

# Enhancing Student Wellbeing: Resources for Academic Educators

## Theories of health and wellbeing informing this program

This program adopts a 'settings' approach to health promotion and draws on self-determination theory and positive psychology to identify strategies for supporting student wellbeing through curriculum design and teaching practice.

### A settings approach to health promotion

A 'settings' approach to health understands individual and population health and wellbeing to be a product of people's physical and psychological resources as they interact with the risks or stressors in their environments. In an educational context, this approach recognises the importance of the teaching and learning environment to students' mental health and wellbeing. Importantly, the settings approach indicates that the academic curriculum has an important role to play in supporting student mental wellbeing, alongside individual psychosocial interventions and professional treatment (Wyn et al, 2000). The settings approach has been successfully utilised in Australian schools in the *Mind Matters* project (Sheerhan et al, 2000) and in the UK in the Healthy Universities program (Dooris et al, 2010). An awareness of the complexity and interconnectivity of health determinants is central to the settings approach, indicating the need for a coordinated and comprehensive, multi-level strategy to improve health outcomes.

### Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation that posits that mental ill-health is a consequence of unmet or frustrated psychological needs. SDT assumes that people have a natural and evolved tendency to strive for personal growth, mastery of new challenges, and integration of new experiences to form a coherent sense of self. These natural developmental tendencies require ongoing social and psychological 'nutriments' and supports. Those nutrients are regular experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Such experiences enable people to develop and function optimally, and experience wellness. When such experiences are denied, people struggle to integrate experiences and are ill-equipped to face new

challenges. SDT understands psychological distress and associated behaviours as reactions to the denial of the basic need for experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

#### Read more about SDT here:

<http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>

### Positive Psychology – Dr Martin Seligman's PERMA model

Positive psychology is a theory of the conditions of human flourishing that supports and complements SDT. Martin Seligman describes 'wellbeing' or flourishing as the focal topic of Positive Psychology (2011: 15). His recent work (2011) identifies that people who enjoy high levels of wellbeing demonstrate: Positive emotions; Engagement; (PERMA). While each of us has greater or lesser innate capacities to experience the PERMA elements, Seligman maintains that we can strengthen our capacities – that the techniques of thriving can be taught and learnt through cognitive and emotional tools (2011). Encouraging university students to adopt the practices of positive individuals has been the focus of several other OLT projects such as *Student Mental Health Support and Assistance* (OLT 2010). However, PERMA is also relevant to our focus: teaching and learning practices, and improving the health-promoting qualities of university students' learning environments. There is emerging evidence that the PERMA elements can be successfully embedded in institutional cultures and frameworks to promote student wellbeing, achievement and effectiveness (Slavin et al., 2012).

#### Read more about PERMA and Seligman's theory of flourishing here:

<https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/learn>