

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING?

Brief No. 1 in a Series

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This four-part series of briefs about emotional well-being was created by [CSCH](#) and the [M3EWB Network](#) at the University of Connecticut. This **first brief** describes challenges in defining emotional well-being, and shares a working definition of emotional well-being generated by a diverse network of researchers striving to advance the science of emotional well-being.¹ The [second brief](#) reviews the components to emotional well-being along with exploration of its causes and consequences. The [third brief](#) discusses options for measuring emotional well-being, and the [fourth brief](#) considers next steps in advancing the science of emotional well-being.

Challenges in Defining Emotional Well-Being

It is widely agreed upon that emotional well-being is desirable,² and leads to positive outcomes such as physical health, healthy aging, and living longer.^{3,4,5} But what exactly is emotional well-being? The answer to this question can depend on who you ask as there not been a shared definition.⁶ Related terms such as psychological well-being and mental well-being are often used as synonyms of emotional well-being, or to mean something similar to emotional well-being.⁷

What problems might result from the absence of a shared definition of emotional well-being? Well, not having a shared definition can result in incorrect assumptions that others define emotional well-being in the same way we do.⁸ We cannot be sure we are referring to the same thing. Using varied, even related, terms to describe emotional well-being (psychological well-being or mental well-being, for example) means that we might be talking about similar things, but not the same thing.⁷ If we say that someone has high psychological well-being, is this the same as high levels of emotional well-being? What about mental well-being, subjective well-being, or quality of life?

In response to these challenges—and because of the importance of emotional well-being to promoting overall health—the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) called for networks of researchers to advance the science of emotional well-being. In 2021, a diverse group of researchers were funded to strengthen our understanding of what emotional well-being is, why it is important, what contributes to it, and ultimately, how to improve people’s emotional well-being.⁹ A first important task for this group was to develop a shared definition of emotional well-being that could be applied across cultures and the lifespan (infancy through aging populations). These researchers spent nearly a year reviewing definitions from various fields, discussing elements essential to emotional well-being, and mapping concepts that contribute to, or result from, emotional well-being, but are not emotional well-being itself.⁵ Through this process, the researchers developed the following working definition that can be used as a starting point for a

shared definition of emotional well-being, and be tested and evaluated for relevance across the lifespan and across cultures, for example.

Emotional well-being is a multi-dimensional composite that encompasses how positive an individual feels generally and about life overall.

It includes:

- **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
- **Reflective features:** judgements about life satisfaction, sense of meaning and purpose, and ability to pursue goals that can include and extend beyond the self.

These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and life course.

Emotional Well-Being is Complex

The process taken by these researchers to develop a shared definition of emotional well-being illustrates the complexity of both the task and the concept. This resulting definition highlights that emotional well-being includes both ***how we feel*** (for example, feeling happy or content in the moment) as well as our ***judgments about the quality of our life*** (for example, are we satisfied with life and do we have a sense of purpose). It exists on a spectrum and is constantly evolving, with various experiences and reflections affecting our emotional well-being.

Emotional Well-being



Broader Terms



Related Terms



It is important to note that emotional well-being is not about being happy all of the time. It is healthy to experience a full range of emotions; many experiences (e.g., loss and failure) elicit feelings such as sadness, grief, anger, or disappointment. These feelings do not indicate the absence of emotional well-being.

Emotional Well-Being Across Cultures and Life Stages

In creating the definition, the team of researchers grappled with how emotional well-being might reflect variability across cultures. For instance, collectivist cultures are cultures that have a strong emphasis on group cohesion and interdependence.¹⁰ Latino cultures, for example, tend to place a stronger emphasis on family than some others.¹¹ In these cultures, social features (e.g., the health and well-being of loved ones) may greatly influence how an individual feels generally and about life overall.^{5,9,10} Those who live in cultures that focus on independence and personal goals may be more influenced by personal preferences and features such as goal pursuit.

In addition, the team of researchers also considered how it might vary across the life course. Is emotional well-being the same for young children and aging populations? Interestingly, many measures of emotional well-being have been designed specifically for aging populations, suggesting the features of emotional well-being might differ or vary in importance as people age.⁶ Consider a 3-year-old child; they are unlikely to have the skills to reflect on their life satisfaction or sense of meaning and purpose. But this does not mean that young children cannot experience emotional well-being. Instead, it is likely that daily emotional experiences (the experiential features within the definition) may be more important to young children's emotional well-being than the more reflective features.

In summary, researchers acknowledge that the different parts to emotional well-being vary in importance based on culture and developmental stage. Lastly, the team of researchers also recognized that emotional well-being does not occur within a vacuum. Emotional well-being is influenced by resources and life circumstances, which are often out of individuals' control. Different teams are exploring new directions to advance our understanding as to how the definition can apply across ages and cultures around the world, along with how it applies in various contexts.⁵

Looking Forward: What About Optimism, Empathy, or Social Connections?

As important as it is for researchers to define what emotional well-being is, it is just as important to define what emotional well-being is not.⁷ In our [next brief](#), we discuss the components of emotional well-being as well as concepts that are related to emotional well-being, but not emotional well-being itself. We consider concepts that **contribute to, or result from, emotional well-being**. The careful defining of the boundaries around emotional well-being allows us to more accurately [measure](#), [study](#), and promote emotional well-being.

To learn more about the researchers' process of defining emotional well-being, and responses to that definition, read the following:

- [Emotional Well-Being: What It Is and Why It Matters](#),⁵ the original article published by the NIH-funded researchers, in *Affective Science*
- [List of eight commentaries in response to original article](#)
- [Response to Commentaries by original researchers](#)¹²

Finally, we invite you to reflect on the definition provided above. Does it resonate with you? Is anything missing? Consider your own definition to help you identify actions to promote emotional well-being for yourself and those around you.

To cite this brief: Koslouski, J. B., Ruiz, O., Marcy, H.M., and Chafouleas, S.M. (2023, August). *What is Emotional Well-being?* Storrs, CT: UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health. Available from: <http://csch.uconn.edu/>.

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⁸ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2022). *Ontologies in the behavioral sciences: Accelerating research and the spread of knowledge*.

⁹ <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-networks-advance-emotional-well-being-research>

¹⁰ Markus, & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>

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This work was supported by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health of the National Institutes of Health Award Number U24AT011281 (MPIs: Crystal Park, Fumiko Hoeft, Sandra Chafouleas). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.