

A photograph of a modern office courtyard. In the foreground, there are several trees with vibrant green leaves. In the background, a multi-story office building with a glass facade is visible. A few people are sitting on a bench in the courtyard, and there are some potted plants in the foreground. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a pleasant outdoor workspace.

# Mental Health & Wellbeing

## *In Today's Workforce*

# Mental Health & Wellbeing in Today’s Workforce

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## Introduction

Many of today's greatest social, environmental, and economic challenges stem from a crisis of mental health. Substance abuse, depression, loneliness and suicide have reached epidemic proportions. While the prevalence of physical health issues like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity continue to rise, the annual costs for mental health are increasing twice as fast as all other medical expenses.<sup>1,2</sup> There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that when employers care about the mental health and wellbeing of their employees, it supports more vibrant and engaging cultures, which in turn improves business performance.<sup>3,4</sup>

It has been more than seven decades since the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as "a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."<sup>5</sup> Thirty years ago, they said that health is "a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities." In short, wellbeing is a big part of what makes a life well lived. These definitions mirror the wellbeing concepts that are included in many of the multidimensional models of wellbeing that are growing in popularity today.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

The [National Alliance's Wellbeing Initiative](#) has adopted the model in Figure 1. Like many other wellbeing models, it represents wellbeing as complex and multidimensional, reflecting many different influences on mental health and wellbeing. In addition, the model represents the considerable overlap and interconnectedness among the dimensions. In fact, it is impossible to think of the impact of these dimensions separately without considering the full breadth of a person's wellbeing. Tom Rath and Jim Harter of the Gallup Organization, describe wellbeing as follows:

*"Wellbeing is about the combination of our love for what we do each day, the quality of our relationships, the security of our finances, the vibrancy of our physical health, and the pride we take in what we have contributed to our communities. Most importantly, it's about how [the elements of wellbeing] interact."<sup>6</sup>*

Every person's ability to fully flourish is unique to his or her personal and enabling characteristics. Attitude and outlook are represented in the center of the model reflecting their dependence on and influence over all domains of wellbeing.

### **The Relationship Between Mental Health and Wellbeing**

According to mentalhealth.gov, "mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being." The National Association for Mental Illness (NAMI), describes mental illness as "a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling or mood."<sup>9</sup> Such conditions may affect someone's ability to relate to others and function each day." These definitions show that mental health is an integral part of wellbeing and shares concepts that are traditionally considered in many popular wellbeing models. Figure 1 highlights the integral relationship between mental health and wellbeing.

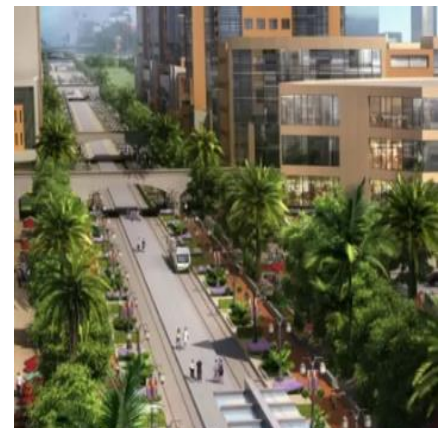
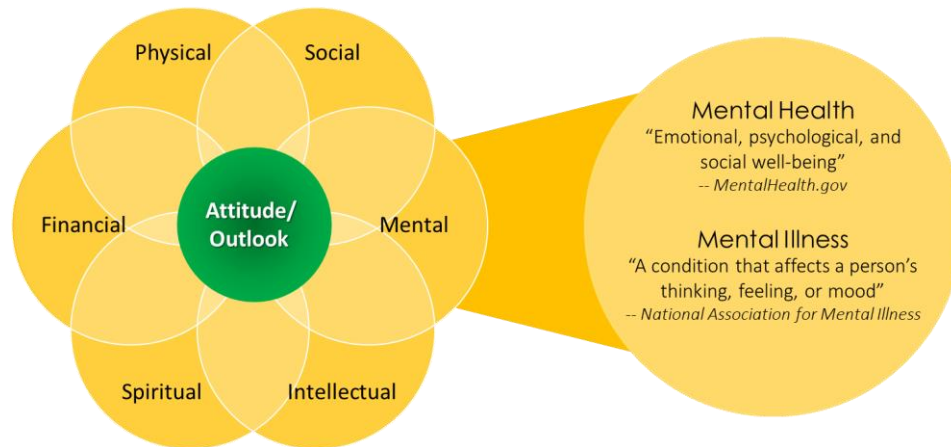


Figure 1. Relationship between Mental Health and Wellbeing



## Why Should Employers Care About Mental Health and Wellbeing?

It's not surprising that addressing mental health and wellbeing have become a top priority for businesses across the country. In fact, a recent survey by the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions (National Alliance) found that over 98% of employers said that mental health was directly linked to overall performance of their organization. Most adults spend a large portion of their lives at work, so employers are in a unique position to advance a mental health and wellbeing agenda. Human resources (HR) and benefits executives can play a powerful role in developing organizational strategies that improve employee wellbeing and mental health. Senior leaders and managers can also be very influential champions for those strategies especially when sharing their personal experiences.

Thriving employees translate into thriving businesses and organizations in the following ways. Compared to employees with lower levels of wellbeing, employees with stronger health and wellbeing are:

- more creative<sup>10</sup>
- more loyal to the organization<sup>11</sup>
- more productive<sup>12,13</sup>
- willing and able to create higher customer satisfaction<sup>14</sup>

Compared to organizations with lower levels of employee wellbeing, organizations with higher employee wellbeing have:

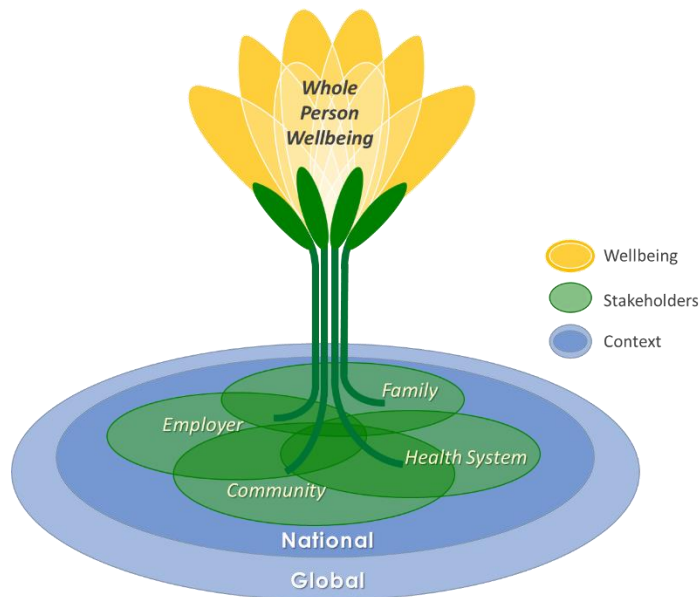
- reduced absence from work
- reduced accidents
- improved retention
- stronger employee commitment
- better productivity
- enhanced brand identity
- greater employee resilience

It would be hard to imagine an employer, family, or community, that wouldn't value these characteristics in its members.

## A Systems View of Mental Health and Wellbeing

In Figure 1 above, we represented mental health and wellbeing in the form of a flower; and like any healthy flower, they rely on support from a healthy ecosystem. Figure 2 below positions the mental health and wellbeing model within the context of the many stakeholders who both benefit from and contribute to mental health and wellbeing. These stakeholders share complex and important connections.

Figure 2. Systems View of Wellbeing



Mental health and wellbeing create the perfect storm that brings together and engages a diverse group of stakeholders toward a common and higher goal. For example, employers contribute to and benefit from their local communities and positively influence families through the employee salaries and healthcare benefits they provide. Healthcare systems have important relationships within communities and with employers. Strong connections and common bonds throughout the larger system can positively influence the mental health and wellbeing of a diverse groups of stakeholders.

Through collaboration and coordination with the stakeholder groups represented in

Figure 2, the regional business groups of the National Alliance are uniquely positioned to help create – region by region – a holistic and comprehensive roadmap that can positively impact their employer members.

## A People Strategy: Rethinking Our Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing

To date, much of what employers have done to improve employee mental health and wellbeing has been focused on changing unhealthy employee behaviors through wellness and prevention initiatives as well as employee assistance programs (EAPs). While many employees appreciate these efforts, a far more strategic and comprehensive *people-focused strategy* will be necessary to achieve the level of impact employers are really seeking to embrace – one that integrates support for the mental health and wellbeing of employees into everything an organization does.

*At the National Alliance, our goal is to help our member organizations understand how to develop more comprehensive and strategic mental health and wellbeing approaches in support of thriving employees, organizations, families, and communities.*

Some of the world’s most successful and pioneering organizations realize the full value of thriving employees and understand that supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their workforce should be a core part of their business strategy. They are investing the necessary time, energy, and resources into creating workplace environments that supports a thriving workplace culture. They also understand the importance of upstream social determinants that impact the mental health and wellbeing of their workforce, including supportive families, communities, and health systems.

At the National Alliance our goal is to help member organizations understand how to develop more comprehensive and strategic mental health and wellbeing approaches in support of thriving employees, organizations, families, and communities. We believe that employees who feel highly valued are better able to bring their best life to work and their best work to life.

## Designing for Greater Leverage in Mental Health and Wellbeing

To have a positive impact, employers will need to take a more comprehensive look at their strategy – offering wellness programs and EAPs can be a great start but it’s not enough to get to the *real endgame*. Designing impactful solutions will take a greater mindfulness of the influences of the complex social systems, environments, and cultures in which people work and live.

The National Alliance Wellbeing Initiative identified six core areas of leverage, or levers, that employer organizations can use to create comprehensive and strategic approaches to supporting employee mental health and wellbeing. These are: (1) Culture; (2) Leadership; (3) Operations; (4) Connections; (5) Places; and (6) Metrics.

Figure 3. Levers Framework



## Evolutionary Path to Mental Health and Wellbeing

Given the many domains reflected in the National Alliance Levels Framework, there is a great deal that employer organizations can do to create workplaces where employees can flourish and many paths they might take. The ***Mental Health and Wellbeing Integration Maturity Model*** in Tables 1 and 2 reflects an evolution of potential approaches that could improve support in employer organizations. Table 1 provides an overview of the core characteristics of each level of maturity. The columns represent the maturity of mental health and wellbeing approaches from more tactical and programmatic approaches (leftmost columns), to more strategic and systemic approaches (rightmost columns). Table 2 outlines more detailed characteristics and aligns itself with the Levels Framework on page 6.

Employers embarking upon a journey to create comprehensive approach can use the Maturity Model to reflect on where they are currently and determine where they would ultimately like to be. In the following sections, we reflect on strategic wellbeing maturity in each of the lever areas.

### *Culture*

Because culture is by far the strongest lever for influencing mental health and wellbeing in organizations, we have positioned it as the first lever in Table 2. According to Ed Schein, one of the most influential culture theorists of all time, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Culture has strong leverage over all the other levers and ultimately determines “how we do things” in an organization. However, as shown in Figure 3, if all levers are interrelated, then culture is also shaped by all the other levers. With this in mind, the strength of a culture will ultimately be determined by strong alignment across all levers. This means that ***support for mental health and wellbeing must be woven into everything the organization does.***

Cultures where support of mental health and wellbeing are the norm support satisfaction and meaning in the work and lives of employees. They also encourage smart decision-making in healthcare choices and healthy lifestyles for employees and their families. This is increasingly important as knowledge and service workers become a growing proportion of the workforce.

Culture is by far the strongest lever for influencing wellbeing in an organization.

A strong culture of wellbeing will pay dividends for individuals and will allow the capacity for compassion and emotional intelligence to be a part of the organization itself. Organizations with the most mature wellbeing cultures (External Integration) work to positively influence their surrounding communities and the health systems with which they partner.

### *Leadership*

Historically, executive leaders of organizations had very little to no direct role or ownership of wellness programs and minimal focus on whether their workplace environments or cultures supported employee mental health or wellbeing. Their involvement in supporting employee wellbeing usually meant endorsing or participating in the wellness programs offered by their organizations (Foundational Programs). However, as competition for the best talent continues to increase across a number of business sectors, executive leaders are becoming more deeply committed to ensuring that mental

health and wellbeing are core to their people strategies, and therefore, woven into the vision, values, and mission of the organizations they lead.

To be the most effective, a strong commitment throughout all levels of and across all areas of an organization is needed to implement comprehensive and aligned mental health and wellbeing approaches. This creates a kind of “*meta-leadership*” approach - where executive leaders, operations leaders, benefits executives, managers of people, wellness leaders, and employees engage together to roll out an agreed strategy across the organization. In more mature approaches, such as in the Organizational Integration level (Table 2), the role of the benefits executive can *expand to play a more strategic role in driving organizational change*.

Ultimately, it will take a systems-level meta-leadership approach working with all relevant external stakeholders to influence the greater good of our communities and societies.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1. Mental Health and Wellbeing Integration Maturity Model (Overview)

	Foundational Programs	Enhanced and Integrated programs	Organizational Integration (Strategic)	External Integration (Systemic)
Approach Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Endorsed by leadership</li> <li>• Program-based primarily focused on traditional wellness and PHM concepts (i.e., nutrition, activity, smoking cessation, stress management, disease management, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership engaged and committed</li> <li>• Largely program-based with broader support for mental health and whole-person wellbeing concepts beyond traditional wellness topics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meta-Leadership throughout the organization</li> <li>• Wellbeing is a comprehensive people strategy woven into fabric of everything in the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System-level meta-Leadership across community and society stakeholders</li> <li>• Address upstream factors and social determinants of mental health and wellbeing.</li> </ul>
Value/Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcomes tied to participation in programs</li> <li>• Reduction in health risks and costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees who participate experience greater mental health, better overall wellbeing, purpose, capacity for creativity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for wellbeing is self-sustaining</li> <li>• Organization becomes an “employer of choice”</li> <li>• Superior business performance<sup>16</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flourishing employees, families, community members, and global citizens</li> <li>• Innovative, successful companies that do more good than harm</li> <li>• Vibrant and thriving societies, locally, regionally, and globally</li> </ul>



Table 2. Mental Health and Wellbeing Integration Maturity Model (Lever Detail)

Lever	Foundational Programs	Enhanced and Integrated programs	Organizational Integration (Strategic)	External Integration (Systemic)
Culture of Wellbeing	Some mental health and well-being programs or resources but not recognized or promoted as a part of the culture.	Mental health and wellbeing are promoted as a “culture of” but are treated as electives, not a core part of culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mental health and wellbeing improvement are a vibrant and dynamic part of the organization culture.</li> <li>Focused on both individual, families, and business wellbeing – core part of “how we do things.”</li> </ul>	Organization takes the lead in embedding its culture throughout the community by becoming a model and motivator for change in communities and health systems.
Leadership	Benefits’ ownership with leadership “permission.”	Benefits’ ownership with leadership commitment.	Commitment, ownership, and accountability for supporting wellbeing is pervasive across all leaders and all levels.	Meta-leadership strategy: Build on c-suite stakeholders, e.g., visible ownership and role modeling by leaders within the organization and activation of family, community, and health systems.
Aligned Operations	“First generation” of primarily vendor-driven programs to address mental health and physical wellness. Not integrated or reflective of the needs of the workforce	Next generation approach reflects expansion to whole person wellbeing, including mental health. Purposefully reflects workforce needs	More comprehensive approach ensures that organizational policies, practices, programs, and benefits are designed to support mental health and wellbeing of employees and their families.	Creation of symbiotic relationships outside the organization to support wellbeing and mental health, including community and health systems.
Strong Social Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic gatherings designed to bring employees together (picnics, health fairs, etc.)</li> <li>Wellness committee works in isolation</li> </ul>	Collaboration between committees/groups (wellness, safety, affinity groups, etc.) encouraged.	Organizational values reflect the importance of social wellbeing. Performance evaluations include collaboration, relationship.	Organization lives its values through corporate social responsibility efforts, promoting connections in homes and communities, and collaboration with other stakeholders
Healthy Places	Basic workplace amenities support healthy choices (e.g., healthy foods in cafeteria, vending machines, and break room, onsite or near-site gym, smoke free worksite/ campus etc.).	Healthy workstation characteristics. Workplace design promotes connection, collaboration, and social interaction	Purposeful alignment of all workplace features in support of mental health and wellbeing (e.g., light, noise, air quality, quiet spaces, views of nature, enjoyable and safe indoor and outdoor spaces, etc.)	Organization collaborates with surrounding communities to improve local conditions for mental health and wellbeing
Meaningful Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Metrics largely focus on participation in programs, activities, and health risks</li> <li>Primarily quantitative data sources (e.g., administrative data and/or health risk assessment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Metrics include indicators of mental health and wellbeing (e.g., life satisfaction, purpose, personal resilience, etc.)</li> <li>Data sources include qualitative information (e.g., interviews, focus groups, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Metrics reflect impact on business performance (e.g. productivity, innovation, turnover, sick leave, burnout)</li> <li>Quantitative and qualitative information reflects support for mental health and wellbeing in the culture, climate, and environment of the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Metrics include impact on business performance and wellbeing in the community</li> <li>Indicators of shared value*</li> </ul>

## Operations

Organizations that have maintained more programmatic approaches to wellness have had limited success in long-term behavior change of their workforces. A growing number of U.S. employers are shifting from just offering wellness programs to a much broader, more integrated approach of wellbeing that we see in Organizational Integration level of The Maturity Model. This requires a more comprehensive mindset that tackles elements like emotional and mental health, productivity, social connectivity, financial education, and job fulfillment, among other things.

Since benefits executives play an important role in engaging employees from the time of hire, they can be a perfect support to leverage change within an organization. Their ability to work with other leaders in the organization and other important stakeholders (consultants, health plans, administrators, and other vendors) will allow them to create a business case for investing in mental health. It can also help ensure that all aspects of their organization's programs, policies, environment, and culture are aligned (see side bar) so that they deliver outcomes that support a positive organizational culture.

The most mature mental health and wellbeing strategies address upstream influences of family, community, and health systems. This kind of larger systems-approach can make an important contribution to creating energizing and rewarding places to work. Employees could leave work more fulfilled than exhausted, and they could return each day to healthy and supportive homes, families and communities after a rewarding day at work. Conversely, employees would return to work energized after a restful and revitalizing evening at home.

### Align Policies, Practices and Benefit Design in Support of Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Hiring and onboarding
- Performance and promotion policies
- Pay equity and fairness
- Time off, vacation, flex time
- Training and development
- Benefit Design
- Travel policies
- Job design that helps employees reach their full creative potential
- Benefit design strategy (F/T, P/T employees, retirees)
- All programs include supervisor training
- Health plan partners screened behavioral health and wellbeing issues
- Engage with community activities to reduce stigma and/or break the silence

## Connections

Research has shown that the one of the most important influences on long-term health is meaningful social connection. According to Dr. Robert Waldinger, the current director of the eight-decade long Harvard Study of Adult Development,<sup>17</sup> "People who are more socially connected to family, friends, and community are happier, healthier, and live longer than people who are less well connected." There is considerable evidence that the social relationships in employees' workplaces can also significantly influence their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>9</sup>

Many Foundational approaches include gatherings like company sports teams and picnics, birthday celebrations, wedding and baby showers, and other efforts to enhance social connections in the workplace. Ideally, the organization's "wellness committee" (or other governance structure for population health) will

begin to look at ways they can work closely with groups in other areas and with other responsibilities in the organization.

Advancing more mature approaches to supporting connections and social wellbeing involves collaborating across organizational silos (such as benefits, operations line management, talent management/staffing, unions, diversity & inclusion, and workforce training). Organizations that are more integrated in their approach (Organizational Integration) have values that reflect social wellbeing and incentive structures (e.g., performance evaluations, etc.) that reward collaboration and social connections as part of employee performance criteria. The most mature approaches (Organizational and External Integration), work to enhance social connection and foster healthy relationships in employees' homes and families, with friends, and in communities.

### *Places*

One of the most powerful influences on our behavior is our environment. Foundational and Enhanced approaches to creating healthier workplace environments include non-smoking campuses, having a gym or dedicated space for working out, ensuring healthy workstation ergonomics, and offering healthier food choices in vending machines, cafeterias, and in meetings. More strategic approaches work to align all aspects of the workplace environment. This includes ensuring that worksites have healthy indoor physical environments, healthy shared spaces as well as personal workspaces and healthy, enjoyable, and safe outdoor spaces. Many of the most innovative organizations are using "choice architecture" to purposefully "nudge"<sup>18</sup> employees toward healthier decisions and actions with design elements that encourage positive practices and discourage negative practices.

#### Align the Workplace Environment in Support of Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Invite sunlight into the workspace.
- Rather than purchasing desktop printers for employees, encourage them to get up from their desks and walk to the shared printer to retrieve their printed documents.
- Provide standing desks, hold walking meetings, promote parking farther from the office, encourage taking the stairs to use restrooms on another floor.
- Allow, and even encourage, exercise breaks.
- Provide nap areas, or pillows and encourage employees to lay their heads down at their desks for time-out rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation.
- Promote connections and social interaction.
- Provide plenty of areas where employees can convene informally.
- Include a generous amount of greenery in and around the office.
- Reduce noise exposure and include sounds from nature.

Organizations with the most mature approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing understand that their surrounding communities are also important parts of their environments and can be a source of supportive resources. Places where we learn, work, play, and obtain our healthcare are all part of the upstream social determinants to can focus on.

### *Metrics*

In the past, the primary metrics of success for wellness and prevention programs were program participation, reduced risk or disease, and lower costs associated with medical care and time away from work. While these measures will likely remain important, especially to employers, we need a new set of

success metrics that reflect broader support for mental health and wellbeing in our workplaces, workforces, families, and communities. Among those are:

- Measures that reflect individual mental health and wellbeing (beyond risks and costs).
- Measures that reflect the organizational support for wellbeing – culture, environment, policies, and practices.
- Measures that mirror what you want to become as an organization guided by core values and a strong vision.
- Measures that influence the greater good in families, communities, and society.

The most mature approaches to measurement will use metrics that assess flourishing in employees, families, community members, and global citizens. Innovative, successful companies also evaluate vibrancy and thriving in societies, locally, regionally, and globally. The bottom line is to use multiple measures so that you can create a meaningful picture of your organization and can measure change over time.

## How to Get Started

As we mentioned earlier, The Maturity Model can be used as a tool to give organizations a sense of where they are currently with respect to supporting mental health and wellbeing and what their ideal state might look like for the future. For organizations with approaches that currently fall into the Foundational or Enhanced and Integrated Programs categories, it is important to understand that maturation doesn't necessarily involve focusing your efforts solely on the next highest level in the Maturity Model. Depending on your organization and its goals, it may make sense to address aspects of more mature approaches without necessarily checking off every box of each subsequent level. For example, if your organization's current efforts to support mental health and wellbeing fall primarily in the level of Foundational Programs, you may want to take a multi-pronged approach by expanding on the types of programs you offer (Enhanced and Integrated Programs), and addressing upstream social determinants that lead to poor mental health (External Integration).

In subsequent papers, we will provide detailed practical advice for advancing mental health and wellbeing strategies in each of the lever areas described in the Maturity Model. The approaches represented can directly and indirectly benefit the wellbeing of employees and increase their engagement and loyalty to their organizations. Our sincere hope for the future is that more employers will embrace comprehensive and integrated internal wellbeing strategies and engage in efforts to improve mental health and wellbeing in the communities where their employees work and reside.



## Appendix A – Overview of Concepts from Popular Wellbeing Theories

Wellness (Hettler, <sup>19</sup> Ardell <sup>20</sup> )	Well-being elements (Gallup <sup>21</sup> )	Well-being (PERMA) (Seligman <sup>22</sup> )	Motivational Hierarchy (Maslow <sup>23</sup> )	Psychological Well-being (Ryff and Keyes <sup>24</sup> )
Physical	Physical	Physical	Physiological needs	
Social	Social	Positive relationships	Psychological needs of belongingness and love	Positive relations
Mental	Emotional	Positive emotions	Psychological needs	Self-acceptance
Intellectual	Intellectual	Engagement	Psychological and fulfillment needs	Personal growth
Spiritual	Spiritual	Meaning	Self-transcendence	Purpose in life
Financial	Financial		Basic physiological/ Safety needs	

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### Mission of the National Alliance Wellbeing Initiative

*To be recognized as a leading voice advocating for and demonstrably improving the wellbeing of individuals and their families through and to the benefit of employers, communities, and healthcare delivery.*

*The Wellbeing Initiative is committed to supporting and enhancing the National Alliance's focus on improving mental health in the US population.*

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