

# Mental health essentials: M-BRAC



Empirical research consistently identifies 5 factors that are essential for wellbeing, or positive mental health and growth: autonomous **M**otivation, a sense of **B**elonging, positive **R**elationships, experiences of **A**utonomy and feelings of **C**ompetence. The acronym M-BRAC is used in this program to refer to these five essential elements of mental wellbeing.

## M – autonomous Motivation



We are autonomously *motivated* when we do things because we find the activities intrinsically interesting or satisfying, or when we believe our actions will facilitate valued goals. When autonomously motivated we feel that our actions are self-determined rather than the result of pressure or control by others. This is psychologically powerful.

Intrinsic interest is the best possible form of motivation. However, not all students are undertaking university study primarily to further their interest in the subject areas and satisfy their love of academic learning. For many students, university study is primarily a means to an end – a required qualification or certification of competence that will enable them to pursue work opportunities that they are interested in. This ‘extrinsic’ goal will provide positive motivation for completing the necessary study providing it is well-internalised – meaning that the student sees the goal as valuable and self-actualising. However, educational research shows that many university students lose sight of their goals – or start to see those goals as unachievable – during their time at university. These are the students who ask themselves, ‘why am I doing this?’ or ‘what’s the point?’

Uncertainty around the outcomes and value of academic learning make it difficult for some students to maintain positive motivation and invest effort in study, to engage with the course content in meaningful ways and to persist and problem-solve when tasks are challenging.

## B – a sense of Belonging



We experience *belonging* when we feel that we are accepted and valued by others within social groups and organisations. Humans are social creatures and we need to feel included by and connected with others within our family, workplace, community and other organisations (Cockshaw and Shochet, 2010).

To have a sense of belonging within a university, students need to feel that they are ‘in the right place’, that they and their learning are valued, and that they ‘fit’ into the values and culture of the institution. If university students do not feel a sense of belonging, inclusion and connection – to their institution and/or their chosen academic program – they will be at higher risk of disengaging and experiencing psychological distress.

A sense of belonging is a condition for and consequence of meaningful and positive relationships with others in the organisation. A sense of belonging

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also facilitates internalisation of social norms and values, which in turn contributes to a shared sense of purpose and meaning in collective activities.

### R – positive Relationships with others



In differing degrees, we all need to regularly interact with and experience positive relationships with other people.

We experience positive *relationships* when we trust, rely on, value and care for others and experience others trusting, relying on, valuing and caring for us. Our need for positive relationships is thwarted when we experience isolation and disconnection, or when others engage us only instrumentally or conditionally.

Positive relationships contribute to autonomous motivation by facilitating the internalisation of social norms and goals. High-quality personal relationships also provide security which facilitates experiences of autonomy and competence. Indeed, the highest quality personal relationships are those in which each person supports the autonomy, competence and connectedness needs of the other person.

### A – experiences of Autonomy, or 'being oneself'



We experience *autonomy* when our actions, tasks and goals are self-chosen, rather than imposed or controlled by others.

Psychological theory posits that humans thrive when we are enabled to choose what to do and how to approach tasks, because this gives us a sense that we are acting authentically or 'being ourselves'. This is described as felt 'autonomy'.

We experience autonomy in the deepest sense when our actions, tasks and goals are not only self-chosen but also self-concordant – that is, aligned with our abiding values and interests. Hence, autonomy is supported by opportunities to choose what we want to do and how to do it, in line with our interests and goals. It is not supported by opportunities to choose between essentially similar options or approaches. A sense of autonomy is thwarted by conditions, directions or incentives that are pressuring, coercive or de-humanising (impersonal).

In learning environments that are perceived to support (psychological) autonomy, students feel that their teachers and faculty – those with decision-making power – understand their perspectives, care about them, and offer choices that enable students to explore their interests and express themselves. By contrast, 'controlling' (non-autonomy-supportive)

learning environments are experienced as de-humanising, and students feel that teachers and faculty impose requirements and tasks arbitrarily, without taking students' differing needs, perspectives and interests into account. Felt autonomy will be thwarted, and intrinsic motivation blunted, if education is perceived as applying a 'cookie-cutter' model in which students feel forced to comply with a fixed program.

### C – experiences of Competence, or being effective, capable



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 'to do' lists, achieve goals and rise to new challenges (Niemiec, Ryan and Deci, 2010).

A sense of competence requires that we regularly experience that we are good (effective) at what we do, or at least that we can become good at it (Sheldon and Krieger, 2007). As Seligman observes, experiences of achievement or accomplishment are addictive (2011). As a result, experiences of competence are important for maintenance of positive task motivation, engagement and persistence.

In learning environments that are perceived to support competence, students face challenges that they have the strengths, support and resources to meet; and they receive constructive and informative feedback on their performance. Our sense of competence is thwarted, and motivation undermined, when we receive no feedback on our efforts, or (direct or indirect) feedback that implies incompetence. When needs for competence or effectance are thwarted, our self-esteem is undermined and we may experience a strong desire to be in control of a situation as a means of compensating for the sense of being unable to manage (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

