

Flourishing Under Strain: A Regulatory Architecture for Sustaining Wellbeing in Adversity

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ABSTRACT

Wellbeing science has traditionally defined flourishing through traits such as optimism, autonomy, and goal pursuit. Yet a persistent paradox remains: why does suffering endure even among those who appear psychologically well? This review critically evaluates nine foundational and emerging models—PERMA, Psychological Wellbeing, Self-Determination Theory, Flow Theory, Hope Theory, Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing, Psychological Richness Theory, the Capabilities Approach, and the Well-Balance Model—to assess whether they account for the lived experiences of individuals navigating emotional disruption, relational complexity, and moral ambiguity. Through conceptual synthesis, the review identifies structural gaps in trait-centric frameworks and introduces four regulatory capacities—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves—as dynamic mechanisms for adaptive restoration. These capacities regulate rather than replace traditional traits, offering a recursive system through which wellbeing can be sustained and recalibrated. By reframing flourishing as a process of intentional regulation, this review advances a cross-domain framework with relevance for emotion regulation, moral psychology, clinical resilience, and culturally responsive wellbeing science.

Keywords: *Wellbeing, Emotional Containment, Experiential Insight, Ethical Coherence, Resilience Reserves*

The pursuit of psychological wellbeing has long animated both philosophical and scientific inquiry. From Aristotelian virtue ethics to contemporary frameworks such as PERMA (Seligman, 2012), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), and the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), the literature has evolved toward increasingly structured representations of human flourishing. These models offer valuable scaffolding—emphasizing trait possession, goal attainment, and relational success. Yet a persistent paradox remains: why does suffering endure even under conditions of moral congruence, emotional stability, and social integration (Wong, 2011; Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016)? If these traits define flourishing, what explains the erosion of wellbeing within lives deemed psychologically well?

This paradox invites a shift in focus—not merely toward what flourishing entails, but toward how it is sustained and recalibrated when disrupted. Although wellbeing has been

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extensively reviewed across psychological subfields, most syntheses remain anchored in trait-centric paradigms and overlook recent conceptual developments. In the past decade, emerging frameworks such as Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019), Psychological Richness Theory (Oishi & Westgate, 2022), and the Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025) have introduced temporal, ecological, and complexity-based dimensions. Yet these models remain underrepresented in consolidated reviews, and their relevance for navigating emotional disruption is rarely examined.

This review addresses that gap by asking: What sustains wellbeing when flourishing falters? Through the lens of adaptive restoration, it critically evaluates nine foundational and emerging models of wellbeing, identifying structural asymmetries and conceptual blind spots. Rather than proposing new theory, it reinterprets four regulatory capacities—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves—as integrative mechanisms that enhance the translational relevance of existing models. These constructs are positioned not as substitutes for traditional traits, but as dynamic regulators of their expression, offering a recursive scaffold through which wellbeing may be sustained as a process rather than a possession.

By embedding restoration within the architecture of flourishing, this review advances wellbeing theory in three key ways: (1) shifting the epistemic focus from trait validation to adaptive process; (2) identifying integrative pathways for strengthening existing models; and (3) introducing a culturally inclusive lens that recognizes wellbeing as contextually sustained across diverse moral ecologies (Thomas & Fietje, 2020; Phillips, Kumar, & Singh, 2024). In doing so, it invites a recalibration of wellbeing science—one that restores complexity, humility, and transformative potential to the study of human resilience.

METHOD

Given the theoretical nature of this inquiry and the absence of unified regulatory models in wellbeing science, a conceptual review was selected to synthesize cross-domain constructs and evaluate structural coherence. This approach enables critical interrogation of foundational assumptions, comparative analysis of existing models, and the reinterpretation of regulatory capacities that address wellbeing under strain.

The review is guided by five interrelated objectives: (1) to assess whether dominant frameworks have examined the lived experiences of flourishing individuals beyond trait inventories, thereby constructing ecologically valid models of wellbeing; (2) to evaluate the conceptual rigor and practical utility of these models, particularly their capacity to guide individuals through emotional disruption, existential ambiguity, and relational strain; (3) to identify theoretical gaps in emotional complexity, relational nuance, and existential depth—dimensions often underrepresented in trait-centric paradigms; (4) to reinterpret adaptive strategies observed in flourishing individuals as ethically grounded, context-sensitive constructs; and (5) to assess how existing and emerging theories can support distressed individuals in achieving adaptive flourishing through recursive regulatory mechanisms.

To address these objectives, the review employs a structured conceptual analysis comprising three interrelated strategies. First, nine foundational and emerging wellbeing theories—PERMA (Seligman, 2012), Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018), Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000), Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019), Psychological Richness Theory (Oishi & Westgate, 2022), and

the Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025)—were systematically reviewed for conceptual coherence, emotional architecture, and translational capacity. Second, the analysis focused on identifying limitations in emotional complexity, relational depth, and existential scaffolding, particularly in how these models address wellbeing under strain rather than in ideal conditions. Third, based on recurring gaps and thematic patterns, four regulatory capacities—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves—were synthesized as interpretive tools for adaptive restoration and ethical regulation.

This methodology supports the development of a conceptually rigorous and operationally extensible scaffold that reframes wellbeing as a dynamic system of regulation rather than static trait possession. It aligns with the emphasis on theoretical clarity, integrative critique, and cross-domain relevance.

RESULTS

This review critically synthesizes nine foundational and emerging models of psychological wellbeing to evaluate their conceptual coherence, emotional architecture, and translational relevance. Guided by five interrelated objectives, the analysis interrogates whether these frameworks adequately reflect the lived experiences of flourishing individuals, offer structured guidance through emotional disruption, address relational and existential depth, support adaptive recalibration, and provide practical scaffolds for individuals in distress. Rather than proposing a new theory, the review reinterprets adaptive strategies observed in flourishing individuals as regulatory capacities that can be embedded into existing models, enhancing their conceptual and clinical utility.

Classical trait-centric frameworks such as PERMA (Seligman, 2012) and Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) define flourishing through attributes like positive emotion, engagement, autonomy, and self-acceptance. While empirically robust, these models are often validated using high-functioning samples—individuals with emotional literacy, relational stability, and socioeconomic coherence (Coffey et al., 2015; Huppert, 2009). This sampling bias introduces epistemic distortion, as traits observed in flourishing individuals may not be universally adaptive (Lakshmi, 2017). These models rarely interrogate the emotional scaffolding or existential strategies that sustain wellbeing under strain, thereby falling short of ecological validity and Objective 1.

Process-oriented models such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) offer motivational nuance but remain largely linear and goal-driven, providing limited guidance for individuals navigating emotional ambiguity. Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018) and Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000) similarly prioritize performance and optimism, yet under-theorize emotional recalibration. Their episodic nature lacks recursive mechanisms for restoration, reducing their relevance for individuals in distress. These frameworks articulate what wellbeing looks like in ideal conditions but offer little insight into how it is sustained or recovered when disrupted, thereby falling short of Objective 2.

The Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011) shifts focus to structural goods and justice, yet often presumes cognitive readiness and emotional stability. It provides limited insight into how individuals navigate moral strain or relational complexity within those structures. Emerging models begin to address these gaps. Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019) introduces temporal mapping of emotional states, emphasizing variability and recalibration. Psychological Richness Theory (Oishi & Westgate, 2022) values discomfort

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and complexity, although it lacks a structured sequence for restoration. The Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025) embeds social and embodied systems, offering a more ecological view of wellbeing, but under-theorizes ethical coherence and emotional containment. Across these frameworks, emotional literacy, relational scaffolding, and existential strategies are often treated as static traits rather than dynamic capacities, limiting their depth and failing to meet Objective 3.

To address these limitations, this review synthesizes adaptive strategies observed in flourishing individuals—emotional endurance, reflective integration, moral alignment, and latent resilience—and reframes them as four interdependent regulatory capacities: emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves. These constructs are not substitutes for traditional traits but regulators of their expression. Emotional containment reflects the volitional capacity to modulate distress without premature resolution, enabling coherence under disequilibrium. Experiential insight enables reflective integration of affective experiences, fostering adaptive meaning-making. Ethical coherence refers to the alignment between personal values and enacted choices, contributing to moral resilience. Resilience reserves denote latent adaptive capacities that buffer against cumulative stress, extending beyond trait-based resilience to dynamic, context-sensitive regulation. Together, these capacities offer a recursive scaffold through which wellbeing may be sustained as a process rather than a possession, thereby fulfilling Objective 4.

Despite growing interest in wellbeing under strain, most models remain optimized for ideal conditions. Few offer structured guidance for individuals navigating emotional disruption, relational complexity, or existential ambiguity. The regulatory capacities synthesized in this review address this gap by providing conceptual scaffolds that support intentional recalibration. When embedded into existing models, they enhance the practical utility of wellbeing theory, offering not only a vision of flourishing but a pathway through suffering. This integrative approach fulfills Objective 5 by advancing a dynamic, ethically grounded, and context-sensitive architecture of wellbeing—one capable of guiding individuals not only toward flourishing, but through adversity.

Table 1. Thematic Evaluation of Wellbeing Models Against Five Conceptual Objectives

Model	Beyond Trait Inventories (Objective 1)	Conceptual Rigour for Suffering (Objective 2)	Emotional, Relational, Existential Depth (Objective 3)	Potential for Recalibration (Objective 4)	Practical Guidance for Distressed Individuals (Objective 5)
PERMA (Seligman, 2012)	No (Trait-centric)	No (Minimal restoration logic)	NO (Limited emotional nuance)	Yes (Can embed emotional restoration mechanisms)	No (Prescriptive but not restorative)
Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995)	No (Trait-centric)	No (Static trait possession)	No (Under-theorised existential scaffolding)	Yes (Can evolve into adaptive orchestration)	No (Lacks processual restoration pathways)
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008)	Yes (Process-oriented)	No (Linear and goal-driven)	No (Limited emotional recalibration)	Yes (Can integrate recursive feedback loops)	No (Limited support during emotional disruption)

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Model	Beyond Trait Inventories (Objective 1)	Conceptual Rigour for Suffering (Objective 2)	Emotional, Relational, Existential Depth (Objective 3)	Potential for Recalibration (Objective 4)	Practical Guidance for Distressed Individuals (Objective 5)
Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018)	No (Performance-based)	No (Episodic and transient)	No (Neglects emotional recovery)	Yes (Can benefit from restoration sequencing)	No (Not designed for emotional adversity)
Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000)	No (Goal-focused)	No (Lacks recursive restoration)	No (Minimal existential framing)	Yes (Can be expanded with experiential insight)	No (Offers optimism but lacks emotional scaffolding)
Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011)	No (Structurally anchored)	No (Presumes emotional readiness)	No (Limited moral strain navigation)	Yes (Can embed ethical coherence and containment)	No (Strong on justice, weak on emotional regulation)
Dynamic SWB (Kopsov, 2019)	Yes (Temporal mapping)	Yes (Variability acknowledged)	Yes (Emotional fluctuation modelled)	Yes (Needs ethical and relational integration)	Yes (Offers adaptive scaffolding, needs moral depth)
Psychological Richness (Oishi & Westgate, 2022)	Yes (Complexity-centred)	No (Abstract discomfort valorisation)	Yes (Existential nuance present)	Yes (Needs restoration architecture)	No (Celebrates discomfort, lacks restorative guidance)
Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025)	Yes (Ecological and embodied)	Yes (Social systems included)	Yes (Relational depth present)	Yes (Needs ethical and emotional regulation)	Yes (Promising for restoration, needs a more precise emotional mechanism)

Conceptual Analysis

This review advances a constructive conceptual analysis aimed at recalibrating wellbeing theory through recursive regulation. Guided by five interrelated objectives—(1) to assess whether flourishing individuals have been studied beyond trait inventories; (2) to evaluate whether existing models offer guidance for individuals in suffering; (3) to identify gaps in emotional, relational, and existential depth; (4) to propose ethically grounded constructs for recalibration; and (5) to determine whether current frameworks offer practical guidance for restoration—the analysis identifies four regulatory capacities that address persistent limitations in dominant theories. Across classical and emerging models, five critical gaps were consistently observed.

Trait-Centric Bias

Models such as PERMA (Seligman, 2012) and Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) define flourishing through static attributes—positive emotion, engagement, autonomy, and self-acceptance. While these constructs are empirically validated and widely adopted,

they are often derived from high-functioning samples characterized by emotional literacy, relational stability, and socioeconomic coherence (Coffey et al., 2015; Huppert, 2009). This “creamy layer” bias introduces epistemic distortion, as it assumes that traits observed in flourishing individuals are universally adaptive. For instance, autonomy may be empowering in individualistic cultures but destabilizing in collectivist contexts where interdependence is normative. Moreover, these models rarely interrogate how such traits are sustained under emotional strain or moral ambiguity. The absence of processual scaffolding raises a provocative question: can wellbeing be meaningfully understood without examining how it is preserved when disrupted?

Lack of Restoration Logic

Goal-driven models such as Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018) and Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000) emphasize performance, clarity of goals, and motivational agency. While these frameworks offer valuable insights into optimal functioning, they provide minimal guidance for emotional recalibration. Their episodic structure—centered on transient states of absorption or future-oriented optimism—lacks recursive mechanisms for restoration. For example, Flow Theory celebrates immersion in challenging tasks but does not address how individuals recover from emotional depletion or disengagement. Similarly, Hope Theory valorizes goal pursuit but under-theorizes what happens when goals collapse or become ethically conflicted. These omissions are particularly salient in clinical contexts, where individuals may struggle not with goal clarity but with emotional coherence. The question emerges: what scaffolds are available when motivation falters and emotional ambiguity prevails?

Under-Theorized Emotional and Existential Depth

The Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011) offers a compelling ethical framework grounded in justice and human dignity. However, it often presumes cognitive readiness and emotional stability, providing limited insight into how individuals metabolize suffering or navigate relational and moral complexity. For instance, while the model emphasizes the freedom to pursue valued functionings, it does not fully explore how individuals cope when those functionings are disrupted—by grief, betrayal, or existential doubt. Similarly, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) focuses on intrinsic motivation and psychological needs but under-theorizes emotional disruption and existential ambiguity. It remains unclear how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are recalibrated during periods of moral conflict or emotional disequilibrium. These gaps invite deeper inquiry: can wellbeing be ethically grounded without accounting for the affective and existential labor required to sustain it?

Minimal Moral Regulation

Most wellbeing models neglect the dynamic negotiation of values under ethical strain. While moral identity has been linked to psychological resilience (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and moral foundations theory has illuminated cross-cultural ethical variation (Haidt, 2007), these insights remain peripheral to mainstream wellbeing frameworks. The absence of moral regulation mechanisms is particularly striking given the growing recognition of ethical stress in clinical, educational, and organizational settings. For example, professionals navigating moral injury or value conflict often report diminished wellbeing despite meeting trait-based criteria for flourishing. Without constructs that address ethical coherence or value realignment, wellbeing theory risks overlooking a critical dimension of human resilience. This raises a pressing question: how do individuals sustain wellbeing when their values are challenged or compromised?

Insufficient Translational Relevance

Emerging models such as Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019) and the Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025) show promise in addressing variability, ecological sensitivity, and systemic integration. Dynamic SWB introduces temporal mapping of emotional states, while the Well-Balance Model incorporates embodied and social systems. However, both frameworks remain conceptually diffuse and lack operational clarity, limiting their applicability in guiding restoration for individuals in distress. For instance, while Dynamic SWB acknowledges emotional fluctuation, it does not specify how individuals recalibrate during prolonged adversity. The Well-Balance Model embeds relational depth but under-theorises ethical coherence and emotional containment. These limitations suggest a broader challenge: how can emerging models move beyond descriptive complexity to offer actionable scaffolds for adaptive restoration?

Among the nine models evaluated, only Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019) and the Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025) demonstrate partial alignment with the regulatory principles proposed in this review. Dynamic SWB introduces temporal mapping of emotional states and models affective fluctuation, offering a recursive structure for emotional regulation. However, its ethical dimension remains underdeveloped, and its relational architecture is implicit. It does not specify how individuals navigate moral strain or interpersonal complexity—particularly in contexts where emotional expression is constrained by cultural norms or ethical ambiguity. For example, while the model accounts for emotional variability, it lacks mechanisms for ethical recalibration when values are challenged or coherence is threatened.

The Well-Balance Model integrates embodied, social, and ecological systems, offering relational depth and adaptive feedback loops. It acknowledges the role of systemic and environmental factors in shaping wellbeing, which aligns with the ecological sensitivity of resilience reserves. However, its conceptual diffuseness and lack of operational precision constrain its empirical applicability. The model does not clearly delineate how emotional containment or experiential insight function within its architecture, nor does it offer structured pathways for moral regulation. In clinical or educational settings, where practitioners must navigate ethical dilemmas and emotional strain simultaneously, such omissions limit the model's translational relevance.

In contrast, the four regulatory capacities proposed in this review offer a recursive scaffold that addresses these limitations directly. Emotional containment stabilizes affective disequilibrium, creating the conditions for deeper regulatory processes to emerge. Experiential insight transforms emotional disruption into adaptive learning, enabling individuals to integrate affective experiences into coherent self-narratives. Ethical coherence bridges personal values and relational contexts, supporting moral resilience under ethical strain. Resilience reserves buffer against cumulative stress, reframing resilience as a renewable, context-sensitive capacity cultivated through prior regulatory experiences.

These constructs do not operate in isolation. Their interdependence reflects a recursive architecture through which wellbeing is sustained not as a possession, but as a dynamic process of intentional recalibration. This sequencing—where containment enables insight, insight fosters coherence, and coherence replenishes resilience—offers a conceptual scaffold that contrasts sharply with the linear or episodic logic of dominant wellbeing models.

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For instance, PERMA (Seligman, 2012) emphasizes positive emotion and engagement as indicators of flourishing, yet offers limited guidance for navigating grief, moral injury, or emotional ambiguity. A bereaved individual may struggle to access positive affect or engagement, rendering the model insufficient for contexts of loss. Similarly, Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000) valorizes optimism and goal pursuit but lacks scaffolding for ethical ambiguity. A student confronting systemic injustice may find goal-directed thinking ethically conflicted, with no mechanism for reconciling personal values and institutional constraints. Even Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), with its focus on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, does not theorize how these needs are renegotiated during emotional disruption. A refugee rebuilding identity in a new cultural context may experience fractured autonomy and relational dissonance, yet SDT offers no regulatory pathway for restoring coherence.

In contrast, emotional containment provides a volitional capacity to remain with distress without premature resolution. This stance is particularly relevant in caregiving, leadership, or collectivist cultures, where emotional expression may be discouraged or morally complex. By stabilizing affective disequilibrium, containment creates the conditions for deeper regulatory processes to emerge. Experiential insight transforms emotional disruption into adaptive learning, enabling individuals to integrate affective experiences into coherent self-narratives. This capacity expands narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2001) by treating autobiographical reasoning as a regulatory mechanism rather than a reflective outcome.

Ethical coherence introduces moral regulation into wellbeing theory, bridging personal values and relational contexts. It enables individuals to act with integrity amid ethical strain, drawing on moral identity theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and moral foundations theory (Haidt, 2007). This construct is especially critical in professions marked by moral injury—such as healthcare, education, or activism—where wellbeing erodes not from emotional instability but from ethical dissonance. Resilience reserves reframe resilience as a renewable, context-sensitive capacity cultivated through prior regulatory experiences. Extending Bonanno's (2004) resilience trajectories and Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory, this construct emphasizes cumulative buffering and recursive restoration.

Among the nine models evaluated, only Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019) and the Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025) demonstrate partial alignment with these regulatory principles. Dynamic SWB offers a recursive structure for affective regulation through temporal mapping and emotional fluctuation modeling. However, its ethical dimension remains underdeveloped, and its relational architecture is implicit, limiting its capacity to address moral strain and interpersonal complexity. The Well-Balance Model integrates embodied, social, and ecological systems, offering relational depth and adaptive feedback loops. Yet its conceptual diffuseness and lack of operational precision constrain its empirical applicability.

By embedding emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves into dominant frameworks, wellbeing theory can evolve from static trait possession to dynamic orchestration. This recalibration restores emotional depth, moral scaffolding, and adaptive sequencing to the science of human flourishing. It also enhances the translational relevance of wellbeing models, enabling them to guide individuals not only toward flourishing but through suffering. In doing so, it invites a more inclusive, ethically attuned, and context-sensitive architecture—one capable of sustaining wellbeing across diverse moral ecologies and lived realities.

Have We Studied Flourishing Enough? A Review of Trait-Centric Models

The empirical maturation of wellbeing science has yielded structured models that define flourishing primarily through trait possession—autonomy, optimism, emotional expressiveness, and goal pursuit (Seligman, 2012; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2008). These frameworks have achieved psychometric rigor and intervention readiness, yet their validation logic often relies on high-functioning samples—individuals with emotional literacy, relational stability, and socioeconomic advantage (Coffey et al., 2015; Huppert, 2009). This sampling bias introduces epistemic distortion, as traits statistically dominant in flourishing populations may not generalize to those navigating grief, trauma, or existential ambiguity (Lakshmi, 2017; Das et al., 2020).

Moreover, many models prioritize outcome attainment over emotional recalibration. Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018), Hope Theory (Snyder, 2000), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) emphasize motivational clarity but offer limited guidance for restoring wellbeing when goals are thwarted or emotional states destabilized. The absence of recursive feedback mechanisms—where emotional disequilibrium activates internal regulation—limits their applicability in contexts marked by adversity, ambiguity, or moral strain. For example, a clinician experiencing moral injury may meet trait-based criteria for flourishing but lack conceptual tools for ethical realignment or emotional restoration.

Recent models signal a shift toward processual wellbeing. Dynamic Subjective Wellbeing (Kopsov, 2019), Psychological Richness Theory (Oishi & Westgate, 2022), and the Well-Balance Model (Norris, 2025) introduce temporal, ecological, and complexity-based dimensions. These frameworks acknowledge variability, discomfort, and systemic interdependence. However, they remain under-integrated and lack operational clarity—especially in guiding distressed individuals through recursive regulation. For instance, while Psychological Richness valorizes experiential diversity, it does not specify how individuals metabolize suffering or restore coherence.

To clarify these conceptual distinctions, Table 2 presents a comparative matrix of wellbeing models across five dimensions: trait centrality, restoration logic, cultural responsiveness, processual architecture, and practical guidance. This visualization reveals structural asymmetries and underscores the need for integrative scaffolding.

Table 2. Comparative Mapping of Wellbeing Models Across Five Dimensions

Model	Trait Centrality	Restoration Logic	Cultural Responsiveness	Processual Architecture	Practical Guidance
PERMA	High	Minimal	Low	Static	No
Psychological Wellbeing	High	Minimal	Moderate	Static	No
Self-Determination Theory	Moderate	Partial	Moderate	Linear	No
Flow Theory	High	Episodic	Low	Transient	No
Hope Theory	Moderate	Partial	Low	Linear	No
Dynamic SWB	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Temporal	Yes
Psychological Richness	Low	Minimal	High	Conceptual	No
Well-Balance Model	Moderate	Moderate	High	Social-ecological	Yes

This matrix supports the manuscript's central claim: dominant models have overemphasized trait possession while under-theorizing the recursive processes that sustain wellbeing through adversity. It also highlights conceptual gaps in emerging models, which, despite their cultural sensitivity, lack the regulatory coherence needed for practical application. By visualizing these patterns, the review strengthens its call for integrative constructs—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves—that can augment existing frameworks and guide individuals not only toward flourishing, but through suffering.

The Need for Processual Constructs: Addressing Theoretical Gaps in Wellbeing Models

Although prevailing wellbeing models demonstrate empirical sophistication, they often fall short in theorizing the recursive processes through which individuals sustain wellness under strain. As outlined in Section 4 and visualized in Table 2, dominant frameworks tend to overemphasize trait possession, prioritize goal attainment, and under-theorize emotional restoration, moral navigation, and practical guidance for distressed individuals. These limitations constrain their applicability in contexts marked by adversity, ambiguity, or relational complexity (Wong, 2011; Coffey et al., 2015; Lakshmi, 2017).

To address these gaps, this review introduces four regulatory constructs—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves—each mapped to a corresponding theoretical deficiency. These constructs are not abstract ideals; they are grounded in the lived experiences of individuals who flourish and offer practical scaffolding for those navigating emotional disequilibrium. Their integration marks a conceptual shift from static trait validation to recursive regulation, operationalizing all five objectives and advancing wellbeing theory toward a more inclusive and therapeutically relevant paradigm.

Trait Overemphasis → Emotional Containment

Models such as PERMA and Psychological Wellbeing define flourishing through traits like optimism and autonomy (Seligman, 2012; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), yet they offer limited guidance on how individuals regulate affect when those traits are destabilized. This gap becomes especially salient in contexts of emotional disruption, where trait possession alone cannot sustain equilibrium. Emotional containment introduces a mechanism for internal regulation that does not rely on external validation. Unlike suppression or cognitive reappraisal (Gross, 1998), containment is a volitional capacity requiring individuals to assess cultural norms, relational dynamics, and ethical constraints before modulating emotional expression. It is distinct from affective holding (Fonagy et al., 2002), which often depends on relational scaffolding. Containment enables individuals to metabolize distress while preserving coherence, particularly in environments where overt emotional expression may be discouraged or morally complex (Kaur & Singh, 2022).

Goal Fixation → Experiential Insight

Theories such as Flow and Hope emphasize motivational clarity and goal pursuit (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018; Snyder, 2000), but offer limited guidance when goals are thwarted or meaning is disrupted. Experiential insight reframes adversity as a source of epistemic growth, allowing individuals to extract meaning, discern patterns, and recalibrate expectations. While post-traumatic growth theory gestures toward this process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), few models offer structured accounts of how insight is cultivated and sustained. Embedding this construct provides a recursive mechanism for learning through suffering, guiding individuals through nonlinear trajectories of emotional recovery (Dogham

et al., 2025). For example, a bereaved parent may develop insight not through resolution, but through iterative reflection on loss, identity, and relational transformation.

Lack of Moral Navigation → Ethical Coherence

Models that prioritize autonomy or competence often neglect the moral dimension of wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Ethical coherence fills this gap by emphasizing the alignment of action with personal and relational values. Flourishing is not merely about feeling good—it is about acting in ways that are morally congruent and relationally attuned. This construct supports individuals in navigating ethical dilemmas without compromising integrity, offering a compass for decision-making under strain. Its inclusion ensures that wellbeing is not achieved at the expense of moral dissonance (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2019; Haidt, 2007; Aquino & Reed, 2002). For instance, a social worker facing institutional constraints may experience wellbeing erosion unless ethical coherence is preserved through value-aligned action.

Emotional Fragility → Resilience Reserves

Resilience is often treated as a trait or outcome, yet few models explain how it is sustained across time and context. Resilience reserves conceptualize resilience as a latent energy system cultivated through prior experiences of containment, insight, and coherence. These reserves buffer emotional depletion and support restoration during future disruptions. By embedding this construct, wellbeing models can evolve from static resilience metrics to dynamic, cyclical regulation—better equipping individuals to recover and adapt (Bonanno, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989). For example, a community leader navigating repeated crises may draw on resilience reserves built through earlier episodes of ethical decision-making and emotional containment.

Together, these constructs offer a roadmap for recalibrating wellbeing theory. They respond directly to the structural asymmetries identified in existing models, providing actionable guidance for individuals in distress. Their novelty lies in their recursive logic, ethical attunement, and translational relevance, which bridge the gap between empirical theory and lived experience. By shifting the epistemic focus from trait possession to adaptive process, wellbeing science can evolve into a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and transformative discipline—one that serves not only those who flourish, but those who seek to.

DISCUSSION

This review set out to answer a deceptively simple question: What sustains wellbeing when flourishing falters? Through a structured analysis of nine foundational and emerging models, it identified a consistent gap—most frameworks define wellbeing through trait possession but offer limited guidance for navigating emotional disruption, moral strain, or relational complexity. While traits like optimism, autonomy, and engagement are valuable, they do not explain how individuals recover when those traits are destabilized. Flourishing, as currently modeled, often overlooks the processes that sustain it under pressure.

To address this, the review introduced four regulatory capacities—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves—as conceptual tools for adaptive restoration. These constructs shift the focus from static traits to dynamic regulation. They help explain how individuals metabolize distress, realign values, and rebuild coherence when wellbeing is disrupted. Importantly, they are not abstract ideals but grounded in lived experience and supported by cross-disciplinary theory.

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Emotional containment fills a critical gap in affective regulation. It enables individuals to endure distress without rushing to resolution, especially in contexts where emotional expression is discouraged or morally complex. Experiential insight reframes adversity as a source of learning, helping individuals make sense of disruption in real time—not just in hindsight. Ethical coherence introduces moral regulation into wellbeing theory, supporting integrity in ethically strained situations. Resilience reserves reconceptualize resilience as a renewable resource, built through prior regulatory experiences and drawn upon during future adversity.

Together, these capacities form a recursive system. Containment creates space for insight; insight fosters coherence; coherence replenishes resilience. This sequencing contrasts with the linear or episodic logic of dominant models, which often assume wellbeing is either present or absent, rather than continuously regulated.

The implications are clear. Wellbeing theory must evolve to reflect the complexity of lived experience. Models should not only describe what flourishing looks like but also explain how it is sustained and restored. This requires integrating emotional depth, moral scaffolding, and adaptive sequencing into existing frameworks. Doing so will make wellbeing science more inclusive, more responsive to cultural and relational contexts, and more useful for individuals facing adversity.

Future research should explore how these regulatory capacities function across diverse populations and settings. Longitudinal studies could examine how containment, insight, coherence, and resilience interact over time. Clinical applications may benefit from embedding these constructs into therapeutic models, especially for individuals navigating grief, trauma, or ethical conflict. Cross-cultural research could further refine their relevance in different moral ecologies.

In sum, this review proposes a shift—from trait validation to processual regulation. By embedding recursive capacities into wellbeing theory, it offers a more flexible, ethically attuned, and context-sensitive approach to human flourishing—one that serves not only those who thrive, but those who strive to.

CONCLUSION

What if flourishing isn't the endpoint we've imagined—but a system we learn to regulate, especially when it falters?

This review challenges the dominant narrative in wellbeing science: that flourishing is defined by trait possession and goal attainment. Across nine influential models, a consistent pattern emerged—wellbeing is often conceptualized for ideal conditions, not for the emotional, moral, and relational disruptions that shape real lives. Traits like optimism and autonomy may signal wellbeing, but they do not explain how it is sustained when grief strikes, values collide, or coherence unravels.

To move beyond this static paradigm, the review introduced four regulatory capacities—emotional containment, experiential insight, ethical coherence, and resilience reserves. These constructs offer more than theoretical nuance; they provide a recursive architecture for adaptive restoration. They explain how individuals metabolize adversity, realign values, and rebuild coherence—not in spite of suffering, but through it.

This reframing matters. It expands wellbeing theory to include those who are not flourishing yet—those navigating ambiguity, loss, and ethical strain. It invites researchers to study not just what wellbeing looks like, but how it is sustained. It equips practitioners with conceptual tools that reflect the complexity of lived experience. And it opens the door to a more inclusive, ethically grounded, and culturally responsive science of human resilience.

Flourishing, then, is not a trait to possess—it is a process to practice. And the future of wellbeing science depends on how well we understand that practice, test its mechanisms, and translate its insights across diverse moral ecologies and lived realities.

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Conflict of Interest

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