



The visible hand: Five Ways to Wellbeing as a wise proposal for social and environmental prescription

“Much of modern life is based upon a false logic, a logic that assumes that happiness and well-being come from financial prosperity. Thus most politicians – and most of our mainstream media – appear to assume that the main goal of government is to ensure the economy is forever moving forward. It is almost as if the American founding fathers had declared that our inalienable rights were Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Economic Growth. There are two main reasons why this assumption is wrong. First, once basic material needs have been met, there is very little evidence that pursuing financial prosperity generates much extra happiness for individuals or for nations. Second, by blindly pursuing economic growth, we are creating a whole set of social and environmental issues that will undermine the potential happiness and well-being of future generations.”
— Nick Marks (co-creator of the Five ways to wellbeing and the Planet Index)

In 2008, the centre for wellbeing at [nef \(the new economics foundation\)](#) developed a set of evidence-based actions to improve personal wellbeing. This was the result of a commission by Foresight, the UK government futures think-tank, as part of the Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing. From a long list of actions for enhancing wellbeing based on enough evidence of “good functioning”, they chose five to simplify and to reach the British population with a better dissemination of the message. These were; **connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give**. In a similar way to the message that people should eat five portions of fruits or vegetables a day to maintain our body healthy, **those five actions could be adequate to promote or enhance our emotional, social and mental wellbeing. I would even include spiritual or a deep**

responsibility towards our planet and future generations if we think of a bigger picture as I have suggested through the message between brackets on the picture.

It's been more than ten year since that proposal and the message is still working thanks to the NHS (National Health Service) and different groups or organizations which promote them as social prescription.

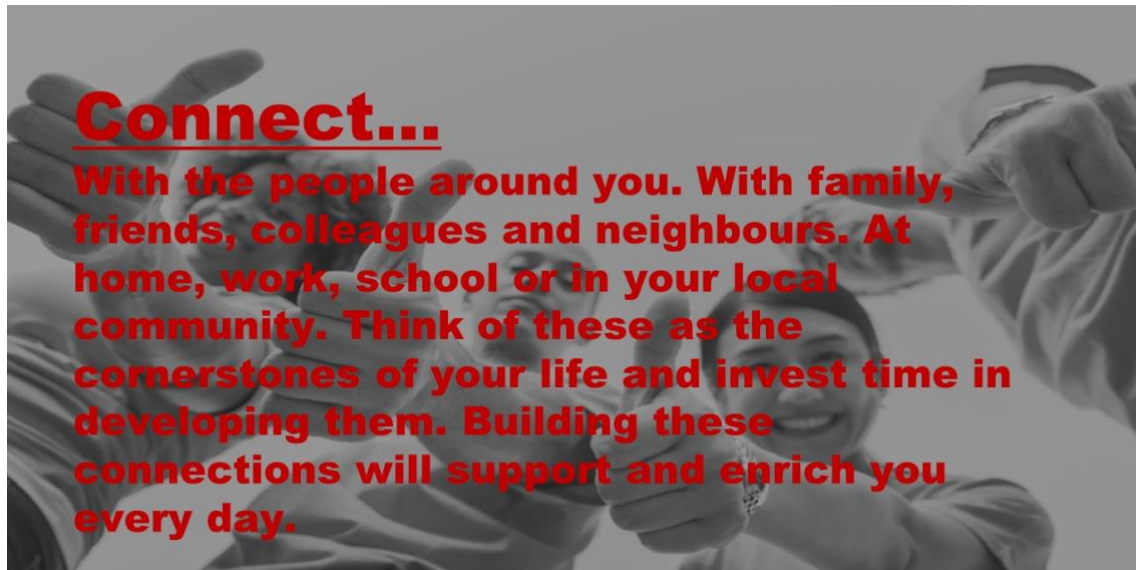
The WHO (World Health Organization) [states that](#):

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

Therefore, our worldview of healthcare should be integral and not only physical as sometimes is taken by granted. In the 20th and 21st century, the life of our bodies has been extended, however our emotional, social and mental health (I'd also add our spirituality humanity) seems to be falling. We can observe it through the state of different crises; depression and anxiety through personal stress, protest demonstrations and big polarities among different groups of people in a particular society and the big problem that surround all of us, the environmental crisis.

The end of the year is usually a time of balance and new year's resolution. However, [80% of these resolutions-ers are back home](#) by the second week of February. The **main proposal** of this article **is to show us those five ways to maintain or increase our wellbeing as well as having handy a mnemonic way for not forgetting easily** and be a kind of invented challenge for reversing the above percentage. For the mnemonic way, I will use the five fingers of the hand, a proposal that reminds me of one of the books that occupied my mind in the 90's. It was the “Handbook for the positive revolution” by Edward de Bono.

Connect ... (We are interdependent)



The thumb or pollex will be our reminder to connect. In addition to using it in hitchhiking in some cultures, making eye contact with motorists, the thumb is the powerful finger. Its etymology comes from the Latin *pollicaris*, [which in turn derives from the verb polleo](#), “to be strong, powerful, able”, since it is the strongest finger and also allows the effectiveness of the hand to grasp anything.

And connecting is perhaps the most effective way of happiness. According to some findings, [relationships and good health](#) are more important happiness factors than money. We are connected since we are born, when we are dependent, until we die, often in dependence with other people. Most of the life of any person occurs in interdependence. Family, community, economy and the work we do and others do for us, are those dimensions of life where there is great interdependence. It’s a giving and taking. The great writer Herman Melville pointed clearly:

“We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.”

In general, when we travel, the most important things are not things (landscapes, monuments, places...) but experiences and connections with the people we travel, or we encounter.

This idea of the importance of connections or encounters in our journey of life was [transmitted in an interview](#) by Jose de Luna, one of the group of actors with disabilities who acted at the successful and feel-good Spanish movie [“Campeones” \(Champions\)](#).

“Meeting people is what makes me most excited. Thank to the movie my life is now richer.”

We could say that being wealthy is not only about money or quantities but connections and qualities. Finally, to have a more efficient or healthier

connections, it mainly requires presence, face to face, where hearing, feeling and seeing all the nuances of a communication makes us really being connecting and empathize with the other person. Let's get active...

Be active ... (We are our body)



The index finger will be the reminder to be active. That finger indicates direction, so we must move. The sedentary behaviour of the modern times does not suit our body which have been prepared for action, activity or mobility since prehistoric times.

The evidence about the virtues of exercising and how the brain releases hormones have been known for a long time. Among those advantages and benefits that contributes to our wellbeing can be found:

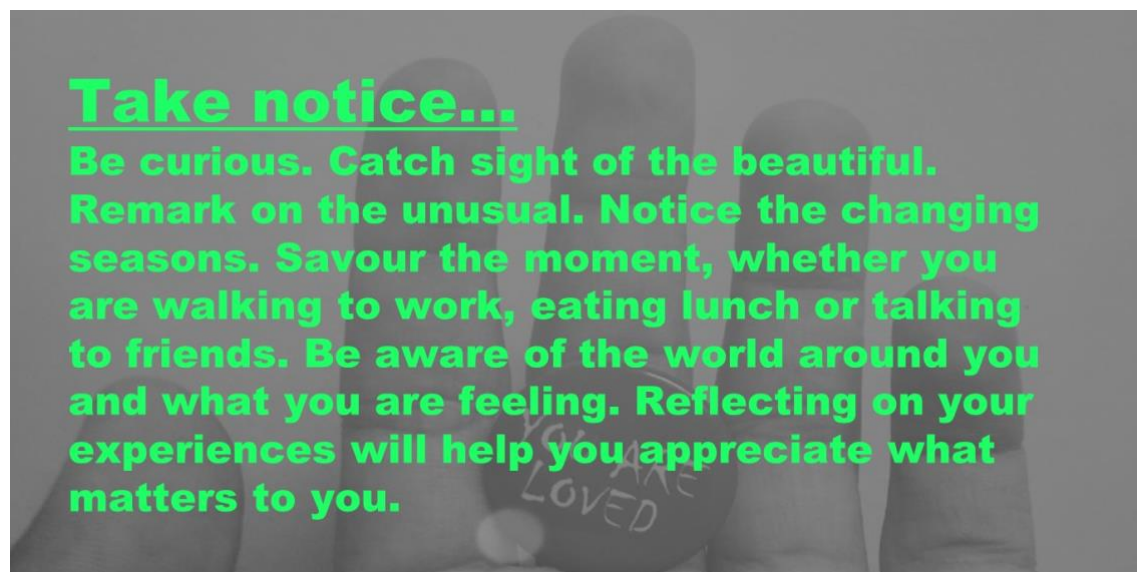
- **Exercise is an all-natural treatment to fight depression.**
- **Exercise may help us fight off colds.**
- **Exercise helps you control your weight.**
- **Regular exercise changes the brain to improve memory, thinking skills.**
- **Physical activity can prevent and manage Alzheimer's disease.**
- **Physical exercise can prevent stress.**

The great linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, had already advanced more than 200 years ago another of the ways of wellbeing, which we will see below, that was very close of being active physically:

“True enjoyment comes from activity of the mind and exercise of the body; the two are ever united.”

His younger brother, the naturalist Alexandre von Humboldt, put them into practice by walking and traveling the world while learning our systemic connections with natural world. His enthusiasm for nature inspired Goethe, Thoreau, Darwin, John Muir... to take notice...

Take notice ... (We are eco-dependent)



The middle finger or tall finger is typically the longest finger. It could remind us to look up and see the highest world that surrounds us, the whole Planet. We are alive because of the Earth and its environment that we take for granted. We are eco-dependent beings. The quality of the energy that sustains us comes from a healthy diet and the quality and quantity of the food depends on the different types of [ecosystem services](#) provided by the Planet. All is connected. The planet maintains life. It deserves our respect and we must take notice of it.

Another dimension of this way it's the focus on the present as a way of life. It seems that **mindfulness returns us to the here and now, leaving behind all that noise of the past and the anxiety of the future. The time is now!** As Carl Honoré explains in his [best-seller "In praise of Slow"](#), there is a "cult of speed" that needs to be challenged. We have interiorised the idea and narrative that time is equal to money, however common sense and the evidence tell us that time is equal to life.

[The Slow movement](#) points to this way of wellbeing, i.e. taking control of our time and not following the inertia that goes through the cult of speed in our life.

Two philosophers support this idea. On the one hand, Alan Watts stated that:

“No valid plans for the future can be made by those who have no capacity for living now. I have realized that the past and future are real illusions, that they exist in the present, which is what there is and all there is.”

On the other hand, Albert Camus remarked to those who were worried about the future:

“Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.”

These are great lessons to keep learning...

Keep learning ... (We are our mind)



The next finger is the ring finger. It is so named because the ring is worn in some cultures as a commitment for the wedding and the marriage. In our case, we will use it as a lifelong commitment to keep learning for our human development. **Except in adverse health situations, we are learning until the last day of our lives.** The same cannot be said for our body. This grows till our young adulthood when it stops and then in our old age it even starts to diminish lightly. This would be a perfect simile for the economy. Once a certain level has been reached, it should not grow more biophysically, in quantity, since the limits of the planet will prevent this kind of growth. On the other side it could grow in quality even indefinitely if it doesn't depend on the biophysical limits of the Earth. Perhaps, the idea of managing planet resources and human wellbeing could be clearer through the paradoxical words of a 11-year-old student. He was having fun and being educated through the fascinated [boardgame "Less is Max"](#) (Less is More). He said:

“It’s cool and teaches you that with less, better things and more things are done than with more and worse things”

The plasticity of the brain allows us that to have inner growth and learn until the end of our days. In addition, if we complement it synergistically with the second way of wellbeing, be active, this would be a perfect symbiosis for our personal life.

Finally, the great blues musician, B.B. King reminded us of a great truth about learning:

“The beautiful thing about learning is nobody can take it away from you.”

This is something that is with us all the time and makes us so unique and special. A consequent next step would be to give its fruits to others...

Give ... (We are emotional and social beings)



Finally, the little finger that is our smallest finger will remind us of **the importance of giving, no matter how small**. It is also called “auricular finger” because it can be readily introduced into the ear passage. In a similar way, this could also be a symbolic reminder to cover our ears to avoid the ego to listening to the infamous mantra “*greed is good*”. However, **contributing, collaborating, showing solidarity or cooperating are more powerful actions for our wellbeing** as it was indicated through the first way of wellbeing, “connect”.

Generosity and gratitude are among those virtues that occur in all cultures. Therefore, its opposite greed or avarice have been penalized and narrated as a

complete disaster for any community. Greed has been condemned in all cultures, through myths, fables or stories as [“A Christmas Carol”](#). The redemption or transformation of Mr Scrooge comes when he realises that generosity and kindness are the best tools to live emotionally and socially in society.

In Goethe’s words would be:

“Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound.”

This chain or circle returns us to the beginning, when we all were inside our mother’s body and experienced... connection...

A synergistic hand

“The concept of wellbeing comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. Equally important for wellbeing is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one’s life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing.”

(nef, New Economics Foundation)

The idea of [“responsible wellbeing”](#) could also be understood from two main elements that seem [“glocal”](#). On one hand, the global and conceptual dimensions that appear in brackets, i.e., the importance of the physical (body), emotional, social and mental complemented with the principles of interdependence and eco-dependence which suggest a more spiritual dimension. On the other hand, a personal and experimental one in our local area of life which is the one suggested by nef through the five ways to wellbeing.

Systems thinking holds that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. If we can exercise every of the five ways to wellbeing daily, the evidences show that they could enhance a great responsible wellbeing. According to the data by nef, **“take notice” and “give” enhance our wellbeing while “connect”, “be active” and “keep learning” not only enhance our wellbeing but buffer against mental ill health.**

In a similar and synergistic way, Edward de Bono, created [those five principles for a positive revolution](#): **effectiveness, constructiveness, respect, self-improvement and contribution**. Each principle is a complementary part of a bigger whole, the positive revolution.

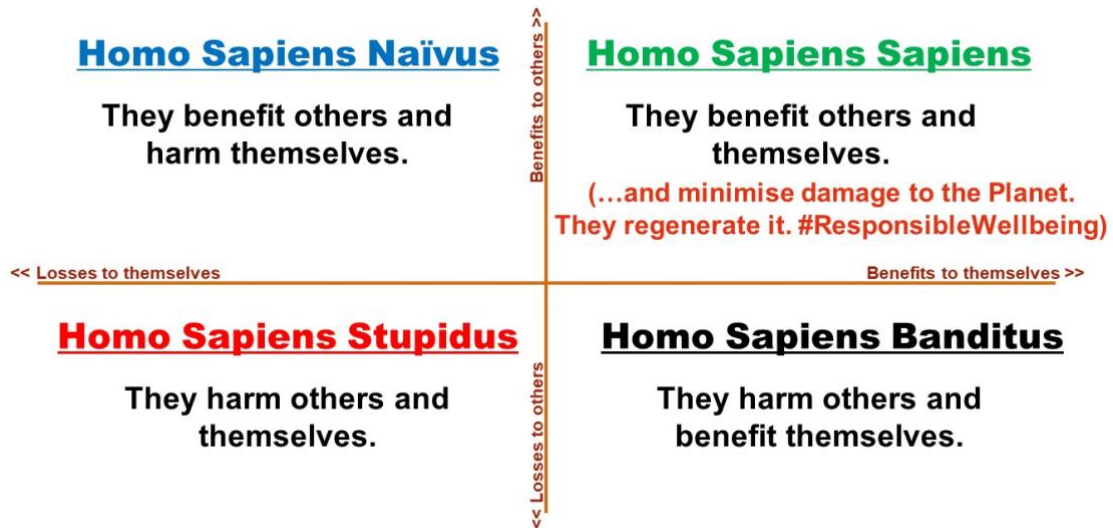
These two models, five ways to wellbeing and the positive revolution, have in common that they are mostly set up from a **proactive, preventive and long-**

term perspective. However, the Nobel prize in Economics, Daniel Kahneman in his book [“Thinking fast and slow”](#) states that human condition is also overlaid by another model that seems in opposition to the above aspects, i.e. a reactive, corrective and short-term perspective.

In general, the facts and evidences of our personal, social and environmental crises seem to indicate that our brains are softly nudged to the short-term scope through our instincts and emotions. The rational part and the long-term perspective seem to be kidnapped by the previous behaviours or actions. Perhaps this is the reason why we don't mostly achieve our new year's resolution. **We are human beings hooked by some instinctive and emotional biases instead of the rational humans or “homo economicus” described by the mainstream economics.**

In a similar way, our rational desire for wellbeing needs a proactive, preventive and long-term perspective. On the contrary, our ill-being through personal, social or environmental crises show us that we are hooked by the reactive, corrective and short-term perspective.

Nobody knows how the future will be. From a utopian wellbeing society to a catastrophic collapse the scope is very wide. However, it seems clearer that we need to be nudged to a proactive, preventive and long-term model. The five ways to wellbeing framework seem to achieve those features. **This personal model and other ones more collective are the bridge of a set of different initiatives that are already working around the world in search of a wellbeing society.** Perhaps from a complementary point of view, the awakening of the people in a mostly reactive way as we can see through these protests and rebellions around the world can catalyse a paradigm shift. Proactively, the former is already building the foundation of a new system and, reactively, the latter are dismantled the current system. Both approaches complement each other. Without some roads already travelled, the fall of the system could drop us into a large hole with no exit. Time will tell us if we were intelligent (homo sapiens sapiens), and we acted with a kind of responsible wellbeing.



Finally, as a proactive way, I will summarise the five ways to wellbeing so we could easily remember through the five fingers of our hand:

- The thumb**, the most powerful and effective finger that we normally use for hitchhiking, will remind us that **contacting others** is probably the most effective and powerful way of wellbeing. Human society is totally interdependent.
- The index finger** or the pointer finger will indicate **our direction to be active** so let's go and keep a body healthy.
- The middle finger is the longest** one and will attract our attention to **the most important, to take notice or our surroundings** and the here and now. We are eco-dependent beings.
- The ring finger**, where the ring is normally worn, **will engage us to keep learning** during our lifelong. Our mind will be open to new possibilities and challenges.
- The little or auricular finger** is the smallest finger and will point out two things: **The importance of giving, no matter how small and the importance of stopping to talk our ego** and diminish the current cultural narcissism that surround us. We are social and emotional beings, so our listening is one of the most important skills.

Let's make visible our hand and give a hand for a better world!

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He is currently writing two books:

"Wellbeing economy: Connecting the dots... A guide and toolkit for a new economy", to be realised at the end 2020.

“Paradoxes we live by: Embracing paradoxical thinking for the emergence of new possibilities.”, to be realised at the end 2021.

You can follow him at [@ResWellbeing](#) [@BienestarRespon](#)

Main references:

[Five ways to wellbeing: The evidence.](#)

[Five ways to wellbeing: New applications, new ways of thinking.](#)