people they intend to serve. Unfortunately, many worry that wellness is just another gimmick for employers to maximize employee efficiency, and doubt that such programs can be effective.

Simon Sinek, an internationally recognized leadership author, speaker and consultant, says: "Trust emerges when we have a sense that another person or organization is driven by things other than their own self-gain."<sup>5</sup> That's really what needs to be instilled in participants: trust that wellness is not primarily for the organization's gain, but for their own. Of course, this has to be sincere, but health promotion needs sincerity to be effective. Otherwise, it becomes the gimmick that employees fear it might be.

Trust is an important factor in turning companies from good to great. As world-renowned authors Raj Sisodia, David Wolfe and Jag Sheth explain in their book, *Firms of Endearment*, "There is no more powerful source of creative energy in the world than a turned on, empowered human being."<sup>1</sup>

To instill the trust that will turn employees on and keep improving effectiveness rates, wellness professionals should give psychological well-being greater attention and start to include it directly in their health promotion efforts.

So, let's examine what psychological well-being really is and what it can contribute to health outcomes and behaviors. We will then explore more concrete reasons why including psychological well-being in wellness

programming can benefit not just your health promotion effort, but also your organization in general. Lastly, we will look at a few low-cost initiatives that you can easily implement to begin integrating psychological well-being into your wellness programming.

## ★ Positive Psychology, the Study of Psychological Well-Being

Founded in 1998 by then President of the American Psychological Association Dr. Martin Seligman, positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes us flourish. It seeks to understand the causes and effects of psychological well-being. Positive psychology is the science that helps people lead happy, productive, meaningful, healthy, and fulfilling lives. Where traditional psychology asks, “What’s wrong in this picture, and how can we fix it?” positive psychology asks, “What’s right with this person/situation/context, and how can we build from there?”

Positive psychology offers a fresh perspective to address some of today’s biggest challenges. For example, until recently in the United States, healthcare has been mainly concerned with the diagnosis and management of diseases. This approach has failed to prevent epidemics in obesity, sleep deprivation, heart disease, stress, and depression, to name only a few.

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Today’s scholars, industry leaders and healthcare professionals alike call for a more balanced approach, where not only would healthcare strategies seek to cure disease after it happens, but also where strong health is cultivated and maintained over the years.<sup>6,8</sup> That’s where positive psychology comes in.

Seligman proposes a model of flourishing based on five pillars of psychological well-being, which together spell the acronym PERMA.<sup>7</sup>

- » **P stands for Positive Emotions**, or the ability to feel good, to enjoy oneself, and to be interested. Positive emotions include love, curiosity, hope, gratitude, and awe.
- » **E stands for Engagement**. It’s about being absorbed and challenged by ones’ activities, experiencing satisfaction from them, and enjoying the state of flow, also known as being “in the zone.”<sup>8</sup> Optimism, the ability to see positive possibilities, enables people to get engaged in what they are doing.
- » **R stands for Relationships**. It’s about feeling connected to others, and feeling supportive and supported through these connections.
- » **M stands for Meaning**. It’s about being connected to something larger than oneself and having a sense of purpose in what one does. Spirituality belongs here.
- » **A stands for Accomplishment**. It includes having a sense of mastery, achieving milestones and goals, and feeling successful.

The elements of PERMA are aspects of life that we can intentionally increase to improve well-being.

Critics of positive psychology say that the field promotes a relentless quest for happiness, which often backfires, or that it encourages us to put our heads in the sand to ignore the negative. Such comments are misinformed. Just as it is foolish to try to promote healthy eating by rejecting every single gram of sugar, salt, and saturated fat in one's diet, it is just as unrealistic to promote positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment while pretending that everything else that composes our beautifully complex lives doesn't exist.

Imagine a world without fear, shame, or guilt. The resulting recklessness would clearly not be so positive. Joking aside, having a strong base of positivity<sup>9</sup> can help us be more resilient<sup>10</sup> so that we can be better prepared and react more gracefully to the negative events that will inevitably present themselves at one point or another.

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## ★ Can Psychological Well-Being Impact Health Outcomes?

So what does psychological well-being, or PERMA, have to do with health? As it turns out, it has a huge impact. Here's what we know from research.

### HOW POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND OPTIMISM RELATE TO HEALTH:

- » Positive emotions have been found in different studies<sup>11</sup> to be related to an improved immune function and a reduced sensitivity to symptoms when they occur.
- » In the long term, research shows that happy individuals tend to outlive their less contented counterparts.<sup>12, 13</sup>

### HOW ENGAGEMENT AND OPTIMISM RELATE TO HEALTH:

- » People who experience flow while exercising are more likely to continue and thus get greater health benefits.<sup>13</sup>
- » Optimists enjoy greater antibody production and better immune outcomes.<sup>14</sup>
- » Optimists also benefit from lower average blood pressure<sup>15</sup>, and lower instance of coronary heart disease.<sup>16</sup>
- » Optimists have a lower hazard of cancer-related mortality.<sup>17</sup>
- » Optimistic individuals have an approximately 50 percent reduced risk of experiencing a cardiovascular event compared to their pessimistic peers.<sup>18</sup>
- » For every 10 point increase in a person's score on their optimism scale, the risk of early death decreased by 19%.<sup>19</sup> If we consider that, for an adult of average health, the difference between sudden death risk for smokers versus non-smokers is roughly 5-10%, the effect of optimism is massive.<sup>19</sup>

## HOW RELATIONSHIPS RELATE TO HEALTH:

- » People who feel better socially integrated tend to have reduced risk of abdominal obesity, inflammation, and high blood pressure.<sup>20</sup>
- » Those who have at least one person with whom to discuss and talk through their problems show fewer signs of aging in their cardiovascular systems.<sup>21</sup>
- » Those who feel they have good support at home have lower blood pressure responses to stressful events.<sup>22</sup>

## HOW MEANING RELATES TO HEALTH:

- » A high sense of purpose in life is associated with a reduced risk for cardiovascular events.<sup>23</sup>
- » Every one-point increase on a 6-point purpose-in-life scale results in 27% reduced risk of heart attack and a 22% reduced risk of stroke.<sup>24</sup>

## HOW ACCOMPLISHMENT RELATES TO HEALTH:

- » Having a sense of accomplishment with regards to our level of physical activity can improve weight, blood pressure, body fat, waist-to-hip ratio, and BMI - without changing the amount of exercise we actually do.<sup>25</sup>

These are only some of the studies rallying to show that not only does a sound mind live in a sound body, but also a sound body comes from a sound mind! If you conduct your own search for ways that PERMA relates to health outcomes, you'll find dozens more sources that corroborate these findings.

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## ★ Can Psychological Well-Being Impact Health Behaviors?

As if the information above wasn't enough, here's another important contribution to health from improved psychological well-being: it influences biochemical activity in the brain in a way that makes better sleep, food, and exercise decisions more likely.<sup>26</sup>

For example, a better mood simultaneously increases serotonin and decreases cortisol, both of which reduce insomnia and food cravings.<sup>27</sup> There is evidence that serotonin boosts will-power<sup>28</sup>, which is helpful to our exercise intentions, food intake regulation and other health decisions. In other words, by improving psychological well-being, we can improve other health behaviors<sup>13, 26</sup>, and therefore shape better health outcomes.

The link between psychological well-being and physical health is so strong that researchers Diener and Biswas-Diener sum it up this way: "We should all think of happiness, hope, and optimism as important health-protective factors. Suggest to your doctor that he or she add these items to the health checklist."<sup>29</sup>

## ★ Can Psychological Well-Being Be Taught?

In a word, YES!

Positive psychology research not only studies what helps us flourish, but also how to get there. It's one thing to know that positive emotions help us be resilient, but if we also know how to generate more positivity in our lives, we can reap more of the resulting benefits.<sup>9</sup> It's good to know that using our strengths at work helps us feel more confident and engaged,<sup>30</sup> but if we also know how to effectively increase the use of our strengths, then we can maximize these benefits. Numerous books and articles are now available describing ways to increase PERMA.<sup>7, 31, 32</sup>

Given that psychological well-being improves both health outcomes and health behaviors, and if it can be taught and learned, it follows that wellness programs can benefit by addressing PERMA directly.

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## ★ Should Your Program Promote Psychological Well-Being?

Including psychological well-being may at first seem like an additional component that would lengthen and complicate a health promoter's to-do list, but it is actually the contrary. Consider that most participants have had a lifetime of failed attempts in their food and exercise intentions. Chronic insomnia is also very difficult to cure when addressed in isolation. But if a better mood can positively impact these three other key behaviors by rendering them easier to tackle<sup>26</sup>, then psychological well-being can make programs more effective with less effort from both wellness professionals and their participants.

A few other reasons to include psychological well-being at work:

- » Positive emotions transform people for the better, allowing them to discover and build new skills, create new bonds, improve existing relationships, and build new, useful knowledge.<sup>9</sup>
- » In today's economy, an engaged and happy workforce is an organization's greatest asset. Under such circumstances, sales can increase by 37%, productivity can improve by 31%, and accuracy on tasks can rise by 19%.<sup>33</sup>
- » Happier employees bring higher productivity, lower turnover, and lower recruitment and training costs.<sup>1</sup>
- » Happy people function and perform better. They are better problem solvers and better ambassadors for the company. They get better performance reviews, get promoted more often, and make more money.<sup>29</sup>
- » Employees are far more likely to have new ideas on days when they feel happier.<sup>34</sup>

- » Positive emotions and psychological capital (a construct encompassing hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience) bring about positive organizational citizenship behaviors, such as being well integrated socially in the organization, being willing to lend a hand where needed, and experiencing higher levels of engagement.<sup>29, 35, 36</sup>
- » Positive emotions and psychological capital are negatively related to workplace deviance behaviors, such as cynicism towards organizational change and other such dysfunctional attitudes.<sup>35</sup>

If the list above doesn't quite give the argument you believe will convince your CXOs to integrate psychological well-being into your organization, be assured that this list is not exhaustive. Happy employees benefit their organizations in very many ways. The list is so impressive, you will likely find just what you need if you look.

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## ★ Where to Begin?

If you feel ready to give psychological well-being a try, here are a few low-fuss, low-cost ways to get the ball rolling:

- » Use whatever messaging strategy you may have to plant positive seeds. Entryway flat screens, posters at the gym/cafeteria/elevators/restrooms, your wellness portal, your wellness newsletter, email, or text messaging, and specially-designed wellness champion T-shirts are a few of the countless ways you can use to communicate. Use these spaces to bring up meaning and purpose in life. For example, ask “What brings meaning to your day?” or “Who benefits the most from your work?” Or maybe you can make meaning-inducing suggestions, such as “Spend extra time with someone who’s important to you today.” You could probably come up with messages for each of the PERMA elements. This sort of messaging may not completely change people’s outlook on life, but the resulting chatter will help you identify whether your participants are ready to tackle that sort of work.
- » Begin integrating PERMA into other campaigns you are already offering. For example, did you know that one of the secrets of the French for keeping their weight in check despite a rather rich diet may be that meals are used not only to eat, but also to connect with their loved ones?<sup>37</sup> Use their example and integrate some positive conversation starters in your nutrition campaigns. “What do you feel grateful for today?” “What are you proud of today?” and “What was the best part of your day?” are good examples of positive conversation starters that can help shape our brains to look for what’s right.




- » Launch a *Pay it Forward* campaign. Print postcards that say “I thank \_\_\_\_\_” for “\_\_\_\_\_.” Have that line repeated several times on the postcard, so that each recipient can read who was recognized before and then send it on to another person. This is not only a way to make sure participants bond together and feel recognized for what they do, but it is also a good way to get positive gossip started.<sup>38, 39</sup>

## ★ Show You Care

Beyond all the above reasons to include psychological well-being in health promotion efforts, there is one more: it tells your participants that you care. Asking participants to find more time for home cooking and regular gym sessions may seem like an unnecessary burden to many who are already experiencing great work or financial demands, including those with young children, those taking care of aging parents, or those with a sick sibling, friend or spouse. The list goes on. Giving these prospective participants concrete well-being interventions that don't add either an extra time burden or pressure to meet what might seem like an excessive challenge is more appropriate and respectful of their situations. It will get the ball rolling in a better direction, while still benefiting the numbers that show up in the evaluations of wellness coaches, coordinators, and directors.

Beyond all the above reason to include psychological well-being in health promotion efforts, there is one more: it tells participants that you care.

Including psychological well-being in your health promotion effort can take you from basic wellness to greater overall well-being. It helps you do more, and do it better. It refines the tone your offer, making its value clear and compelling to your participants. It contributes to an organizational culture that is a potential competitive advantage. And it can improve how participants feel about your intentions, and our profession. 



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