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M6. WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCE OF A VOLUNTEER

The scientific approach to functioning successfully and reaching the peak of action is the domain of the so-called positive psychology¹. Its name comes from the fact that it studies human strengths, not disorders. In the centre of its attention lies strengthening mental health, i.e. focusing on how to build and develop mental resilience, character and strength as well as a positive attitude to life which is often characterised with one broadly understood word - well-being. Contrary to traditional psychology, which helps people recover mental health by dealing with deficits and dysfunctions, positive psychology studies and explains how to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life, cultivating the best in oneself.

However, do not equate positive psychology with so-called success affirmation. It's not about wearing a mask of a winner and trying to create an aura of triumph to earn the envy of those around. Many persons who wear a mask of a "successful person" in reality feel inside inconsistency, emptiness, loneliness, or lack of fulfilment. Each failure can undermine the self-confidence of such persons; each failure violates the foundation on which the "perfect image" was built. It should come as no surprise that so many people get lost into depressive states.

So what is it? – You may ask. Positive psychology helps to not run away from life that is stroking and kicking, sometimes it brings pleasant surprises, and sometimes it puts obstacles in your way. This is how life works and there is not much you can do about it. End of the story. You are to focus on your potential and strengths because they will help you build your well-being and development. Energy spent on pretending to be someone you are not, on doing something that is actually alien to you, is wasted energy. In order not to lose this energy irretrievably and to develop your well-being, answer the question: What is the truth about you? This is one of the most difficult questions! However, the

¹ The pioneers of the positive psychology trend are Martin Seligman and Mihály Csikszentmihályi.

answer to it will open the door for you to understand how you can strengthen your resistance to stress and various adversities as well as your own well-being.

The module *M6. Well-being and Resilience of a Volunteer* consists of two parts:

- M6.S1. Fundamentals of Well-Being
- M6.S2. Resilience Development

WELL-BEING

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines human health not only as a state of the absence of disease or disability, but also as a subjective feeling of being satisfied with one's life. It recognises the fact that in order to be called healthy it is not enough not to feel pain or be reasonably physically fit, but also one needs to be efficient in coping with the challenges of everyday life, have good relations with oneself and with the environment; it corresponds to what we feel in a subjective way - to feel completely healthy and to live well, you have to feel good.

Psychological research on quality of life has shown that well-being is made up of a sense of having good life in three areas:

physical well-being + mental well-being + social well-being

The individual sense of well-being will be influenced by both our resources (physical, mental and social) at our disposal and the challenges (physical, mental and social) we face. The balance between them maintains the stability of well-being.



Figure 1. The balance between resources and challenges influences the sustainability of well-being.

Martin Seligman distinguished five aspects of well-being, which have been supplemented with a sixth component as research in positive psychology continues. The current model is nowadays described by the acronym PERMA-V:

P – Positive emotions – relate to emotions and feelings such as joy in life, appreciation, comfort, inspiration, optimism. What was said in the introduction about positive psychology also applies to positive emotions. The game of fake happiness and success brings no positive emotions. Rather, more fear and anxiety (will there be likes, positive comments, will there be hate after

posting stylized photos and embellished stories?). The source of positive emotions is optimism, hope and self-confidence related to the future, pride, satisfaction and fulfilment related to past events. In the present, you will find the joy of momentary pleasures and longer-lasting gratifications. These will be both pleasant physical sensations (such as beautiful smells, music, views, favourite flavours) and more complex experiences that may bring us closer to the state of optimal experience, i.e. the state of flow². Feeling positive emotions strengthens resilience to stress, improves mood and health.

- E – Engagement** – the state of optimal experience, when the tasks we perform are so engaging (interesting, inspiring, and not too easy at the same time) that the importance of factors disrupting work decreases in favour of concentration on the performed activity. The more flow experiences we create, the more the sense of autonomy increases. Involvement in challenging, skill-requiring tasks, based on internal motives, facilitates access to the state of flow. Let us recall the other conditions conducive to the emergence of an optimal experience: possibility to complete the task, clear goal, and available and immediate feedback. By focusing on the task at hand, the perception of time changes. The sense of agency, energy and satisfaction with the action itself increases.
- R – Relationships** – creating authentic, meaningful social connection; being among people. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the imperfection of virtual contacts, which have become the dominant form of interpersonal relationships in 2020-2021. The feeling of loneliness and the increase in the level of social anxiety, investigated by psychologists during the pandemic, prove that virtual contacts (even frequent ones) do not replace natural bonds. Close relationships with friends and family are an important source of well-being, and their quality and physical presence (closeness) are important.
- M – Meaning** that is, the sense of meaning/significance of the activity performed – discovering the meaning, passion, and fulfilment. Finding meaning and purpose is not always obvious. Too many different "I must", "I should", "I have to", "this is what they expect of me" suppress and disturb the true calling. Dissatisfaction is guaranteed if your thoughts are preoccupied with "What are people going to say?" Take a moment to answer the following questions: What makes sense to me? From what do I get a sense of meaning and purpose in my life?
- A – Accomplishment/ Achievement** – undertaking and arranging activities that lead to achievements, acting with the vision of the goal. The sense of autonomy, agency, control, self-confidence encourage taking more ambitious tasks, the implementation of which increases self-esteem and effectiveness, improving resilience and well-being. Feeling that one can cope with life's challenges has a positive effect on well-being.
- V – Vitality**, i.e. physical health, energy – physical activity, good nutrition, adequate hydration, paying attention to the needs of the body (including sleep and rest). There is no exaggeration in the old saying "A sound mind in a sound body". Healthy nutrition and oxygenation of the body increase the level of energy, which in turn favours taking bolder actions that bring satisfaction.

² Referred to in module M1. *Motivation in the work of a volunteer.*

Good quality of food and physical activity help reduce stress, while neglecting these aspects adds more to the set of stressors.



Source: Own elaboration

Don't you have the impression that well-being relates to everything that is valuable to you, that has meaning and purpose, and therefore has a positive effect on emotions, inspires you to act, giving you a feeling of real self-fulfilment? It is possible that you will also think that the world would be a much friendlier place if more people felt well ...

Looking at the components of well-being, you may as well come to the conclusion that in some areas you experience deficits - maybe you have too little vitality, or maybe you lack sense of meaning, or maybe you experience flow too rarely? The starting point for change is always awareness of the current state. To do this, do the "The Wheel of Well-being" exercise (see appendix).

If you want to strengthen and develop your sense of well-being in all its aspects, include the attitude of mindfulness in your daily practice.

MINDFULNESS

There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called Yesterday and the other is called Tomorrow. TODAY is the right day to love, believe, do and mostly live. (Dalai Lama)

Mindfulness is a special type of attention: conscious, non-judgmental, and focused on the moment³. The basis of the state of mindfulness are coexisting states and behaviours:

- Curiosity - searching, wanting to know, exploring and learning
- No-judgment - in not judging everything you observe
- Acceptance - of what is and how it is, assuming that it is OK
- Beginner's mind (Zen mind) - in the sense that it is open and ready, not "foggy" with an excess of unnecessary and chaotic thoughts. "In the mind of a beginner there are many possibilities, in the mind of an expert – only few"⁴
- Patience - a feature that helps you persevere in the process of developing mindfulness
- Maintaining contact with the body - awareness of the body and its signals

When you analyse your most common thoughts during the day, you will likely discover that there is a compulsive dance going on in your head - reliving past events or worrying about the future, and often both taking turns. The awareness of the present moment does not seem to exist, although realistically you only exist in the NOW. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow is not here yet. It's only today, just this minute, only this current second. The rest is the activity of the human mind. The paradox is that although the present moment is the only real moment, we are not concerned with it at all. In your "absence" the lost mind affects the entire body and its functions. Hormones thrown into the blood by the internal glands, the reactions of the nervous system make the body react with agitation or weakness, it responds intensively not to events, but to our interpretations of events, memories and predictions.

Regular practice of mindfulness seems to be a somewhat alien endeavour to man living in Western civilization, and meditation seems to be an inaccessible luxury. The meditative rituals of Buddhist monks may be perceived as exotic and impractical. After all, monks do not deal with things that are "useful" from our point of view - they do not produce, do not provide services, do not go to work. And yet... they give something to the world. Something so important that it is worth looking at. You may doubt whether the state of meditation in which the monk remains for a long time brings any benefit to anyone other than himself? So take a moment to think what is the world gaining from the increasing number of goods, the multitude of their varieties? More and more noisy ads (to get you to buy), more desires (because you want to have it), but also more waste, unfair trade, less natural resources, etc.

³ A statement by Jon Kabat-Zinn from the introduction to the book *Mindfulness. A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, Rodale 2012.

⁴ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shambhala Publications Inc. 2005.

Suppose you have a Buddhist monk close to you instead. What will you ask him? How to live? How about being a happy person? The monk will not say that a new smartphone or designer clothes will make you a special person. Not because he is unaware of the existence of such goods. Even if you have never seen a monk with your own eyes, you feel how ridiculous it is. He would probably say: stop, go inside yourself, and look for what is true about you. No material thing can give you happiness. It will bring temporal pleasure, that's all. You don't need anything to enjoy life to the fullest. You will be happy when you discover the meaning of your existence. You will find it in a state of real presence, not struggling between your desires, the opinions of others, between what is important and really requires your attention, and what algorithms direct your attention to.

MINDFULNESS VERSUS MEDITATION

Although these two terms are sometimes used as synonyms, there are some subtle differences. Mindfulness is a state of awareness focused on the present moment. It can therefore be said that it is the awareness of presence, that is, of something that is actually happening. Meditation, on the other hand, is about cleansing the mind, and therefore immersing in non-thinking, which initially is quite a challenge for all those who undertake the practice. However, for mindfulness to become a way of life, meditation is an essential training for nurturing and developing a state of mindfulness. Is this effort worthwhile? It is worth quoting the conclusions of an interesting study conducted as part of scientific cooperation undertaken by psychologists and neurobiologists and the Dalai Lama with accompanying lamas in 2001.⁵

In the course of several experiments carried out on a meditating lama with the help of measuring devices used in neurobiology (fMRI, EEG⁶), the positive effect of meditation on the brain (neuroplasticity - i.e. creating new connections) and the body (nervous and endocrine systems) was proven. In other words, your thinking actually changes your "software." What you do and how you think will change and strengthen your connections and actually change your brain. We were born with the brain, but it is literally being created all the time by what we do, what we think about, and meditation is one of those significant practices that influence positive changes in the brain.

Apart from patience and determination, learning a meditation of dozen or so minutes and implementing it into everyday practice does not require any special skills. It is not necessary to sit in the lotus position. It is important to be quiet and calm and not to concentrate on thoughts. It is like a prayer without words. When it becomes your habit, you will see tremendous benefits in the quality of your life.

You can find inspiration for exercises in many books.⁷

⁵ Described by Daniel Goleman in the book *Destructive Emotions. How can we overcome them*, Bantam Books 2004.

⁶ fMRI – functional MRI measures the increase in blood flow and oxygenation in the active brain area; EEG - electroencephalogram studies the bioelectrical activity of the brain.

⁷ Mark Williams, Danny Penman, *Mindfulness. A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, Rodale 2012 or Thich Nhat Hanh *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Beacon Press 1999.

M6.S2. RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. (English proverb)

If you ask anyone how she/he intuitively perceives mental resilience, the answer will most likely be that a resilient person is a tough man who quickly recovers from failure, does not break down, copes well with stress, etc. Those who are resilient to adversity do well in life. Most will agree with this statement. But what exactly is resilience?

The admission that volunteers who decide to volunteer, and especially work with children (or adults) at risk of exclusion, are often above-average sensitive and empathetic people, provokes an important question - how do they cope with the daily problems of a volunteer? Is their resilience threshold higher or lower?

What strategies to follow and how to deal with difficult situations every day, when we are exposed to the influence of complicated stories of the pupils? Does our sensitivity help us or, on the contrary, prevent us from functioning efficiently and helping others effectively? When looking for answers to these questions, let's check what supports resilience. Experts on the subject⁸ point to four pillars:

1. Perceiving every life challenge as an opportunity
2. Faith in one's abilities
3. Perseverance in carrying out tasks
4. Sense of impact, i.e. the belief of having control and influencing what is happening.

All the above points have been extensively described in the previous modules. Therefore, let's examine whether and how it is possible to strengthen resilience to difficult situations and to learn to deal with challenges, failures and adversities.

RESISTANCE OR ANTIFRAGILITY⁹?

The authors of the research on mental resistance prove that its opposite is not weakness but sensitivity, which could suggest that an empathetic and compassionate volunteer is in a lost position. The effects of stressors bombarding his sensitivity, as well as the experiences of the pupils, can overwhelm him. But... it is worth taking a deeper look at it and a bit from a different (albeit not conflicting) perspective. Brené Brown, proving that sensitivity is a measure of courage, directs our attention to the human condition, which manifests itself in something much more than just "coping" and "ability to survive" in difficult situations, which life brings to everyone. Sensitivity (and courage) is an instrument of shock resilience. This type of resilience, as opposed to "regular" resistance, has been called antifragility.

⁸ Peter Clough, Doug Strycharczyk, *Mental Resilience. Development strategies and tools*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne Profesjonalne 2017.

⁹ A term introduced by Nassim Taleb, author of the book *Antifragile. How to live in a world we don't understand*, Allen Lane 2012.

Figuratively speaking, resistance helps us get through difficult times, while antifragility helps transform our lives. While the goal of resistance is to get through problems relatively unscathed, antifragility allows you to build new on the ruins of the old, change for the better, and transform due to the former impulse of a catastrophe.

Inspired by the examples of N. Taleb, let's compare the examples of resistance and antifragility:

example	of resistance:	of antifragility:
When they give you lemons	you swallow the acidic juice without even blinking	you make lemonade of them
generally: a crisis	you will survive by limiting your losses	you grow thanks to it
A fall	you recover	you get stronger
A conflict	you solve it by reaching a compromise	you propose a new solution (transformation)
A failure	you try again	you change your attitude/ way of acting

What events in your life and the work of a volunteer can you mention when you are coping (you are resistant) and when you are transforming (using a difficult situation to make improvement changes)?

Summarising the above, it is probably easier to understand what the well-known saying "what does not kill us, makes us stronger", which not everyone likes ... In this sense, every difficult situation becomes an opportunity to introduce both minor course adjustments and major changes in life. Just like with regular physical activity - the more you exercise, the more energy you have, the more you can do, the more willingly you exercise ... etc.

Training builds courage and resilience to shocks. By enhancing resources, you also strengthen your well-being and keep it in balance.

RECOMMENDED METHODS AND TOOLS

1. Contemplation of a Mandarin – exercises for individual work
2. The Wheel of Well-Being – exercises for individual work
3. Effective Self-Help – tips from the Headington Institute

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