

HOW RUNNING HELPS ME FLOURISH...

...And How You Can Find Your Own
Method for Flourishing



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What is this All About?

Human happiness has been a concept heavily researched. The findings across several different disciplines have pretty much come to the same conclusion, and just to get to the point: ***Happiness is not something we can dictate or bottle up and keep with us*** -- there is no perfect formula for producing happiness, and if there is one that we can find to fit ourselves, it will only produce that happiness in the short-term, and it certainly won't work for everyone else.

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You see, happiness is highly personal and specific to you. It's a state of being that comes and goes. Think about that for a moment. Imagine if you were always happy, every second of the day, from the moment you woke up until you fell asleep. If happiness was our baseline, and only state of being, we'd have no appreciation for it. We'd take happiness for granted, because appreciation and gratitude come from having a reference point to compare things to, in this case, when we are unhappy.

Additionally, it's important to be able to define happiness in order for us to be on the same page when discussing it and helping people increase happiness in their lives. Herein lies another problem: it is extremely difficult to define something so individualized and fleeting in life. Hence the lack of a true definition, especially in terms of quantifying, human happiness.

Not to worry, though. The scientific literature on authentic happiness and well-being, as popularized by the movement of Positive Psychology and its founding researcher, Dr. [Martin Seligman](#), has culminated in a model for [human flourishing](#) that will help you to increase your happiness and well-being. This is the model I will present, along with its practical application to the habit of running.

Although I am about to offer a physical exercise to show how to increase well-being and happiness, you don't need to become a runner to do that. The point is to see what's behind the activity and the elements that can be transferred to the activities you decide are best for you and your current lifestyle, medical history, interests, and so on. If you are to engage in any type of physical exercise, please make sure to check in with a medical provider to ensure that is the best thing for you, and also please keep in mind that none of the advice in this blog constitutes as medical advice. In order for this to work, you'll have to find out what will work best for you.

What Does Flourishing Mean?

The goal set forth by Seligman's [Well-Being Theory](#) is to help increase our life satisfaction through five domains or facets that can be sought after each day we are alive, so that we may flourish. The acronym for these flourishing tools is PERMA, and can actually be measured, tracked, practiced, and produced to help us actualize our best selves. Read on to learn more...

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Using Running to Increase Flourishing

PERMA stands for: **(P)** positive emotion, **(E)** engagement, **(R)** positive relationships, **(M)** meaning, and **(A)** achievement. Below you will find the definition of each element and its practical application to running outdoors (or whichever activity / habit you want to use).

I find it important to make the distinction between running on a treadmill and outdoors, because there are obviously many more variables to consider when running outside. This distinction in no way intends to disparage those who only run at the gym. Exercise is exercise. For the purposes of this discussion, the running metaphor refers to running outdoors.

You should continue doing whatever works best for you, even if it is something outside of exercise altogether. Whatever it is that you decide, see what you can apply from the following tidbits, and then throw the rest away.

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P is for Positive Emotion



Positive emotion is perhaps the easiest element of the PERMA model to understand and produce. This facet of well-being increases our flourishing and happiness usually by pumping extra feel-good chemicals, such as dopamine, through neurotransmitters in the brain. This can include a hug, ice cream, sex, dancing, a new haircut, shopping, your favorite alcoholic drink, and yes – running.

Before getting into more about how running increases positive emotion, a word of caution. When it comes to positive emotion, no matter what one chooses, there is the risk of over-doing it. At some point, depending on the activity, there is a threshold reached, creating *diminishing returns*. In other words, the more you do, the less positive emotion you will have. Think about that. For most people, having one or two ice cream treats will be enough – anything after that and you run the risk of feeling sick. The same is true of all activities we pursue to increase positive emotion, which happens to be the area that a majority of people seek out the most.

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There is nothing inherently wrong with seeking out positive emotion each day. We just need to keep in mind that these emotions are fleeting, always have a human threshold, and can run the risk of putting us in a position where we become a slave to seeking them out. That's one reason why positive emotion, by itself, will not increase your overall well-being over time. You need all five of the elements.

Creating positive emotion through running is pretty straight-forward. The concept of "runner's high" is [scientifically valid](#) and shown to have several other long-term benefits as a result of those chemical increases in the brain, including increased motivation, endurance, freedom, energy, and yes, well-being. Still, running too hard and too often can cause injury, dehydration, sun poisoning or heat stroke, among other issues, so it pays dividends to know one's threshold.

Keep in mind that a threshold is different for everyone, so don't compare someone else's six-mile run to your jog around the block, since that will never motivate you to ever start or continue running (or anything else that is deemed a challenge and something you have yet to master or experience long enough to make into a life habit).

The reason why I specifically love running to help produce positive emotion is because it's a healthy habit, unlike having sweets or drinking alcohol can be. And I don't run every day, especially here in the south Florida heat. I find different ways to increase my positive emotion each day, but I also try to be careful not to rely on things that could potentially create problems in my life if used frequently (like chocolate, as delicious as it is). That's not to say that I don't occasionally like to enjoy something sweet – it's just not my "go to" activity.

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So, since we know that by increasing positive emotion alone won't suffice, how do we integrate the other elements into our lives to increase well-being? We need to also build a sense of engagement.

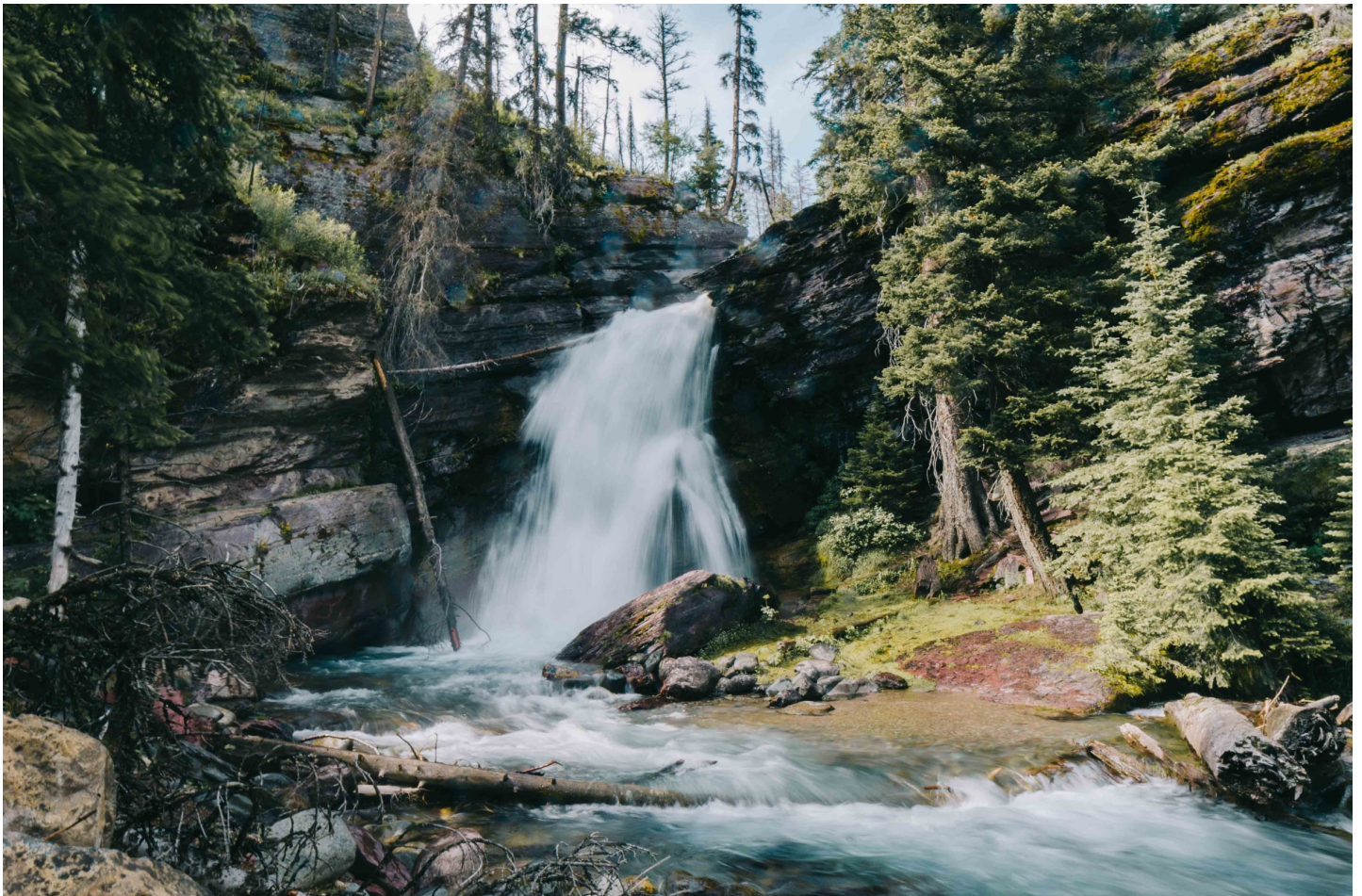
E is for Engagement

The most important aspect of engagement is creating a sense of *flow*, where time and space become meaningless, and we immerse our very being into an activity that helps us to flourish. The key word here being flourish, as there are plenty of activities that can engage us, yet also have the potential to destroy us. This doesn't necessarily mean we can't choose things are considered neutral to create flow (such as meditation or relation exercises), but it definitely shouldn't be unhealthy (hence why PERMA is taught under the umbrella of Positive Psychology).

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There are plenty of activities we can engage in that will create a sense of flow. The important thing to remember is that we can set ourselves up to engage and create flow, and analyze how well we did after, but *it is impossible to know while we are in the midst of it*. Think about it – if the very definition of flow includes us losing all sense of time, space, and ourselves, then there's no way to be aware of that until after the fact.

For you artists out there, flow is perhaps the most easily understood. It's when we are so enthralled into an activity, that we have no idea how much time has passed until we check. (The opposite can happen also, where we think a lot of time has passed, and we are shocked to find out it hasn't.) It forces us to live in the moment, focus on the task at hand, and be mindful of being present – so much that we are unable to reflect on it until it has passed.



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So why is creating flow during engagement so important to our well-being if we don't even realize it's happening until after it's done? [Science provides evidence](#) that human peak performance happens during flow and is closely related to mindfulness, a recent buzzworthy term that is being [applied to many aspects of life](#), shown to reduce depression, stress, anxiety, and increase empathy and compassion, although [future studies are still needed](#) to confirm these findings. Engagement can also produce higher skill levels, autonomy, mastery, and a sense of accomplishment, which is another aspect of human flourishing.

When running, it is all but impossible to dictate when and where engagement and flow will happen. Inevitably, though, it does. The best way to describe flow for runners is when our focus becomes so narrow that we can actually hear our own breathing or the pounding of our feet on the ground. It usually happens in more familiar surroundings, since we become hyper-aware when in uncharted territory and need to secure our safety. Flow can happen in spurts, or not happen at all. Distractions are usually the culprit, which makes flow a challenge to produce each day.

One of the sure-fire ways to help yourself find ways of increasing engagement and flow into your life is by understanding what your *character strengths* are, especially if you aren't a runner. You can take this [free assessment](#) online (although you will have to register) and see what your top five strengths are. Then, take some time each day to practice those top five strengths using activities that will help you create more flow.

Although creating positive emotions and engagement in our lives each day is a wonderful start to increasing our well-being and happiness, it's still not enough. As we shall see, we also need to share our lives (and flourishing activities) with other human beings.

R is for Relationships that are Positive



Here's the skinny on relationships: We are social creatures who need to have good relationships [in order to thrive](#). In our current society, technology may give us a sense of good relationships, but those who examine this more closely will see that the majority of these "relationships" are anything but that. Instead, they tend to be superficial interactions that do little more than add to the number of "likes" we receive on a given post.

True, lasting, and positive relationships are exactly what our parents told us they would be; far and few between, and not always easy to maintain. Also, if you've ever heard the axiom "You're only as good as the three closest people you keep around you," you'll understand why it's important to stay away from individuals who only bring you negativity, drama, and unhappiness.

Since we're using clichés here, negative people "rent space in your head, so raise the rent and kick them out." And why we're at it, remember there are lessons to learn from relationships, which can be meaningful even if they last a moment, a season, or a lifetime. The key here is that they are **positive**.

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Using running as an example, I have come across many "types" of runners. There are perhaps just as many types as there are differences in personalities. The point being that sharing an interest alone doesn't constitute a positive relationship, although it can be a good start. In life we need options so that when we feel stuck, we are able to pivot to the next option and not give up.

Here's where [technology can work in our favor](#), where we may have access to others who share our interests and can support our efforts. Personally, I enjoy using the [Nike Running App](#) to occasionally connect with others, as an example. When I have historically gone on dates, I would usually ask the person online if they enjoy outdoor activities, such as running. Again, this doesn't automatically constitute a positive relationship, but it can be a good start.

Positive relationships also include *the relationship we have with ourselves*, something we overlook frequently. I know you're aching for another cliché, so here it is: Can anyone possibly have a good, loving relationship with another person if they haven't taken the time to do this *first* with themselves? Granted, this is a life-long process (falling in love and re-falling in love with the self), but if we are not actively involved in our own self-esteem, self-love, and self-enhancement, we will most likely have difficulty receiving that from others.

Running not only produces positive emotion, engagement, and a positive relationship with oneself and others, but it can also produce more meaning in one's life.

M is for Meaning

Simply put, meaning is any human activity done for the sake of others. There are several ways meaning can be produced each day, including making use of spiritual, meditational, religious, family-oriented, community-based activities, and so much more.

Creating meaning is probably one of the easiest aspects of PERMA to create. In running, it can be as simple as the statement, "I am not only running for myself, but to be healthy enough to help and support others that I love," or something much more ideological and existential, such as "Why am I here, and what is my purpose in life?" – aspects that are easier to contemplate when in a state of flow, and everything else in-between these two examples.

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The point is that the activity in question creates a sensibility that confirms we are living for something other than ourselves, whether that be our God of choice, a group with shared interests, cultural activities, or rituals we identify with, including our family, friends, and other loved ones, or even a concept that is just much greater than we and humanity are altogether.



I know you must be wondering when the next cliché statement will take place, so here it is: Faith is the expectation of things not yet beheld, and by having faith that what we practice each day can and will have an impact on others while confirming that we do indeed have a purpose on this earth, *offers us a sense of meaning* that combines with the other elements mentioned to increase our well-being and help us flourish.

But what else is needed?

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A is for Achievement

Built into every day is an opportunity to create achievement in our lives. This can be accomplished many different ways. We can learn a new recipe that offers healthy food and still tastes great. We can finish a chapter in that book we never got through (or finish the book finally!). We can achieve that credit score we've been wanting to get, or complete that training, or run a little faster or farther than we have before.

Building achievement into our everyday lives isn't as easy as providing ourselves with positive emotions, but it is well worth the time and energy spent. It can be completing a short 5-minute breathing exercise, a 4-year degree, or anything in-between. In fact, it is probably best to create [goals that focus on mastery](#) or learning as opposed to performance or competitive outcomes, in the near-, mid-, and long-term to help us build a habit of including achievement into our routines.

When we focus on mastery and learning, we are trying to set achievements that utilize our past outcomes as a benchmark for future improvements. Conversely, when we focus on performance or competitive goals, we compare ourselves to others, which can create animosity, fear, anxiety, and depression. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with being competitive or wanting to see how we compare to others, but this shouldn't be our only comparison, nor the one we readily concentrate on.

Ready for the next cliché? ***The only true competition is the person you were yesterday.***

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Running provides us with several opportunities for increasing achievement. It can be the simple act of just completing a run, especially if we haven't run in a while. It can be the performance learning goal to run a faster mile, or a longer route. It can be completing your first mile, your fifth 5K, or anything else you want to accomplish.

The point is to try and challenge yourself to include some type of accomplishment each day you are given the gift of another day of life.

The Running Metaphor

By now I hope you will see that running is only one of many, many things that can assist with increasing your well-being through the PERMA model offered in Positive Psychology. My challenge to you is to find your own activity or ritual that can add all five PERMA elements into your life, and then find other things that can do the same, so you always have a back-up and different ways to ensure your own well-being as much as possible.

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For me, running gives me that natural high I crave because I know I'm doing something good for myself, even though it can also be difficult and create some pain (overall, that fosters *positive emotion*, especially once I have completed the run). It also creates a sense of *engagement*, where I feel there is flow and a laser focus that is hard for me to find in many other activities (although I do love to lose myself in dancing). It deepens my relationship with myself, especially when I'm running alone and get to have that uninterrupted internal dialogue, while also bringing me closer to others who appreciate healthy living (and the larger running community as a whole, which adds to the *positive relationships* I need to thrive). It gives me *meaning* and purpose, because I know I not only run for myself, but also so that I may be able to live longer and help others who struggle in life. Finally, it gives me plenty of opportunities for *achievement*, as I find ways of challenging myself and improving my habit over time.

You can do something about it, though. **With PERMA, you have tools on your side, no matter what you find yourself going through.** And to use a final cliché: You will never be running on empty.

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Let's be real here: even with using the PERMA model every day, there's still no guarantee that we will be extremely happy and flourish all the time. There will be days that are bad. There will still be heartache, drama, and bad times. And that's okay, because that won't be the only thing there is when you practice PERMA. So don't give up, keep the faith, and remember that without the bad times, we simply wouldn't appreciate the good times.

[Dr. Josh](#) earned his doctoral degree in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from the [Chicago School of Professional Psychology](#) and has a mission to help people increase their well-being and flourish both in and out of the workplace.

Want to learn more or receive coaching or consultative services? Contact Dr. Josh at info@drjosh.solutions.