

ESF Evaluation of Positive Psychology

Name: Positive Psychology

Origin: Organised as a research movement in the United States in 1998, associated with Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and developed internationally through multiple scholarly traditions, institutions and communities.

Primary focus: Understanding and supporting strengths, wellbeing, meaning, relationships, engagement and human flourishing, increasingly through cultural, contextual and systems-informed approaches.

ESF Evaluation Score: 13 / 20 | Moderately Integrated

Introductory Context

Positive psychology is a pioneering international body of work that has helped establish wellbeing and human potential as legitimate subjects of scientific inquiry alongside illness and distress. This evaluation is offered in support of its forward evolution. Its strongest contribution remains the understanding and development of human capacities; its international development also includes substantial cultural inquiry and explicit efforts to connect wellbeing with social systems and environmental sustainability.

The evidence base includes international intervention meta-analyses, cross-cultural empirical studies, workplace and education research, systems-informed positive psychology, sustainable wellbeing scholarship and relevant nature-connection and materialism research. The assessment distinguishes research explicitly situated within positive psychology from neighbouring wellbeing, environmental and cultural psychology. The latter informs relationships and opportunities, but is not treated as evidence that positive psychology has already integrated every associated achievement.

This is a structured international evidence synthesis, with sources checked on 1 October 2026, rather than a preregistered exhaustive systematic review. Searches targeted intervention efficacy, non-Western populations, culture, systems, sustainability, nature, economic values, work and education. Peer-reviewed research and publisher or university records were prioritised. Relevant sources from 2014–2026 were examined alongside the supplied international review and critiques review. English-accessible evidence predominates, creating a remaining language limitation. Country labels are not assumed to represent homogeneous cultures.

The four domains are equally weighted on the published ESF scale: 1 not integrated, 2 minimally integrated, 3 partially integrated, 4 well integrated and 5 fully integrated. Half-points represent intermediate judgements, consistent with the previous evaluations. Scores indicate ecosystemic alignment, not intervention effect sizes or a scientific quality ranking. The 13/20 judgement recognises demonstrated contributions and credible integrative strands without assuming these are embedded uniformly across the field. The relevant evidence and its role are recorded in the accompanying evidence notes.

1. Natural Environment Integration

Score: 2.5 / 5

Assessment. Ecological engagement is more developed than earlier reviews would suggest. Ronen and Kerret (2020) explicitly bring positive psychology and environmental education into a sustainable wellbeing framework. This establishes a genuine integrative strand within the field, although a proposed framework is not itself evidence of consistent implementation or ecosystem recovery.

Strengths. The neighbouring nature-connection literature provides an empirical bridge. Capaldi, Dopko and Zelenski (2014) synthesised 30 samples involving 8,523 participants and found a small positive association between nature connectedness and happiness. Barragan-Jason and colleagues (2022) synthesised 147 correlational studies linking connectedness with health and pro-nature behaviour. These findings support investigating reciprocal relationships between human wellbeing and care for nature, while remaining distinct from proof that all positive psychology practice is ecologically integrated.

Gaps. A stronger connection to nature does not automatically produce biodiversity gains, lower emissions or regenerative land use. Much of the evidence concerns self-reported wellbeing and behaviour, rather than ecological conditions. Intervention findings also vary: Wilkie and colleagues' 2026 comparative review did not establish a significant benefit for its nature-based intervention category, whose evidence was heterogeneous. This does not negate the connectedness literature; it cautions against equating correlational associations with uniform intervention effects.

Recommendations. Build on existing sustainable wellbeing work through place-based studies that measure psychological outcomes alongside ecological health and stewardship. Examine whether benefits endure and whether they support the wellbeing of other species and future generations. Involve ecological researchers and local knowledge holders in defining outcomes. The score of 2.5 recognises an established but uneven bridge between psychological flourishing and ecological systems.

2. Circular and Regenerative Economies Integration

Score: 2.5 / 5

Assessment. Positive psychology and allied wellbeing research make important contributions to understanding work, consumption and economic values. These contributions challenge the assumption that flourishing is equivalent to wealth or productivity. However, they do not yet constitute a broadly integrated framework for circular resource flows, regenerative enterprise, equitable ownership or economic redesign.

Strengths. Donaldson, Lee and Donaldson's (2019) workplace meta-analysis of 22 studies found modest improvements in desirable work outcomes and reductions in undesirable outcomes. In allied motivational and consumer psychology, Dittmar and colleagues (2014) analysed 259 independent samples and found materialistic orientations associated with lower wellbeing. Moldes and Ku (2020) reviewed 27 experiments and found materialistic cues reduced individual and societal wellbeing. Together, these provide evidence for examining meaningful work and alternatives to consumption-centred definitions of success.

Gaps. Workplace interventions may improve experience without changing insecure employment, unequal power or harmful working conditions. Research challenging materialism does not itself establish a regenerative economy. Economic distribution, care work, public provision, resource throughput and planetary boundaries remain incompletely connected to the movement's practical

models. Commercial uses of wellbeing also require scrutiny, but criticisms of commodification should not be generalised to all research or practice (van Zyl et al., 2024).

Recommendations. Evaluate wellbeing alongside fair pay, security, participation, working conditions and distributional outcomes. Link evidence on values and consumption to circular and regenerative practices, examining both material and psychological consequences. Distinguish adaptation to damaging conditions from changes to those conditions. A score of 2.5 recognises relevant economic and organisational inquiry while retaining the gap between such inquiry and integrated regenerative economic architecture.

3. Cultural Values and Identity Integration

Score: 3.5 / 5

Assessment. International positive psychology cannot adequately be described as simply the export of one Western happiness model. Kim and colleagues (2018) documented research across 63 countries. More importantly, empirical work has examined cultural meanings and relational understandings of wellbeing, rather than only translating existing scales. These achievements justify an assessment between partial and well-developed integration.

Strengths. Delle Fave and colleagues (2016) studied 2,799 adults in 12 countries across five continents, including Argentina, Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa. Participants' definitions highlighted inner harmony and family or social relationships. This bottom-up approach gives culturally situated accounts a substantive role. Japanese scholarship on the happiness of individuals and the collective likewise foregrounds interdependence and relational harmony (Uchida and Ogihara, 2016). These strands broaden the field's assumptions about what a good life comprises.

Strengths. Hendriks and colleagues (2018) reviewed 28 randomised trials from non-Western countries and reported improvements in wellbeing and symptoms, while noting low study quality and possible bias. Their findings support taking research beyond Western settings seriously without assuming that larger reported effects prove better cultural fit. The international evidence includes both common psychological needs and variation in meanings, practices and outcomes.

Gaps. Research presence across countries does not guarantee equitable authorship, locally grounded theory or shared authority. English-language publication and established measurement conventions can still privilege particular worldviews. National averages also obscure variation within countries. Indigenous knowledge should be engaged on its own terms; its existence cannot be appropriated as an achievement of positive psychology. Faith, cultural memory, identity, colonial histories and collective obligations need stronger integration into intervention design and evaluation.

Recommendations. Extend community-led research, culturally grounded constructs and mixed methods. Test whether measures have equivalent meaning before comparing groups, and permit locally meaningful definitions of flourishing. Support multilingual evidence synthesis and equitable partnerships with Indigenous and Global South scholars. Build on the field's actual cross-cultural achievements rather than presuming cultural responsiveness is either absent or complete.

4. Human Capacities and Potential Integration

Score: 4.5 / 5

Assessment. The international evidence supports positive psychology as a substantial contributor to the understanding and support of human capacities. It offers theory and applications addressing strengths, relationships, engagement, meaning, hope and growth. Its evidence base goes beyond descriptive studies and includes international intervention research, with important qualifications concerning effect size, study quality and durability.

Strengths. Carr and colleagues (2021) synthesised 347 studies involving more than 72,000 participants in 41 countries. They reported improvements in wellbeing, strengths and quality of life, with benefits also reported for distress outcomes. Their estimated wellbeing effect was small to moderate, and gains were maintained at three months. This is substantial international evidence, while three-month follow-up should not be treated as lifelong durability.

Strengths. Wilkie and colleagues (2026) compared wellbeing-focused interventions across 183 randomised trials involving 22,811 adults without diagnosed conditions. Single positive psychology interventions were among approaches showing moderate benefits against inactive controls, with no significant differences between several intervention categories. This places positive psychology within a wider evidence-based repertoire rather than establishing its superiority to other approaches. Workplace research provides further evidence of practical application (Donaldson et al., 2019).

Gaps. White, Uttl and Holder's (2019) reanalysis of two earlier meta-analyses found that accounting for small-study effects reduced estimated wellbeing benefits and made depression findings less stable. This does not automatically overturn later reviews, which use different study sets and methods; it shows why estimates must be interpreted critically. Evidence on long-term outcomes, adverse effects, disadvantaged populations and transfer across settings remains uneven. Positive education also has less historical research in early childhood than in secondary and higher education (Waters and Loton, 2021).

Recommendations. Continue improving transparent, adequately powered and longitudinal research, combining self-report with behavioural, relational and contextual evidence. Strengthen developmental foundations, embodied experience and the connection between psychological resources and enabling conditions. The 4.5 score recognises depth and practical evidence while reserving full integration for a more coherent lifelong account linking capacities with relational, material, cultural and ecological conditions.

Overall ESF Score

ESF Domain	Score / 5
Natural Environment	2.5
Circular & Regenerative Economies	2.5
Cultural Values & Identity	3.5
Human Capacities & Potential	4.5
Total	13 / 20

According to the published ESF evaluation scale, 13 / 20 falls within Moderately Integrated. The total is an interpretive synthesis of a diverse movement, not a population estimate or a score for every programme. It recognises strong human-capacity evidence, substantive cultural development and partial ecological and economic integration.

Developmental Levels Assessment

The seven ESF levels are interconnected lifelong needs and capacities rather than a rigid ladder. Positive psychology offers relevant inquiry across **Security, Relationship, Independence, Engagement, Fulfilment, Contribution and Growth**. Correspondence with these concepts does not mean that the movement has adopted a unified ESF developmental model.

Security connects with coping, health and resilience, but psychological resources cannot substitute for safety, secure attachment or material sufficiency. Relationship is supported through research on social connection and interdependence. Independence concerns agency and self-direction, with cross-cultural work reminding us that autonomy need not mean separation from others. Engagement has clear links with flow and meaningful participation. Fulfilment connects with purpose, harmony and satisfaction. Contribution includes generosity, ethical participation and care, increasingly extending towards sustainable wellbeing. Growth concerns learning and development through both positive experience and difficulty; growth following adversity must never be expected or demanded.

The main developmental opportunity is to connect these capacities with the conditions in which they emerge across childhood, adulthood and later life. Waters and Loton's (2021) large-scale positive education review identifies an early-childhood research gap. This strengthens the case for attention to relational safety, family and community contexts, embodiment and early meaning-making, while recognising that the wider field already contains contextual and developmental approaches.

Overall Assessment

Positive psychology has produced a substantial international research and practice contribution. Its intervention evidence, culturally grounded inquiry and work in education and organisations demonstrate more than an individualistic pursuit of pleasant feelings. The movement is internally diverse, with different traditions and levels of integration coexisting. Its strongest integrative work should be recognised without assuming that it describes every mainstream model or commercial application.

Kern and colleagues' (2020) systems-informed positive psychology explicitly brings systems science into the field's theory, methods and practice. Lomas and colleagues (2021) describe a third-wave broadening towards complexity, interdisciplinary inquiry and the systems in which wellbeing is embedded. These are real intellectual developments, although not proof of universal implementation. Wissing (2022) presses further towards the wellbeing of wider human and non-human systems. This provides a particularly promising meeting point with ecosystemic flourishing.

The Global Flourishing Study, described by VanderWeele and colleagues (2025), adds important neighbouring evidence from more than 200,000 participants across 22 countries. Its longitudinal design and attention to culturally diverse settings can inform future collaboration. It is a broader flourishing-science initiative, not evidence that positive psychology alone generated its findings or that survey research establishes causal interventions. It is therefore used as contextual evidence rather than a direct basis for raising the domain scores.

Recommendations for Stronger ESF Alignment

The next stage is to connect existing achievements across domains. Psychological capacities, ecological stewardship, material conditions and cultural meanings should be studied as interacting relationships rather than assembled as separate wellbeing indicators. Sustainable wellbeing and systems-informed approaches provide foundations on which this work can build.

The Flourish Project could contribute through collaborative synthesis, developmental interpretation and place-based research with positive psychology scholars. An initial partnership could identify one setting, agree community-defined outcomes across the four domains and test whether strengthened psychological capacities accompany improvements in relationships, material conditions and ecological care. Shared inquiry should include independent evaluation, attention to unintended effects and follow-up beyond short-term wellbeing gains.

A further priority is a multilingual evidence programme with regional research partners. This would improve coverage of work not readily accessible in English and clarify which approaches are established across contexts, which require adaptation and which remain conceptual. Scores for specific programmes should be assessed separately; successful examples should not automatically be generalised to the whole international movement.

Concluding Assessment

The international evidence supports an ESF score of 13/20: Natural Environment 2.5/5, Circular and Regenerative Economies 2.5/5, Cultural Values and Identity 3.5/5, and Human Capacities and Potential 4.5/5. This represents Moderate Integration. The revised judgement gives proper weight to cross-cultural empirical work, international intervention evidence, sustainability scholarship and systems-informed developments, while retaining the distinction between field-wide integration and particular leading-edge strands.

Positive psychology should be recognised as a pioneering contributor to the evolving science and practice of flourishing. The Flourish Project hopes to support its forward evolution through respectful dialogue, complementary research and collaborative experimentation. The opportunity is to deepen connections already emerging within the field, linking the development of human capacities with the health of cultures, economies and the living world.

ESF Assessment

Positive psychology has a substantial international evidence base and credible pathways towards fuller ecosystemic integration. Its future contribution can be strengthened by connecting demonstrated psychological benefits with reciprocal relationships and the wider conditions that sustain flourishing.

The Flourish Project is a global initiative dedicated to advancing the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework, an integrative approach to wellbeing that recognises the deep interdependence between human development, cultural values, regenerative economies and the natural world. Rooted in systems thinking, relational practice and research on flourishing, it supports education, policy innovation, research and cross-sector collaboration.