

The Five Pillars: A Simple Way to Understand Human Wellbeing

Introduction

Life is complicated and sometimes our mental and physical health struggles can feel like a mystery. Therapies, medications and labels like “depression” or “anxiety” can help - but they don’t always address the basics. Some people keep trying different treatments and still feel stuck.

The Five Pillars idea is simple: before worrying about labels or complex treatments, it helps to check if the foundations for coping and resilience are in place. These foundations are Sleep, Food, Connection, Expression and Meaning. When these pillars are stable, everything else in life, including stress, illness and mental health challenges, becomes a bit more manageable. Think of these as the basics everyone needs to function well.

The Five Pillars

1. Sleep

Sleep is like your brain and body’s reset button. When you sleep well, you think clearly, manage emotions better and recover physically. When sleep is off, everything else can feel harder. Try to keep a regular bedtime and wind down before sleep.

Think of it like your phone battery: no matter how many apps you run, if your battery’s low, it’s all going to lag.

Example: People with stubborn depression often struggle with sleep. Fixing sleep alone can sometimes improve mood even before other treatments.

2. Food

Food gives your body and brain energy. Eating irregularly, poorly or in ways that cause pain can make stress and fatigue worse. The Five Pillars check asks: do you have a steady intake, can you eat without pain and do you get enough energy? It's about fuel, not dietary perfection. The goal is steady energy, not eating perfectly all the time.

Example: Someone with Fibromyalgia or chronic illness often feels worse when meals are skipped or inconsistent.

3. Connection

Humans are social creatures. Feeling part of a community or simply having meaningful interactions helps us to cope with stress. Connection isn't just about people; pets, nature or online communities count too.

Example: Loneliness is so harmful it's been compared to smoking or obesity in terms of health risks.

4. Expression

We all need ways to let out what's inside. This could be talking, writing, art, music, sports or building things. Bottling it up makes stress worse.

Example: Keeping a journal, making music or painting has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve mood.

5. Meaning

Meaning is about having a purpose, values, curiosity or a sense that life makes sense, even when it's hard. This isn't about being happy all the time; it's about having direction.

Example: People with chronic illness who find meaning in life cope better and feel more resilient.

How it Works

The Five Pillars check isn't about diagnosing you. It's about spotting where the basics might be shaky. Once those pillars are stable:

- Struggles become easier to manage
- Doctors can better understand if there's an underlying condition
- You can focus on what actually matters, not just the surface symptoms.

Edge Cases: Some conditions, like autism or psychopathy, aren't explained by missing pillars. But even then, checking the pillars can clarify whether struggles are coming from basic unmet needs or something more complex.

Example: Someone may feel depressed and withdrawn. If their sleep, food and social connections are off, fixing those first can improve symptoms and avoid misdiagnosis.

Why This Matters

- Simple: No jargon or complex assessments.
- Non-judgemental: Struggle is NOT failure - It's a sign something fundamental is off.
- Universal: Anyone can use it, not just those with diagnosed conditions.
- Prevents wasted time: Instead of trying countless treatments blindly, check the pillars first.

Practical Use:

- For you: Use the checklist to spot which pillars need attention.
 - For Doctors or caregivers: Quickly understand where the basics are failing.
 - For research: Study resilience, treatment resistance and wellbeing with a clearer picture.
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Conclusion

The Five Pillars is a simple, practical framework to see whether the foundations of your wellbeing are in place. Sleep, Food, Connection, Expression and Meaning: when these are stable, life's challenges become easier to face.

It's not a magic fix, a label or a prescription, It's a starting point. Think of it as checking the engine, fuel, tyres, steering and map before hitting the road. Once the basics are solid, you can navigate life with more clarity and resilience.