There are many definitions for well-being. Our goal in this paper is to synthesize and share the Limeade definition. Before diving deeper, here are our key points:

- At Limeade, we define well-being as feeling good and living with purpose
- Well-being is a comprehensive concept that describes human beings as the complex and interconnected systems we are, what we describe as “whole person well-being”

Well-being is (per Seligman, 2011) the extent to which an individual experiences positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Others describe it as “optimal psychological functioning and experience” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p.142). People with well-being are living the good life — they’re happy, and they realize their potential (Waterman, 1993).

The wellness industry historically defined well-being as the absence (and prevention) of physical or mental illness instead of focusing on an optimal quality of life. This limited definition isn’t aligned with the history and the research. To further understand well-being and how it contributes to individual, organizational and societal betterment, we must trace back to its foundational roots.
FOUNDATIONS IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The concept of well-being is rooted in POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY, a term that Abraham Maslow coined and psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman adopted. It’s a movement in psychology that focuses on what’s right with people rather than what’s wrong with them. It shifts focus away from dysfunction and disorder to understanding how individuals flourish and thrive in their lives (Lambert et al., 2015) or reach their potential.

Researchers map well-being to two philosophical approaches — hedonia and eudaimonia. Hedonia is the “FEELING GOOD” component of well-being, and eudaimonia can be thought of as the “FUNCTIONING WELL” piece.

Hedonia (same root as “hedonistic”) is the “pursuit of pleasure, gratification and comfort” (Ryan & Deci, 2001). It describes the basic pursuit of happiness (maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain), as well as the short-term pursuit of pleasure, with positive effects that may extend beyond the activity itself. Subjective well-being is a hedonic concept that indicates one’s level of positive affect in the moment — think of it as a fleeting gratification.
In contrast, eudaimonia is described as “a way of life, characterized by a constant STRIVING TO GENERATE MEANING through personal development and growth” (Lambert et al., 2015). It involves the practice of participating in challenges that lead to growth and the realization of potential. The pursuits may feel difficult and challenging, but the long-term payoffs include feelings of competence, autonomy, relatedness and meaning, which lead to lasting gratification. Eudaimonia is associated with the concept of psychological well-being, which is “the good state of psychological functions and the fulfillment of personal potential” (Ryff, 1989).

Limeade aggregated and extended this important research to define well-being as a combination of feeling good and living with purpose. Feeling good refers to feeling healthy and happy. Living with purpose is about being intentional and actively thriving.

WELL-BEING IS PRIMARILY A SUBJECTIVE CONCEPT. That is, only the person can indicate the extent to which he/she has well-being. Things like optimism, resilience, mindfulness and self-efficacy often mediate the extent to which difficult life circumstances impact perceptions of life quality—so our perceptions of someone else's life circumstances can be very different from how they feel about their well-being.
WHOLE PERSON WELL-BEING

Recent well-being research expands the topic from narrow measures of satisfaction and subjective well-being to a broader, comprehensive concept that captures people as the complex and interconnected systems we are. And evidence supports the idea that what happens in one part of your life impacts all others.

In one study, 47 percent of employees said problems in their personal lives affected their performance at work (Bensinger et al., 2013). In another study, 37 percent of HR professionals agreed that employees in their organizations have missed work due to financial emergencies (SHRM, 2014). Relatedly, stress has shown it’s a driver of most illness and disease (JAMA, 2013). Even more research demonstrates that physical and emotional health share much of the same biochemistry.

Limeade developed a hierarchical way for organizing the complexity of this “system” — well-being has physical, emotional, financial and work components. It’s made up of a rich set of “well-being dimensions” as well — all taken directly from primary and secondary research. These include exercise, nutrition, stress, making & keeping commitments, mindfulness, resilience work meaning and dozens more we’re testing all the time. (See the Limeade Well-Being Assessment Overview for more details.)
Research studies are beginning to examine the connection between well-being and important workplace or organizational results, such as employee turnover ($r = -0.39$), performance ($r = 0.36$) (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000), affective organizational commitment ($r = 0.32$), and job satisfaction ($r = 0.43$) (Grawitch et al., 2006; Harter et al., 2003). Initial findings suggest that employee well-being plays an important role in employee and organization success. Scientists have also demonstrated strong links between well-being and employee engagement (Gallup, 2013; Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2015 & 2016). This highlights the relative importance of understanding and measuring well-being in the workplace context, for the sake of both employees and organizations.

The impact of well-being on multiple domains of life is driving this change from simple satisfaction to a more holistic understanding of the concept (Boothe & Brand, 2009; Els & De La Rey, 2006; Hattie et al., 2007). Various research highlights this shift, including career development literature, counseling research, organizational behavior studies, healthcare analysis and educational research. Few of the many proposed well-being models have completed rigorous validation work across a variety of settings. While some models have started this process, they tend to be developed for specific contexts (such as schools, Chinese organizations and counseling interventions), which make them difficult to generalize to greater populations.
At Limeade, we believe that the best companies invest authentically in the well-being of their people. This leads to well-being improvement and perceptions of organizational support for well-being — which in turn leads to great business results.

That means a broad view of whole person well-being is critical. We believe, as described above, that people are complex systems — what happens in one area of someone’s life impacts other areas. For example, a person might disagree with her manager about work, leaving her frustrated. It’s gotten bad enough that she wants to look for another job, but because of financial pressures, she is worried about the instability a career change would create for her family. Over time, she starts dreading going to work. She gets intense headaches and stops sleeping well. Her immune system is stressed, leaving her more vulnerable to ulcerative colitis.

This story demonstrates the many factors at play with well-being. She could treat her headaches, but she'll likely only find temporary relief until she addresses some of the root causes.
What makes Limeade different is that we don’t look at well-being in silos. If you want to improve your well-being, you must understand all the underlying well-being factors to learn how they connect and truly improve. This can be quite personal — and varies widely from person to person.

Fundamentally, Limeade helps our customers and their employees do four things: build awareness; take actions to improve their health, well-being and performance; earn social, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards; and create insights that help drive even more improvement.

Our mission at Limeade is to measurably improve well-being in the world. The challenge is huge — but the evidence continues to demonstrate the importance of whole person well-being.
REFERENCES


ABOUT LIMEADE

Limeade is a corporate wellness technology company that drives real employee engagement. The Limeade Institute, led by managing director Laura Hamill, Ph.D., conducts evidence-based research to help employers create a better employee experience and improve well-being in the world.

Learn more at limeade.com.