# What should governments do to promote wellbeing?

## OVERVIEW

- Wellbeing is widely recognised as a goal of public policy. Several governments have instituted frameworks to track wellbeing indicators and guide policy action
- However, in many countries rates of psychological distress and mental ill-health are still too high and getting worse, especially among young people
- On their own, remedial medical responses to mental ill-health are not enough and are failing to make a difference. These are primarily social issues and must be tackled as such
- The social and economic costs of mental ill-health are huge and rising
- Wellbeing policies have huge potential to prevent mental ill-health and promote psychological wellbeing, but governments lack a clear public health framework to define and implement such policies
- Psychological wellbeing provides people with resources to live and work as compassionate, healthy and resilient citizens
- Matthew Fisher's book on *How to Create Societies for Human Wellbeing* offers a comprehensive, public health framework to understand psychological wellbeing and devise effective, equitable wellbeing policies
- Governments must go beyond indicators to adopt a public health approach to wellbeing
- Matthew Fisher is an Australian philosopher and public health researcher with the University of Adelaide in South Australia

## CONTEXT

The growing failures of neoliberalism have sparked renewed interest from governments in policies to promote community and individual wellbeing. Wellbeing policies have huge, untapped potential to reduce the societal burden of psychological distress and mental ill-health. In Australia, around 40% of young adults now show symptoms of these conditions.

Early wellbeing policies are not yet enough, and conventional biomedical responses are failing to make a difference. *How to Create Societies for Human Wellbeing* presents a new public health approach to promoting wellbeing, drawing on evidence from multiple disciplines. It offers an ethical and policy framework for governments to act effectively on wellbeing.
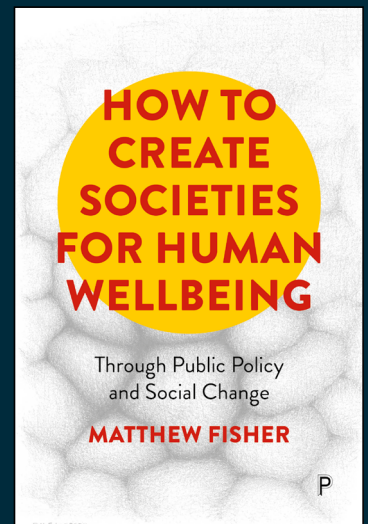


*How To Create Societies for Human Wellbeing* by Matthew Fisher is published by Policy Press, October 2024

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## FINDINGS

*How to Create Societies for Human Wellbeing* adopts a public health approach, drawing on evidence from multiple disciplines to define psychological wellbeing and show how it is shaped by social conditions. It then sets out ethical and policy frameworks to promote wellbeing. The key points presented are:

- Psychological wellbeing and psychosocial stress are two side of the same coin. Increased stress demand caused by adverse social conditions leads to psychological distress, mental ill-health and harmful social behaviours. Reduced stress demand coupled with well-developed coping skills is a key element of wellbeing.

- Wellbeing is the ability to self-regulate social cognition and behaviour to cope with minor stressors, avoid chronic stress, and engage in positive social relationships

- Secondly, wellbeing is the ability to balance purposeful goal-directed action with other states of being, which down-regulate stress and enable self-awareness, calm, happiness, connection and meaning

- Social, economic and cultural conditions in contemporary urbanised societies and neoliberal economies are harming human wellbeing and causing chronic stress in multiple ways, contributing to a social burden of psychological distress, mental ill-health and damaging social behaviours

- The key social conditions for development of wellbeing abilities across the life course include: parenting skills for early child development; secure, meaningful work and work-life balance; social connectedness; connection with nature; education for life-long learning; comprehensive primary health care; secure affordable housing; and healthy neighbourhoods

- Universal and equitable access to these conditions for wellbeing is a core principle for effective wellbeing policy

- Ethically, wellbeing should be recognised as a matter of fundamental and enduring public interest

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- To design and implement wellbeing policies effectively, governments and public agencies must assimilate knowledge on psychosocial stress, its social causes and impacts on mental health. This is needed to appreciate how wellbeing is at risk and how it can be promoted through access to supportive social-environmental conditions, across the life-course

- Today, many governments are committed to a narrow biomedical understanding and response to common forms of distress and mental ill-health. While medical care is needed for severe mental illness, governments must shift resources toward preventive strategies, aimed at universal access to supportive social conditions for wellbeing

- To pursue wellbeing policies consistently, governments must get their ethical house in order by recognising wellbeing as a matter of basic public interest

- Governments have a legitimate and vital role to regulate private commercial interests, where these conflict with the public interest in wellbeing

- Political strategies to provoke anxiety through unfounded conspiracy theories contribute to psychosocial stress and harmful social behaviours

- Governments must plan for sustained action to reduce population exposures to stressful conditions, in areas such as: socioeconomic inequality; climate change and extreme weather; harmful employment conditions; housing insecurity; discrimination; and social media.

- Simultaneously, governments can promote access to supportive conditions for wellbeing through place-based wellbeing strategies, empowering and engaging active communities, and strengthening local services for family support, education, and primary health care.

- Bottom-up action for wellbeing can provide a base of support for broader wellbeing policies.

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