

## In search of a better story: Teaching wisdom to build wellbeing in an increasingly complex world

**Joshua Brown**

Macquarie College, Wallsend, NSW  
jbrown@mc.nsw.edu.au

**Keywords:** Anxiety, depression, happiness, stress, wellbeing, wisdom

### Ancient questions

It seems entirely logical that human beings might seek out a fulfilling life that produces positive relationships, good health and a deep sense of meaning. Indeed, ancient cultures the world over have a history of enquiry related to the examination of 'the good life' (Seligman, 1998, p.1). During the 4th Century BC Plato outlined "a general theory of well-ordered human life" (Allot, 2011, p.1165) in his work *Republic*. From within the Hebrew tradition, Solomon urged his people to turn their "ear to wisdom" and apply their "heart to understanding" (Proverbs 2:2 NIV). This consistent call to wisdom is more relevant than ever in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world that seeks to understand and facilitate wellbeing for staff and students in an educational context.

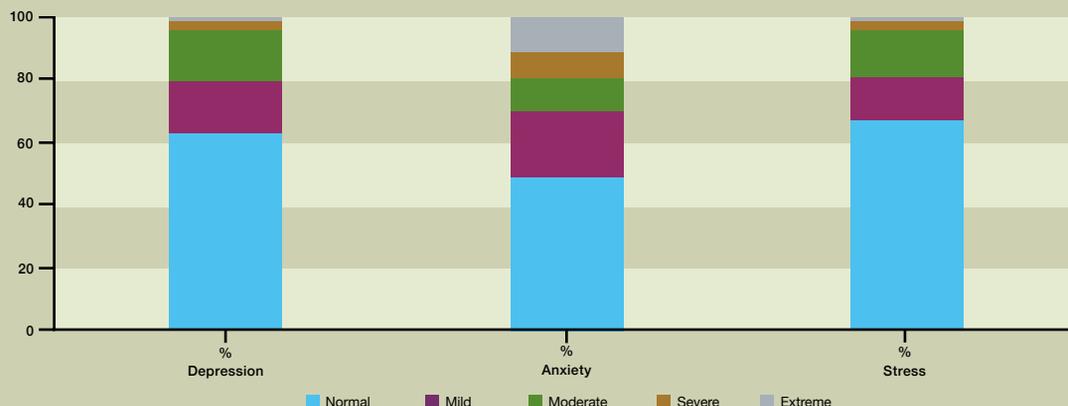
### Modern realities

Despite the long established psychological tendency to seek out the good life, teachers in the 21st Century are confronted with mental and behavioural disorders that now account for about one-third of the world's disability due to all ill-health (Anderson, Jané-Llopis & Hosman, 2011, p. i5). Additionally, depressive disorders are set to become the world's number one cause of ill-health and premature death by 2030 irrespective of national wealth and education (p. i1). The results outlined in Figure 1 reflect the rates of depression anxiety and stress reported by students at one coeducational private school in NSW Australia and are axiomatically parallel to wider results such as those outlined by Anderson.

Additionally, Dr Jean Twenge in her publication *i-Gen* subtitle, surmises that "today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy and completely unprepared for adulthood" (2017). Twenge's generational observations again echo the trend outlined by

“teachers in the 21st Century are confronted with mental and behavioural disorders that now account for about one-third of the world's disability due to all ill-health”

**Figure 1:** Year 8 Pre-Test Results for Invictus Wellbeing Program Cohort



Anderson and the results displayed in Figure 1. However, Twenge acknowledges that commentators should not be too quick to pass judgement on this cohort of adolescents as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than previous generations. Rather parents and educators should note that they are different and therefore our approach to engaging with them may also need to be different. Within this context, schools are asked to shoulder an increasingly complex set of social responsibilities not limited to the shaping of knowledge, responsibility, social skills, health, kindness, and citizenship (Greenberg et al., 2003). It is possible that wisdom’s ancient call is in need of amplification.

## The role of wisdom

In order to understand the protective factor capacity of wisdom, an accurate definition needs to first be established. Until the 1970s empirical studies on wisdom had not emerged (Bangen, Meeks, & Jeste, 2013), possibly due to a prior emphasis on deficit models. However, researchers at UC San Diego have more recently conducted a longitudinal investigation of wisdom called the (SAGE) study (LaFee, 2017). The San Diego School of Medicine used the San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE) to assess an individual’s level of wisdom based upon the following six domains: 1) prosocial attitudes and behaviors such as empathy, altruism, and social cooperation, 2) social decision-making/pragmatic knowledge of life, 3) emotional regulation, 4) reflection/self-understanding, 5) tolerance of diverse values, 6) and ability to effectively deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in life (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 43-44).

Keeping this multi-part definition of wisdom in mind it is noteworthy to consider the ways in which an increase in wisdom could ameliorate the high levels of depression, anxiety and stress outlined above. Increasing urbanisation and loneliness (Anderson et al., 2011) along with risks associated with increases in technology use and family breakdown are all known contributors to these trend lines. Today’s adolescents are growing up in a world vastly different from that of their parents. Life in contemporary Australia features “the cultural pluralism of late modernity, the information deluge, increased anxiety about personal and environmental risk, precarious employment, increased instability in families, rampant consumerism, greater individualisation and the emergence of the ‘spiritual marketplace’ (Mason, Singleton, & Webber, R., 2007, p. 41). It is within this societal context that teachers are aiming to facilitate the journey of students toward resilient adulthood and a deeper experience of wisdom, and

therefore wellbeing.

## From wellbeing to wisdom within new media and the consumer culture

According to the OECD (2015) 72% of OECD countries now explicitly include student wellbeing as a learning priority. Despite emerging and helpful insights such as Dr Martin Seligman’s PERMA model (Seligman, 2013), Dr Darren Morton’s SMILERS lifestyle medicine interventions (Morton, 2017) or Sir Richard’s Layard (2014) utilitarian approach to wellbeing, without a structural acknowledgement of wider cultural forces all interventions may be operating below capacity. In the early 20th Century, journalist and essayist Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud pioneered the notion that “manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses” could be used to drive mass consumption by instilling a psychological lack in the mind of his audience (cited in Gunderson, 2017, para. 4). In short, Bernays cleverly realised that through advertising he could “nudge” (Kosters & der Heijden, 2015) people to towards unhappiness, subsequently providing consumers with goods and services so they could purchase their way back to happiness.

The culture of widespread cultural dissatisfaction has been incredibly effective at making people feel they cannot be happy with how things are at the moment. It can be difficult for young people to navigate life in a culture of mass marketing, “consumption” and “individualism” as outlined by Hughes (2007). Furthermore, Twenge (2017) asserts that i-Gen are “growing up slowly” with “less responsibility” and high levels of “anxiety, depression and loneliness” (p. 290). It is possible that psychological distress on an epidemic scale needs to be met by both targeted wellbeing interventions and a broader shift in the dominant cultural discourse. Publicly funded and ubiquitously available education is the norm in most developed countries and provides an ideal platform from which to deliver a more positive cultural narrative that can subvert the economically driven social and mass media and entertainment industries that largely shape young people’s ideas of reality. These companies have a profit motive to make their platforms as addictive as possible (Murphy, Illes & Reiner, 2008), therefore change is unlikely to come from within the industry itself.

However, schools can make use of explicit wellbeing programs to normalise life affirming outlooks and introduce a suite of new vocabulary allowing young people to unlock their inner worlds. The long term and immersive nature of the education system positions schools as the ideal arena for change. The Invictus Wellbeing Program is one

“schools can make use of explicit wellbeing programs to normalise life affirming outlooks and introduce ... new vocabulary allowing young people to unlock their inner worlds.”

example of a school-based intervention that seeks to reorient students towards a life of wisdom and therefore wellbeing. Wisdom can hold dualities in balance and live within the tension that exists between extremes. This capacity is increasingly important in an age of identity politics and polarities, Twenge (2017) warns that i-Gen tend to avoid the “middle of the road” position because “you might get run over” (p. 266). Contrastingly, wisdom is pro-social and empathic. Wisdom teaches the importance of “love[ing] your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31). The reference to “yourself” highlights the importance of self-knowledge; the fourth domain in the SD-WISE Wisdom Scale. In fact, it could be argued that the entire SD-WISE Wisdom Model could be distilled in its simplest essence, into this one simple insight; love your neighbour as yourself. In the 21st century it may help to note that doing so in person is the best option, “online time [with friends] does not protect against loneliness and depression, while in person time does.” (Twenge, 2017, p. 298).

### Wisdom and happiness

In the journey to become a ‘wellbeing school’ it is also important to help students realise that it’s OK not to feel 100% happy all of the time. This is pertinent in light of Dr Melissa Weinberg’s discovery that “the setpoint for our happiness, according to the latest research, is about 80%” (Weinberg, n.d., para. 3). Much like homeostasis, the body regulates its mood based on efficiency and therefore it is not sustainable to feel euphoric all of the time. However, Weinberg notes that good mental fitness allows an individual to respond by “recovering their normal setpoint for mood” (para. 8). As established previously, self-knowledge is an important part of becoming wise. Understanding your own set-point for mood and having strategies to recover it quickly are skills explicitly taught to students through programs such as The Invictus Wellbeing Program (n.d.), Bounce Back (?), and Dr Paula Barrett’s FRIENDS (n.d.) program and many others. The importance of these programs may not lie entirely in their explicit content, but in their capacity to create an ongoing enabling environment. Mochon, Norton and Ariely (2008), also note that “shifting focus from the impact of major life changes on well-being to the impact of seemingly minor repeated behaviors is crucial for understanding how best to improve well-being” (p. 642). Therefore, the wisdom domain of reflection and understanding becomes increasingly important to our sense of wellbeing. It is the ability to metacognitively reflect upon prior experiences and alter future environments that may impact on our wellbeing if we truly are as “predictably irrational” as Ariely suggests (2010, p.5). These connections are worthy of further investigation

in an educational context.

Adolescence remains an increasingly complex stage of life, exacerbated by widespread cultural factors, the technology revolution and disruption of stable family life. As such, the imbedding of wisdom traditions and the explicit teaching of wisdom practices becomes increasingly important. Having an internal locus of control and being able to navigate the intellectual and practical tensions that exist in adult life are worthwhile pursuits for professional educators, curriculum writers and political leaders. **TEACH**

### References

- Allott, P. (2011). On first understanding Plato’s Republic. *European Journal of International Law*, 22(4), 1165–1173. doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chr085
- Anderson P., Jané-Llopis E., Hosman C. (2011). Reducing the silent burden of impaired mental health. *Health Promotion International*, 26(S1), i4-i9. doi:10.1093/heapro/dar051
- Ariely, D. (2010). *Predictably irrational : The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Bangen, K. J., Meeks, T. W., & Jeste, D. V. (2013). Defining and assessing wisdom: A review of the literature. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry: Journal of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry*, 21(12), 1254–1266. doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2012.11.020
- Barrett, P. (n.d.) Friends: Resilience. Retrieved from <https://www.friendsresilience.org/professor-paula-barrett/>
- Bounce Back! (n.d.). Retrieved from [www.bounceback-program.com/about](http://www.bounceback-program.com/about)
- Gunderson, R. (2017, July 9). *The manipulation of the American mind: Edward Bernays and the birth of public relations. The Conversation*. Retrieved 13th January 2017 from: <http://theconversation.com/the-manipulation-of-the-american-mind-edward-bernays-and-the-birth-of-public-relations-44393>
- Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R. P., O’Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, 58(6-7), 466.
- Hughes, P. (2007). *Putting life together*. Melbourne, Australia: CRA / Fairfield Press
- Invictus Wellbeing Program. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.theinvictuswellbeingprogram.com>
- Kosters, M., & der Heijden, J. V. (2015). From mechanism to virtue: Evaluating Nudge Theory. *Evaluation*, 21(3), 276–291. doi.org/10.1177/1356389015590218
- LaFee, S. (2017, September 20). Researchers develop new tool to assess individual’s level of wisdom. UC San Diego Health Newsroom. Retrieved from: <https://health.ucsd.edu/news/releases/Pages/2017-09-20-researchers-develop-new-tool-to-assess-wisdom.aspx>
- Layard, R. & Clark, D. (2014). *Thrive: The power of evidence-based psychological therapies*. London, England: Allen Lane.
- Mason, M., Singleton, A., & Webber, R. (2007). *The spirit of Generation Y: Young people’s spirituality in a changing Australia*. Mulgrave, Vic: Garratt.
- Mochon, D., Norton, M. I., & Ariely, D. (2008). Getting off the hedonic treadmill, one step at a time: The impact of regular religious practice and exercise on well-being. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 29(5), 632-642.
- Morton, D. (2017). *Live more happy*. Warburton, Australia: Signs.
- Murphy, E., Illes, J., & Reiner, P. (2008). Neuroethics of neuromarketing. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 7(4-5), 293-302. doi: 10.1002/cb.252
- OECD (2015). *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*. OECD Skills Studies. Paris, France: OECD Publishing.
- Seligman, M. E. (1998). What is the good life. *APA Monitor of Psychology*, 29(10), 2.

“  
In the journey to become a ‘wellbeing school’ it is also important to help students realise that it’s OK not to feel 100% happy all of the time.”

# Teaching & Professional Practice

- Seligman, M. E. (2013). *Flourish*. New York, NY: Atria.
- Thomas, M., Bangen, K., Palmer, B., Sirkin Martin, A., Avanzino, J., & Depp, C. ... Jeste, D. V. (2019). A new scale for assessing wisdom based on common domains and a neurobiological model: The San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE). *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 108, 40-47. doi: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2017.09.005
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood—and what this means for the rest of us*. New York, NY: Atria Books.
- Weinberg, M. (n.d.). The fascinating science of happiness explained. this. Deakin University. Retrieved October 2019 from: <https://this.deakin.edu.au/self-improvement/the-fascinating-science-of-happiness-explained>

## Author information

**Joshua Brown** is the founding Director of The Invictus Wellbeing Institute and is the Assistant Principal -

Wellbeing, at Macquarie College, Wallsend.

## Editor's Note

For more information about The Invictus Wellbeing Institute and its programs access:

- the website <https://www.theinvictuswellbeingprogram.com>
- an ABC radio interview on Invictus: <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/newcastle/programs/mornings/invictus/11481202>
- a Newcastle Herald article: <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/6351780/wellbeing-program-founded-at-macquarie-college-wallsend-goes-international/>
- Or contact: [jbrown@invictuswellbeing.com.au](mailto:jbrown@invictuswellbeing.com.au)