



## Mental wellbeing essentials

*This PDF provides a written version of the video “Mental Wellbeing Essentials”, from the Enhancing Student Wellbeing project website.*

Empirical research consistently identifies 5 factors that are essential for wellbeing, or positive mental health and growth: autonomous motivation, a sense of belonging, positive relationships, experiences of autonomy and feelings of competence. (M-BRAC)

According to psychological research, people flourish when their actions and goals are self determined and self actualising – that is, when they are doing what they want to do and acting in accordance with their sense of self, or feeling like they are being true to themselves. This is autonomous motivation – when we do what interests us or what is important to us. It can be contrasted with controlled motivation, where we are energised to act but we do so because we feel pressured or controlled by others – for example, we may fear disappointing others or that we should do something because others value it.

Autonomous motivation is the key to psychological well-being and many other positive outcomes such as persistence, personal growth and achievement because when we act through our own volition, and in accordance with our deep values and interests, we’re more likely to experience feelings of personal autonomy, competence, positive relationships with others and a sense of belonging to social groups. These experiences are critical for mental health because they provide us with psychological resources that help us approach the challenges, difficulties and setbacks in life with creativity and optimism.

We experience belonging when we feel that we are accepted and valued by others within social groups and organisations and this enables us to participate in shared endeavours and pursue common goals. Belonging will be undermined if we are excluded or not accepted by others within a group, or we feel that the cultural values and social purposes of the group are at odds with our own values and interests.

A sense of belonging and shared goals is a condition for and consequence of meaningful and positive relationships with others.

We all need to regularly experience relationships in which we feel we can trust, rely on, value and care for others and experience others trusting, relying on, valuing and caring for us. Positive relationships are thwarted when we experience isolation and disconnection, or when others engage us only instrumentally or conditionally.

In this context, it is important to understand that when psychologists say that people need experiences of autonomy to thrive they do not mean that people need to act alone. In a psychological sense we experience autonomy when our actions, tasks and goals are self-chosen and self-concordant (or authentic), even when they’re shared. Psychologically we need to feel that we are the origin of our actions and that we have chosen to do what we are doing. This sense of autonomy is undermined when we are commanded, directed or controlled by others and expected to comply without explanation or reason.

Finally, we experience competence when we are able to manage the interactions, tasks and challenges that we face. We need to feel capable and effective in our daily lives and this comes from being able to complete tasks, achieve goals and rise to new challenges. A sense of competence does not require that we are good at everything we do, only that we believe that we could become good at it with persistence and practice.

Experiences of competence and autonomy are mutually supportive because when we are doing what we have chosen to do we have greater investment and interest in becoming good at those tasks

Competence, autonomy, relationships and belonging – positive experiences that are mutually interdependent. In combination, these experiences also foster and sustain autonomous motivation in a mutually supporting spiral. These 5 factors in combination are powerful for psychological well-being.