

Brain Health as an Actionable Pathway to Human Flourishing

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The purpose of this paper is to begin exploring the relationship between flourishing¹ and brain health² – two highly connected terms that have largely evolved in parallel.

Researchers from Center for BrainHealth at The University of Texas at Dallas and the Institute for Global Human Flourishing at Baylor University have come together to connect these two movements and their respective measurement mechanisms – and to ask if, how and why brain health is instrumental to flourishing.

Through this exploration, the authors propose that whenever flourishing is the objective, brain health is an important and actionable pathway toward achieving it. Said another way, “flourishing” provides a holistic view of complete well-being, while brain health provides a set of actionable measures of the cognitive, emotional and social capacities that support flourishing.

Concept Definitions

Flourishing is explored across disciplines, including positive psychology, public health, education and philosophy. Recent scholarship has adopted a multidisciplinary and increasingly transdisciplinary approach to this field. Flourishing is generally considered a multidimensional concept describing the ability to pursue or attain complete well-being and thriving for individuals, communities or ecosystems.³

While well-being concerns the individual, the concept of flourishing is gaining traction as a force for community impact through the “relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives.”^{4,5}

Definitions vary across fields as researchers attempt to encapsulate what it means to pursue a well-lived life. For example, sociologist Corey Keyes, PhD, approaches flourishing

through the lens of optimal mental health, defining flourishing as high levels of emotional well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect), psychological well-being (e.g., purpose, autonomy, growth, mastery), and social well-being (e.g., acceptance, contribution, integration).⁶ From Keyes’ perspective, a flourishing person experiences positive emotions, has a sense of purpose and growth, and is engaging effectively with their community. Similarly, psychologist Martin

Seligman, PhD, defines flourishing as thriving through five components known as the PERMA model: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.⁷ Seligman argues flourishing involves living well across multiple dimensions rather than simply maximizing pleasure or happiness for an individual.

Moving beyond psychological well-being, epidemiologist and biostatistician Tyler VanderWeele, PhD, approaches flourishing from a public health perspective. Informed by social science and humanities disciplines, he suggests six domains of flourishing:

Happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships and financial/material stability.

The Global Flourishing Study (described more below) explores and measures these six domains

in a longitudinal research study across more than 20 countries and cultures.⁸

Researchers focused on understanding human flourishing address a great many topics – linking objective and subjective measures – from life satisfaction and well-being, to doing good and the thriving of non-human species. In sum, scholarly fields focused on flourishing are characterized by conceptual and empirical convergence and divergence.^{5,9}

Brain health is also a multidimensional concept which has evolved over time. Early definitions of brain health primarily focused on the physical integrity of the brain and the prevention of neurological disease. More recently, perspectives have expanded beyond disease prevention to emphasize the optimization of brain function and the capacity to thrive across the lifespan.^{2,10}

One of the most widely recognized definitions comes from the World Health Organization (WHO), which

defines brain health as “the state of brain functioning across cognitive, sensory, social-emotional, behavioral, and motor domains that allows a person to realize their full potential over the life course”.² This definition highlights the multidimensional nature of brain health and emphasizes how functioning across multiple domains contributes to an individual's ability to achieve a higher potential and maintain well-being throughout life.

Similarly, Sandra Bond Chapman, PhD, and colleagues at Center for BrainHealth define brain health as a dynamic state that enables individuals to think clearly, regulate emotions, maintain meaningful social connections, and live with purpose throughout the lifespan.¹⁰ Their work emphasizes that brain health is not a fixed trait but a proactive capacity that can be strengthened through targeted training, healthy lifestyle behaviors, and meaningful engagement, ultimately supporting individuals in reaching their fullest potential.



Likewise, Dylan Wint, MD, and colleagues at the Cleveland Clinic describe brain health as the preservation and optimization of brain function across domains such as thinking, memory, mood and everyday functioning.¹¹ Their approach emphasizes lifestyle medicine strategies that promote healthy aging, cognitive vitality and quality of life.

Across these models, several common themes emerge. Brain health is consistently viewed as a

multidimensional construct that extends beyond the absence of disease. While the prevention of neurological disease and cognitive impairment remains important, these frameworks also emphasize the promotion of optimal functioning, resilience and well-being. Together, these traits underscore the importance of supporting both individuals and communities in developing the capacity to thrive and lead meaningful, fulfilling lives throughout their lifespans.



Brain Health as a Set of Capacities for Flourishing

Both brain health and flourishing are defined by their multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach, encompassing how individuals experience the world and engage within their contexts and communities to thrive.

Whereas flourishing research has often been more focused on whether a person is thriving across multiple dimensions of life, brain health is concerned with the cognitive, emotional and social capacities that allow people to navigate those dimensions.

The brain is central to every aspect of human experience. It shapes how individuals perceive the world, regulate emotions, build relationships, make decisions, pursue goals and adapt to change. Brain health is foundational to flourishing

because the brain underlies the capacities through which flourishing is experienced and achieved.

Therefore, **improving one's brain health and performance is an important and actionable pathway towards greater flourishing.**

To illustrate this, let's explore the brain-based capacities that underlie activities VanderWeele suggests to promote flourishing:¹²

- **Learning to attend to the good in one's own life** requires self-reflection and perspective-taking.
- **Seeking and promoting the good** requires empathy, social awareness, emotional regulation and executive functions to find and follow through on opportunities.
- **Finding and experiencing the good in community** depends on healthy social cognition, compassion and the ability to build and maintain relationships.
- **Addressing psychological distress** often requires strengthening cognitive and emotional regulation skills that support resilience and adaptability.

A Bidirectional Relationship

Just as brain health supports flourishing, flourishing also strengthens brain health. Key elements of a flourishing life, such as positive social relationships, sense of purpose, meaningful engagement and lifelong learning, have all been associated with healthier cognitive and emotional outcomes.¹³

For example, by seeking and promoting the good – one of VanderWeele’s suggested activities to promote flourishing – an individual utilizes a number of high-level executive function skills, such as:¹²

- Strategic attention (e.g., What of the many options will I choose to engage in?)
- Possibility thinking (e.g., How will this make an impact in my life?)
- Planning and organization (e.g., How will I execute my plan?)

Strengthening executive functions in real-world contexts has been associated with improvements in mental health such as increased resilience and decreases in symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.¹⁴ Additionally, by

engaging with others to do good, our motivational systems trigger neurochemical rewards, including the release of oxytocin and dopamine.¹⁵ Promoting good in your community helps build supportive social relationships and strengthen cognitive skills that contribute to long-term brain health.

These concepts share a reciprocal relationship: *flourishing* creates conditions to promote and protect brain health, while *better brain health* strengthens the well-being and cognitive skills that underpin flourishing.



An Opportunity for Collaboration

Both concepts are fundamentally concerned with helping individuals thrive. Together, brain health and flourishing offer a powerful opportunity to better realize what it means to live well and intentionally cultivate lives of greater purpose, connection, resilience and well-being.

Integrating neuroscience with the science of flourishing can deepen our understanding of the cognitive and neural capacities that enable human thriving while identifying practical, measurable pathways to strengthen these capacities.

Teams at Center for BrainHealth and Baylor University have partnered to further explore the relationship between brain health and flourishing by bringing together two scientifically validated measurement tools.

The Global Flourishing Study (GFS)

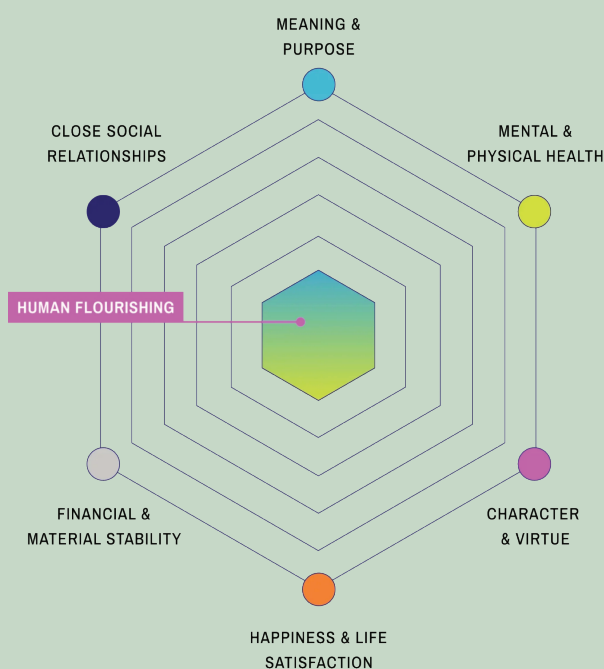
This longitudinal study is led by Baylor University's Institute for Global Human Flourishing and the Human Flourishing Program at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University, in collaboration with Gallup and the Center for Open Science.

Designed to measure and track human flourishing across countries and cultures, its 109-item questionnaire includes the Secure Flourishing Index, which uses 12 target survey items to assess six domains:

happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships and financial and material stability.

Wave 1 included 200,000+ adults from 22 geographically and culturally diverse countries across six continents, with nationally representative sampling within each country. Initial findings demonstrate substantial variation

in the levels, patterns and predictors of flourishing across countries and demographic groups. Notably, results demonstrate how different cultures have cultivated different strengths through the flourishing framework.^{4,8}



GFS Collaboration Partners



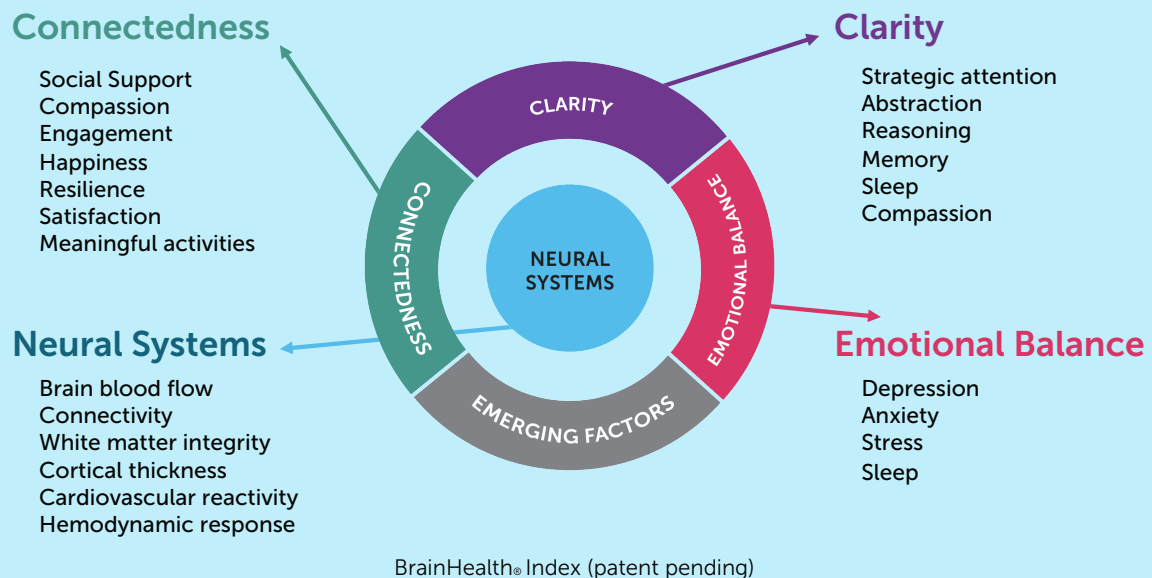
The BrainHealth Index (BHI)

Developed by Center for BrainHealth at The University of Texas at Dallas, this longitudinal metric is designed to measure and track holistic brain health and performance.¹⁶

As an online assessment, it combines cognitive performance tasks with validated self-report questionnaires and novel or adapted tasks developed and tested through

Center for BrainHealth research, assessing complex cognition alongside mental health, social connection, purpose, sleep and other aspects of daily life. The BHI generates four scores: an overall composite score and three empirically derived factors — Clarity, Connectedness and Emotional Balance — which reflect the interdependence of cognitive, social and emotional health.

Longitudinal research demonstrates that participants across age groups and baseline performance levels can improve their BHI scores, with greater engagement in brain-health activities associated with greater gains.¹⁰



A Look Toward the Future

The collaboration aims to develop a Flourishing Quasi-Index by identifying questions within the BHI assessment that align with questions and domains measured by the Secure Flourishing Index. These matched items will be used to calculate a proxy flourishing score from the existing longitudinal database of BHI responses. Researchers will be able to examine the relationship between overall brain health scores and these proxy flourishing metrics, including whether

changes in brain health are associated with changes in flourishing over time. Future research could build on these findings through additional data collection to uncover new insights into how brain health and flourishing interact and shape daily life.

In this partnership, researchers hypothesize that measured improvements in brain health will correlate with improvements in flourishing. If supported, this

relationship positions brain health as an actionable, measurable pathway to flourishing – one that can guide research, inform interventions, and empower individuals to take an active role in their well-being. Advancing this work will require collaboration across neuroscience, flourishing, psychology, public health and more in order to build a more complete understanding of the capabilities that enable people and communities to thrive.

Citations:

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