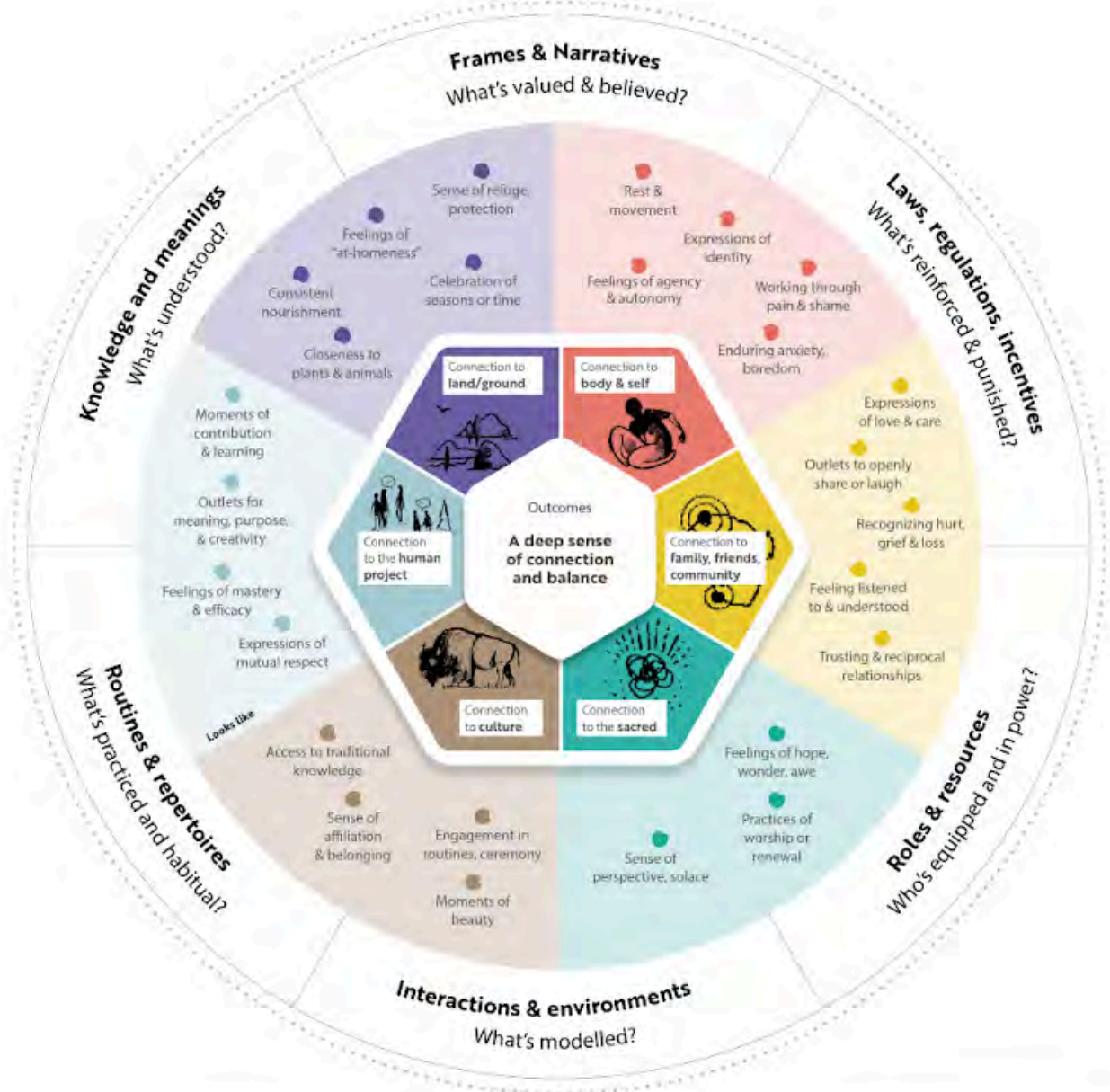


GUIDE TO THE WELLBEING FRAMEWORK





The Background for the Wellbeing Framework

The Wellbeing Framework emerged from the research and experience of a City initiative called RECOVER Urban Wellbeing which ran from 2017 to 2024. At the heart of the framework is a deep sense of connection and balance, and it identifies six kinds of connection.

In 2020, after completing a couple of years of work, the RECOVER team decided to pause and synthesise learnings, to revisit and revise assumptions. The team's ethnographers, social design firm InWithForward, sifted through all the research and learnings from previous years. They also worked with the Indigenous consulting firm, Naheyawin, to examine Indigenous traditions and practices that enhance wellbeing, in order to better integrate Indigenous ideas.

The wellbeing framework is explained in the guiding document called [The Soulful City](#). This document is a deep dive that examines what we really mean by urban wellness and wellbeing. It combines the stories and lived experiences of street-involved Edmontonians, and draws on their wisdom about what wellbeing means through their eyes. It also pulls together cultural and philosophical teachings from around the world, including from Indigenous Peoples, to provide a deep understanding of how wellbeing is achieved.

We hope to deepen our understanding over time.

As we pursue our urban wellness goals, it is clear that Indigenous ways of knowing and being can meaningfully lead the way.



More on the lived experience research that informed the wellbeing wheel:

When doing the deep ethnographic research, the researchers at InWithForward asked people living on the margins what matters most to them in terms of their wellbeing. People were able to hone in quickly. Behind all of the numbers, was a really surprisingly shared conception of what it actually means to live well, to be well, and it doesn't have a lot to do with money.

What we learned is that the people who are arguably the most materially deprived say materiality isn't what matters most. Yes, it's often a significant barrier and something that creates stress, but it's not the top desired outcome. Just because you have four walls and a roof, food and clothing, it doesn't mean that you are living well or being well.

Across the sample, three things really stood out in terms of what mattered most:

- a sense of purpose
- a feeling of respect - self respect as well as others respecting you
- a sense of connection - a sense of not being alone, of having close relationships

For the Indigenous Peoples that they spent time with, respect was often the top thing that was talked about. For non-Indigenous people, it was similar but respect was replaced with safety and security, including psychological safety. Both purpose and connection remained constant in terms of the things that people saw their life needing.



REFLECTION PROMPT: *What matters most to you for living well, for being well? Do the answers from our research resonate with you? Try playing the [Good Life Game](#) to help you explore your own thoughts.*

More on the other research that informed the wellbeing wheel:

The researchers at InWithForward also looked at 3000 years of cultural and philosophical teachings from around the world - including Indigenous, Eastern, Western, and modern interdisciplinary thought and traditions about what it means to live well. The elements of wellbeing that were across almost all the traditions included: harmony, balance, oneness, love, relationships and self (not in terms of aggrandizing self but in terms of transcending or developing oneself). Money, status, power and authority weren't prioritised in almost any of the teachings.

For the nehyiwak or Cree people, a life well lived recognizes everyone and everything is alive, restored and renewed through practices, teachings and ceremonies grounded in values of compassion, generosity, honesty, self-determination, respect, unity, humility, and a desire to live in harmony.



Elements across almost all traditions

- Harmony, balance, oneness
- Love, relationships
- Self (either transcending self or self-actualizing)

Elements in some traditions

- Virtue
- Coming through hardship
- Pleasure
- Absence of pain
- Honoring tradition
- Divine salvation
- Obedience
- Faith

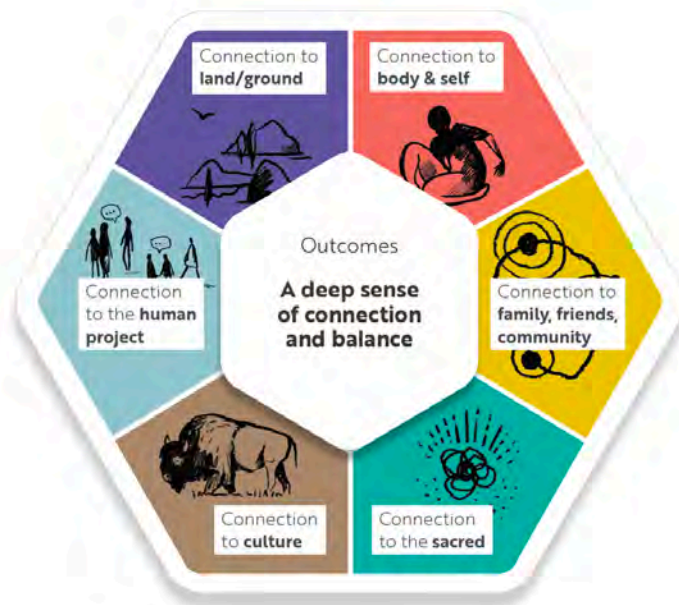
Elements absent from nearly all traditions

- Wealth
- Status
- Power
- Authority

What stood out from holding the space for all of these voices from Edmonton, and from reading about 3000 years of different traditions is:

- How much wellness is defined as a relational phenomenon,
- It is something that's about connection both within and beyond self.

RECOVER's learning journey led to a focus on connections as being key to wellbeing. This is why a deep sense of connection and balance is at the heart of the wellbeing framework.



Wellbeing is not a destination but an ongoing pursuit.

The layers of the wellbeing framework

The centre:

At the heart of the wellbeing framework is the overarching desired outcome of a deep sense of Connection & Balance. The framework identifies 6 kinds of connections. They are connection to:

- Land/Ground
- Body & Self
- Family, Friends, Community
- The Sacred
- Culture
- The Human Project

These are the desired outcomes that this framework encourages everyone to strive for. Please note that:

- *connection to the sacred* is defined however one personally defines the sacred
- *connection to the human project* is related to purpose, one’s growth and development

These identified connections are not mutually exclusive. For some, connection to land is connection to the sacred. Also, connection to culture has a lot of overlap with connection to family, friends and community. Identifying these 6 kinds of connections is meant to help us think about them, not to pigeon-hole our thinking.

We understand that an important element of enabling a deep sense of connection and balance is acknowledging people’s grief and loss.

The middle layer:

The middle layer, shown in pastel, has examples of what the outcomes might look and feel like - they are examples of behaviours and attitudes, and include some practices, emotions and experiences. So for example, the connection to land/ground can be a sense of feeling “at home”. This layer is one of the things you can look at when you are evaluating your work; when you are checking to see what difference you are making.



The outer layer:



The outer layer (shown in black and white) are the levers for change. They are the tools you can use to improve wellbeing; to have impact on the connection outcomes at the centre. They are: frames & narratives; laws, regulations, incentives; roles & resources; interactions & environments; routines & repertoires; and knowledge & meanings. These levers can be used by individuals, families, neighbourhoods and cities.

The identified levers roughly correspond to cultural or systems change levers. For example, the Frames & Narratives lever is similar to the underlying mental models that underpin our systems as shown in the [Iceberg Model for systems thinking](#). It speaks to what is believed, to mindsets and values. Here is some more information on each lever with some examples:

Laws, Regulations, and Incentives Lever:

If wellbeing is to be nurtured where people can connect, belong and flourish, then we need to research and test how to use governments' authorities and tools better. How might we change the laws, regulations and incentives in a way so that they reinforce positive behaviours that strengthen wellbeing outcomes — and disincen or punish the creation of conditions that impose isolation and neglect? How can we learn from Indigenous and ethnocultural communities about their laws and rules? How might we reimagine the interactions that enforcement officers engage in, so that they can be better leveraged as opportunities for engagement, learning and connection?



Roles and Resources Lever:

In every system, there are many roles and resources to consider. There are traditional roles such as those of social workers, planners, and researchers. When we only focus on these sorts of roles, we run the risk of centering professional ways of knowing. When we rely solely on professionals running a service or program to meet a need, certain ways of framing or biases can flourish. What if we more often brought lived experience and peer supports into the fold? What if people with lived experience could help to shape practices and scripts, based on their first hand experiential knowledge as service recipients? It is about looking at where current resources are being dedicated and if those are the right areas to improve welling. Also asking if the resources we are employing and are the best ones for getting at wellbeing outcomes. What if we used the knowledge and wisdom of elders and the youth in our communities? What if we used the gifts that each neighbour (for example, as a gardener, an artist, a plumber) has to connect to each other?

Routines and Repertoires Lever:

Routines refer to things that happen on a recurring basis; they reflect the patterns in our systems. Repertoires are the “cache” of actions and strategies people know to use in any given situation. When faced with a situation, and needing to act, we flip through our mental binder of options - possibly falling back on the old strategies, even if they don't really further our wellbeing. It is important to widen and deepen our repertoires, sometimes intentionally replacing unproductive strategies with new ones. This can happen in a variety of ways including cultural and embodied learning, peer modelling, and coaching and positive feedback.

Interactions and Environments Lever:

Interactions are how we come into contact with our environment – from objects to other people. Your day is made-up of hundreds of interactions: with your alarm clock, phone, shower, bus driver, barista, dog, pharmacist, park bench, the grass. It's through interactions that values get expressed, or discarded. A kind nod from a bus driver versus a rushed, unempathetic pharmacist. Adding up all these interactions either gets us closer to, or further away from, different conceptions of wellness. With just a different articulation of the pharmacist's role, or changing the order so that a shower comes before making a phone call, we might arrive at a different kind of day.



Knowledge and Meanings Lever:

It is impossible to remove bias from data. At a time when we are being called to disrupt long-standing patterns of marginalisation, we must commit to changing who and what we value and count. To measure what matters means moving beyond only economic measures to ones that encompass human wellbeing and connection. This means valuing voice, lived and learned experience and recognizing that wellbeing is dynamic, fluctuating over time and with context. It requires a focus on qualitative over quantitative data, and on nuance in human stories. By decentering Western European ways of knowing/reckoning with, and allowing ourselves to be influenced by and reflect other culturally-based knowledges, including Indigenous knowledges, we broaden our perspectives, and deepen our capacity to encounter complex human and environmental issues. How might you incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into your work, your evaluations?

Frames and Narratives Lever:

Frames offer a lens through which we make meaning, and the dominant narratives related to them are the underlying mental models - the conscious and unconscious stories that we tell ourselves and others about any given situation. Framing leads us to focus on some aspects of a situation, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, possibly assign cause (and who is to blame), as well as the recommended course of action. For example, substance abuse can be framed as a crisis of individual moral degeneration, a public health issue, or a symptom of societal breakdown and social disconnection. Narratives are stories linked to social identity, and reveal how people see experiences, constraints and opportunities. It is important to examine the frames and narratives, and in this case, to change them. What are the stories you tell yourself about a specific situation? How does this impact your approach?

When designing your solutions, we encourage you to think about these questions:

- Which levers are you employing, consciously or unconsciously?
- Why are you using these levers?
- Are there other levers you can use that you haven't considered?
- What levers are others who are working on this issue using? Could your work be more complementary by employing different levers?
- Will they help to get to the outcome you want in terms of connection?



General notes on the wellbeing wheel:

- While the image is static, the outer layer is meant to spin around the two internal layers. This means that any of the levers identified in the outside layer can impact on the various connections in the centre.
- We can use the framework to help us design our approaches, interventions or prototypes that intentionally link levers and outcomes.

The wellbeing framework can help us all to...

- Refocus purpose - help keep straight means and ends. For example, is the outcome you are aiming for food in stomachs or is it connection to land/ground, and connection to community AND the food is a means to that end?
- Provide a common language for all of us working to improve wellbeing in the myriad of ways that this is possible
- Align activities
- Measure what matters

A tool for applying the wellbeing framework

The wellbeing framework offers a lens for designing and testing interventions. It helps to be intentional and specific – choose the right levers for the problem you are trying to address, and consider how to strengthen your solutions/approaches. The wellbeing framework can help you to think through which outcomes you are focused on and which levers you are using. [This](#) is an application worksheet that you can use.

As a society, we tend to focus solutions on business management practices, on improving things like coordination or integration of services. Also, we tend to focus on creating new programs or services. How might you rebalance your approach with thinking about which routines, interactions, and narratives should be addressed? Try to apply intentional thinking about the 6 kinds of connections and ALL of the tools/levers in the wellbeing framework.



A note on use of the wellbeing framework:

Please note that the framework is meant to be generative - helping people to frame their thinking and then to jump off from there to generate more thinking, more creativity. It is not meant to be prescriptive - not meant to be interpreted or enforced strictly.

REFLECTION PROMPTS:

- *What thoughts, suggestions and specific ideas do you have about bringing wellbeing into your life or work area?*
- *How might working with the wellbeing framework shift or complement how you approach your commitments?*
- *The application of this wellbeing lens is about applying “YES/AND” thinking. How might thinking about the 6 kinds of connections and ALL of the tools/levers in the wellbeing framework support your efforts?*

To learn more about the wellbeing framework, you can read RECOVER's guiding document called The Soulful City [here](#).



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