

Wellbeing

How do I relate to and take care of myself in order to achieve systems change?

RATIONALE

Why is wellbeing important for achieving systems change?

It's a simple truth: If I am not well, I cannot do well. We need to take care of ourselves. Lasting social change can only happen if we are well, self-aware, and healthy. Along with a growing number of initiatives and publications, our work demonstrates that wellbeing is an essential element of entrepreneurial support. In fact, we have found a direct correlation between a social entrepreneur's wellbeing and their capability to contribute to the greater good. In this section, we want to offer supporters of social entrepreneurs our perspective on wellbeing and our learnings on how to effectively integrate wellbeing into support programs.

Before diving into principles, we will first outline four core beliefs that underpin our understanding of wellbeing:

1. Wellbeing is subjective and interdependent.

Wellbeing is different for everyone. We view wellbeing as a condition or state of balance between the various dimensions that make us human – mental, emotional, physical, social, environmental, energetic, and transcendental. Our holistic view of wellbeing also considers the relationship between individual, societal and planetary wellbeing.

Holistic wellbeing happens in relationships and in community. My wellbeing, the wellbeing of others, and the wellbeing of our planet are all intimately interconnected; one cannot exist without the other. Whether we realize it or not, we all impact each other's wellbeing.

2. Wellbeing is a personal systems change strategy.

Self-care is not an act of selfishness or self-indulgence, but rather one of self-preservation. In a sector often driven by the notion of sacrifice and defined by limited resources, self-care is a radical act and a critical mindset shift. In fact, self-care is a system change strategy, an “act of political warfare,” as civil rights activist Audre Lorde put it.

“I understood that working on self is not being self-centric. In fact, it is the most unique and beautiful gift to oneself and everyone around.”

Kabir Vajpeyi, Ashoka Fellow

3. Wellbeing creates inner space.

The success of a leader hinges on their ability to adapt their mindsets and skills to the changing environment, to listen deeply to let go of past conceptions and embrace new ones, and to be comfortable with constant change. The ongoing process of noticing and responding to a changing landscape can be stressful and demanding. When we are stressed and unwell, we listen less, reflect little, and make poorer decisions. Wellbeing creates the necessary space for openness, effective listening, reflection, and informed decision making. Leaders who cultivate their wellbeing can be more present for themselves and for others, enhancing their ability to perceive what the system needs and wants.

4. Wellbeing means resilience.

Perhaps the most common reason for prioritizing wellbeing is resilience. Change – especially long-term systems change – is taxing. If we mismanage our emotional and physical resources, we are likely to run out of steam on the long and winding journey towards change, especially during times of stress and hardship.



System change is a marathon, not a sprint.

PRINCIPLES

As a supporter of social entrepreneurs and changemakers, the following principles will help you integrate wellbeing into your support programs:

Principle 1: Support leaders in making wellbeing a priority

The first step to improving wellbeing is simply recognizing its importance and making it a personal and professional priority. Wellbeing is critical for social entrepreneurs because it influences the quality and magnitude of their impact. As we mentioned in the leadership section, how we show up affects our ability to effectively implement systems change strategies. Equally, how we take care of ourselves influences how we show up. Our inner wellbeing and outer actions are connected; what we do in the world reflects our inner conditions, and what we have not healed in ourselves shows up in the solutions we create.

On a behavioural level, we can observe common patterns when our wellbeing suffers: we might become reactive, impatient, or uninspired.

On a strategic level, we risk creating solutions that reflect our own suffering and thereby harm others.

On a personal level, lack of wellbeing can create a disconnect between our actions and our values. Each of us has a responsibility to act in a way that reflects our values and our vision for the world. When social entrepreneurs fail to live out their values and mission – to the extent possible and reasonable in the present – their vision and work become less credible, less authentic, and less impactful.

Moreover, wellbeing enhances openness and authenticity – key competences for collaboration. When leaders are open to other perspectives and can accept themselves and others, there is space to build trust. Finally, wellbeing prevents burnout, which is reaching crisis levels in the citizen sector: research by the Wellbeing Project demonstrates that changemakers are experiencing increasing levels of burnout and stress, high rates of depression and chronic illness, and distress within personal and professional relationships. For those working in helping professions such as nursing, medicine, and teaching, these challenges are often even more pronounced due to the relational and emotional intensity of their work. Empathy requires resilience.

A 2010 study conducted on 10,000 non-profit professionals found that more than 90% of respondents regarded burnout as the principal reason for leaving the sector. A survey conducted by Unite on people employed by charities and NGOs found that 42% of respondents believed that their job was detrimental to their mental health.

A 2016 study conducted by the British Association of Social Workers and Community Care found that 57% of respondents resorted to emotional eating and 35% used alcohol to cope with work-related stress. In addition to this, 63% of respondents had difficulties sleeping, 56% said that they were emotionally exhausted, and 35% felt unable to cope at work.

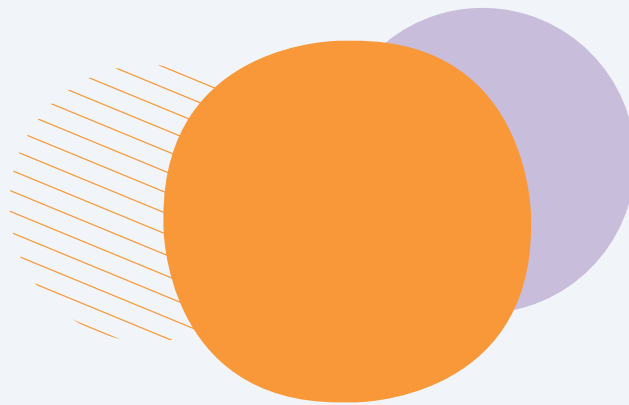


Tips for Supporters & Intermediaries:

- Invest time in noticing, experiencing, and understanding the effects of wellbeing on the impact of leaders and teams. If possible, collect evidence of the impact of wellbeing support to help make the case about why wellbeing is strategic for social change.
- Integrate wellbeing (workshops, practices, conversations) into your programming, strategy, and leadership development work. You can start as easy as doing a “wellbeing bazar” – ask participants what they do to take care of themselves, have them paint it on a flipchart, and invite them to share it with the group. The wellbeing tips of participants constitute a powerful toolbox of experiences, practices, and inspiration.

Resources:

- [The Wellbeing Project Research](#)
- [Ashoka Latin America Report on Fellows' Wellbeing in Spanish](#)
- [Stepping Up or Stepping out - A Report on the Readiness of Next Generation Non-profit Leaders, 2010.](#)
- [Article](#): Charity workers suffering an epidemic of mental health issues and stress, survey reveals.
- [Article](#): How stress impacts social workers – and how they're trying to cope.



“I really feel that Ashoka looked at the problem I solved through my eyes, instead of looking at the problem and then trying to find someone who fit that problem or fit that solution. I think if today I wasn’t a Fellow, I definitely wouldn’t be where I am right now. I would probably still be dealing with mental battles of should I keep on going or should I stop?”

Ashoka Fellow, Mexico

Principle 2: Support leaders to be authentic – showing up and embracing others as true whole selves

The 'Paradoxical Theory of Change' teaches us that "when I accept myself as I am, then I can change" (Carl Rogers, American psychologist and among the founders of the humanistic approach to psychology). This means practicing loving acceptance of who and what we are in the current moment, with a recognition of the fact that only from that place of loving acceptance can real growth begin. Learning and development spaces that are free from judgment can help us to let go of the layers we build up to protect ourselves and express vulnerability and authenticity.

Authenticity and wellbeing reinforce each other. Wellbeing helps us to be more authentic and being authentic improves our wellbeing. This virtuous cycle can only begin, however, when we learn to love and accept ourselves. As Antonia Ariza Montes and his co-authors explain in a recent publication, "Authenticity generates wellbeing by providing individuals with a clear and concise sense of themselves. In contrast, the absence of authenticity provokes disorientation and dissatisfaction since individuals might be forced to act against their innermost values and aspirations."

A body of research shows that authenticity is associated with positive social relationships and can act as a buffer against interpersonal conflict. In her book *Love 2.0: How Our Supreme Emotion Affects Everything We Feel, Think, Do, and Become*, Dr. Barbara Fredrickson demonstrates that our capacity for connection is linked to our health and longevity.

Furthermore, a series of studies over the past few decades show that suppressing emotions can and does affect our physical and mental health. A 2013 study by the Harvard School of Public Health and the University of Rochester found that people who bottled up their emotions increased their likelihood of premature death by more than 30%, with



their risk of being diagnosed with cancer increasing by 70%. In some cases, social change leaders choose to suppress their feelings so they can 'continue working' or 'continue fighting for the cause,' or because they don't have safe, non-judgmental spaces to share and process their emotions. Without appropriate support, this behaviour becomes unsustainable. Wellbeing conversations, exercises, and support spaces can help to prevent and mitigate this problem.



Tips for Supporters:

- Create and hold confidential safe spaces that allow social entrepreneurs to cultivate connection and inner development and practice being vulnerable.
- Create spaces where participants hold space for each other. By holding space, we simply mean being present for someone without judgment. This requires donating your ears and heart without wanting anything back, practicing empathy and compassion, and accepting the person's truth.

Resources:

- We invite participants to support each other by integrating [peer coaching circles](#) in our programs.
- [Book](#): James J. Gross Ricardo F. Muñoz. Emotion Regulation and Mental Health.
- [Report](#): Lucy E Cousins. February 2018.

Principle 3: Teach leaders that wellbeing requires an integral approach that recognises and attends to multiple factors.

Wellbeing depends on the interaction and balance between the mental, emotional, physical, social, spiritual and energy elements of our being and on the satisfaction of fundamental human needs. As such, cultivating wellbeing requires an integral and individualized approach.

When explaining our holistic view of wellbeing, we often rely on Manfred Max-Neef's fundamental human needs model and Ken Wilber's Integral framework. The graphs below depict these two models and demonstrate the key factors that shape wellbeing. On the one hand, the model on fundamental human needs shows nine needs that manifest across four dimensions – being, having, doing, and interacting. Each of these nine needs – subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity – can be fulfilled in a variety of ways. On the other hand, the Integral Model shows various dimensions in which we manifest our humanity – mental & emotional, behavioural, culture, systems – at the individual and collective levels.

These two models help us to notice the complexity and interconnectedness of the variables that create our subjective wellbeing. They also serve as a critical reminder that our human experience is not confined to the cognitive/mental realm, and that there are other important realms that we often ignore. In order to truly thrive, we must care about every aspect of our humanity.

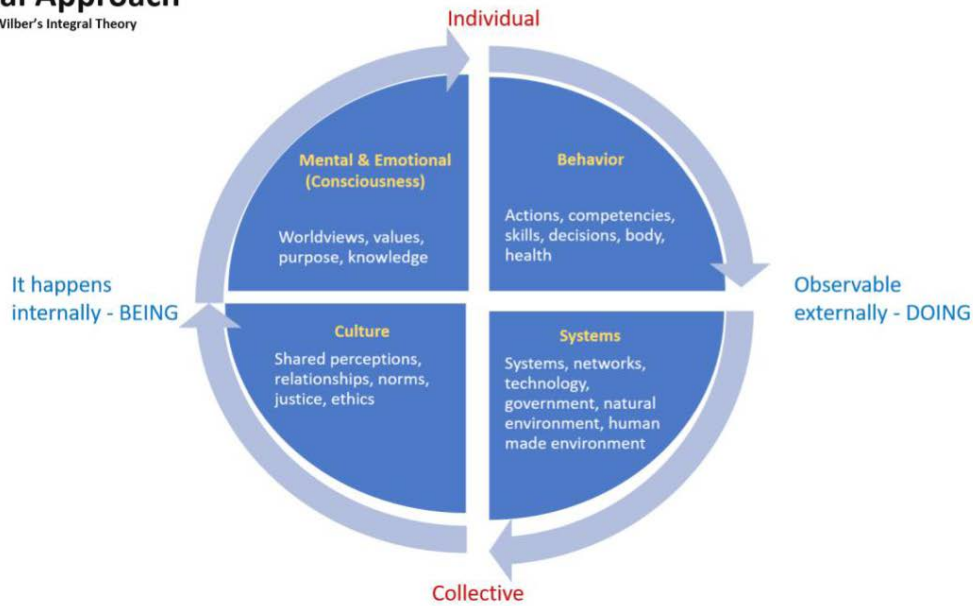
Tools:

To make it easier for our social entrepreneurs to design their wellbeing plans, we have created our own framework out of the two models explained above. We have chosen nine key areas that we consider fundamental for wellbeing: mental, physical, emotional, transcendence, contribution, relationships & community, livelihood, nature, and social/cultural context. We help our leaders identify areas from this framework that they want to nurture and then connect them with resources to facilitate their development.

Throughout this process, we invite leaders to rely not only on their cognitive capacity but also on other ways of knowing and learning, including other intelligences connected with intuition, sensing, and feeling. Creating coherence using multiple intelligences further reinforces wellbeing by establishing a sense of alignment, centeredness, and balance.

Integral Approach

Based on Ken Wilber's Integral Theory



Human Needs Matrix After Manfred Max-Neef

	Being	Having	Doing	Interacting
Subsistence	Health, adaptability Sense of humour	Food, shelter, work	Feed, procreate, rest, work	Social setting, environment
Protection	Care, equilibrium, solidarity	Rights, social security, family	Cooperate, plan, help	Living space, dwelling
Affection	Self-esteem, respect, passion	Friendships, family, relation with nature	Make love, share, cultivate, appreciate	Privacy, intimacy, home, togetherness
Understanding	Critical conscience, curiosity, discipline	Literature, education teachers	Investigate, meditate experiment,	Groups, community, schools, family
Participation	Dedication, respect, receptiveness	Rights, responsibility duties, work	Cooperate, dissent, agree on, interact	Associations, churches, family
Idleness	Curiosity, tranquillity, imagination	Peace of mind, games, parties	Day-dream, relax remember, brood	Privacy, intimacy, free time, landscape
Creation	Passion, intuition, imagination,	Abilities, skills, method, work	Work, invent, build, compose, design	Productive settings, workshops, time
Identity	Sense of belonging, self-esteem	Language, symbols, religion, values	Commit oneself, grow, recognise	Social rhythms, maturation stages
Freedom	Autonomy, boldness, passion	Equal rights	Dissent, choose, disobey, run risks	Temporal/ spatial plasticity

Tips for Supporters:

- Create time and space for social entrepreneurs to reflect, learn about their basic needs, and identify wellbeing areas that they can nurture to strengthen their overall wellbeing.

Resources:

- We use the [human needs model](#) by Manfred Max-Neef as a baseline to identify the wellbeing needs that are our leaders are and are not meeting.
- The integral approach enables social entrepreneurs to connect their being (inner wellbeing) with their doing (system change).
- Ashoka's nine wellbeing areas (mental, physical, emotional, transcendence, contribution, relationships & community, livelihood, nature and social/ cultural context) can be used to create developmental plans with respective resources and timelines.

Principle 4: Help leaders see that wellbeing builds on self-awareness and self-development.

In order to cultivate wellbeing, leaders must learn to be present, to observe what is happening to, with, and around them, and to respond appropriately. As we discover and evaluate our inner wellbeing, we need to be comfortable holding space for ourselves and processing our inputs, sensations, emotions, and experiences without denying, dismissing, or judging them. Only then can we develop a holistic development journey for ourselves.

In this process, it is important to be compassionate and gentle. Awareness without judgement can be challenging. We must approach ourselves with kindness as we face the discomfort, confusion, and self-judgement that can emerge as we get to know ourselves.

The process of building an effective development journey should be approached holistically. A great way to create these journeys is to offer experiential learning that integrates head, heart, and hands and that helps leaders to work not only with their cognitive intelligence but also with their intuition, sensing ability, and feelings. This means offering social entrepreneurs a space to connect with mind, body, and emotions, and to express their creativity in new ways. This can include areas like emotion coaching, somatic work, and the use of art for creativity and development (a.k.a. social arts).

Development journeys also help leaders to understand the ways in which they have been shaped by their early childhood years, their cultural upbringing, and the environment in which they live. These processes can result in deep healing and often improve the leaders' capacity to integrate parts of themselves that have been ignored or suppressed, creating a sense of coherence that leads to wellbeing.



Tips for Supporters & Intermediaries:

- Support participants to recognize that self-awareness and personal development may feel uncomfortable and destabilizing at times, given the inner change that they require.
- Provide coaching support to help participants along their developmental journeys.
- Some personal development journeys may require healing (at physical, emotional, and mental levels). When necessary, encourage participants to seek external support.

Principle 5: Support leaders in enhancing their deep sense of meaning.

Connecting with purpose enhances our sense of meaning, our self-worth, and our wellbeing. Working towards social good inherently creates a sense of meaning, especially when there is strong alignment between personal and professional purposes. Self-worth also increases when work happens in a giving manner. A body of research shows that one of the reasons people get stuck in the cycle of low self-esteem is because they are overly focused on themselves and what they are lacking. In contrast, according to research by Jennifer Crocker and Amy Canevello from University of Michigan “Nothing makes you prouder of yourself than knowing that you are making a positive difference in the lives of other people.” In many cases, when leaders enable other changemakers, they not only generate greater impact but also improve personal and collective wellbeing.

As supporters, it is important to remember that along the challenging path towards change, leaders may lose sight of their purpose. Helping them regain a connection to purpose is critical because it allows them to shift their perspective from ‘having to work’ (seeing work as an obligation), to connecting with ‘why I work’ (what gives them energy and motivation).

Tips for Supporters:

- Create learning journeys that encourage social entrepreneurs to reflect, connect with, and clarify their sense of purpose.
- Coaching support can help social entrepreneurs to discern whether they are doing their work out of a sense of obligation or because they feel truly called to it.

Resources:

- [Ikigai](#) is a tool that helps participants reflect on their personal purpose.
- Vision Quests can also help leaders connect with their personal purpose. This resource lists a range of available [Vision Quests](#).
- [The Purpose Economy: How Your Desire for Impact, Personal Growth and Community Is Changing the World](#).
- [Purpose programs and coaching](#) offered by Alexander Inchbald.



Photo credit: Ashoka

Example 1: Wellbeing Initiatives at Ashoka

We have created a range of wellbeing offerings for Ashoka Fellows, staff members, and other members of our network. This has allowed us to deepen our exploration of a) the correlation between wellbeing and the ability to galvanize others as changemakers and b) the respective inner work and self-care required for all social entrepreneurs and changemakers to do this sustainably. Our inquiry has led us to recognize that when leaders consciously establish their leadership in order to enable other changemakers, it not only generates greater impact, but also helps them to cultivate personal and collective wellbeing.

We also recognize that a leader's ability to inspire and support others is inextricably linked to and shaped by his or her inner development. We aim to help social entrepreneurs and changemakers to embody the wellbeing through our wellbeing activities and offerings:

Being-Well Retreats for Ashoka Fellows and Staff

As part of our Fellowship support, we offer wellbeing retreats for Ashoka Fellows and staff. These retreats enable participants to embody authenticity, show up as themselves, build self-awareness, and acquire an integral view of wellbeing. Depending on availability, Ashoka Fellows can also access further support through Ashoka's pro bono coaching partners.

Wellbeing Toolkit

We have created an external [wellbeing toolkit](#) accessible via our website, as well as an internal wellbeing microsite where Ashoka staff members can access resources to support individual and team wellbeing. Staff members also have access to pro-bono coaching to support their development.

Online Offerings

We offer digital workshops, conversations, dialogues and learning journeys for leaders, teams and organizations. These online offerings raise awareness about the importance of wellbeing and provide social entrepreneurs and their teams with frameworks, tools, and resources.

Supporting and Working with Others in the Field

In times of crisis, it becomes especially important to support others. In recent months, we have collaborated with the Wellbeing Project and a number of co-creators to advance two wellbeing initiatives:

- 1) The Wellbeing Series is a powerful space where hundreds of changemakers gather to learn, practice and be with each other.
- 2) We will launch a digital service to help changemakers access coaching support at pro bono rates.

Weekly Mindfulness for Social Innovation

We host a 30-minute mindfulness session each week for everyone in our network. Led by an Ashoka Fellow and a Zen priest, this practice has become a place of refuge and nourishment for participants

Building Resilience Community of Practice

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, we launched a community of practice on resilience for Ashoka Fellows and staff. The intention of the space is to enable participants to develop the capacity and ability to work and lead effectively during difficult times.

Example 2: The Wellbeing Project (TWP)



- Co-created by Ashoka, the Esalen Institute, Porticus, Impact Hub, the Skoll Foundation and the Synergos Institute, the Wellbeing Project is focused on catalyzing a culture of inner wellbeing for all changemakers. The Project is structured in four pillars: Model Programs: Programs that explore personal and organizational wellbeing.
- Research & Evaluation: Rigorous research around wellbeing programs and their effectiveness.
- Learning, Convening & Enabling: Interactive gatherings where key constituencies in the field of social change discuss the research and learn from each other.
- Storytelling & Connecting: A multimedia media campaign sharing stories from across The Wellbeing Project with the field.

TWP has focused their work on raising global awareness about the importance of prioritizing wellbeing. Through their program, they have also deepened the understanding that wellbeing:

- starts with authenticity - accepting and showing up as ourselves.
- requires an integral approach that recognizes and attends to all wellbeing factors.
- builds on self-awareness and self-development: sensing, understanding, and working on ourselves.
- is enhanced the more we connect and stay connected with our purpose.

TWP conducted a three-year study to document the journeys of the changemakers who participated in their 18-month program on inner development. As they describe in their report, “The research findings validated our initial hypothesis – inner wellbeing translates to a better and healthier relationship with self, one’s social environment and one’s work.”

The report also describes their key design principles for a learning journey, which include:

- **Journey-oriented:** Understand inner development work as unique to each person, multidimensional, multifaceted, and ongoing.
- **Invitational:** Invite people to take part in inner development work while allowing them the freedom to choose how to participate and engage.
- **Welcoming of the whole person:** Place individuals, not their work, at the centre. Invite participants to engage without premeditated expectations about personal or professional outcomes.
- **Nurturing Commitment:** Create opportunities for the discovery and integration of capacity-building practices and experiences that support enhanced self-care.
- **Facilitating depth:** Provide a variety of therapeutic and/or healing modalities and opportunities within consistent, coherent and useful inner development frameworks.
- **Meaningful frameworks:** Trustworthy, credible, and skilled staff create and hold a sacred, confidential transformational process.

“To responsibly and effectively bring change into the world, we need to develop the capacity to lead ourselves; “Know Thyself” is the oldest advice out there. However, ‘knowing thyself’ doesn’t mean only focusing on inner work. Changemaking from the ‘inside out’ is never a linear process: that you first have to change inside before creating meaningful change out in the world. Instead, the goal is deepening self-awareness while in action, through a continuous process of action and reflection.”

Ilaina Rabbat and Roshan Paul,
Amani Institute Co-Founders.