

The Five Pillars: A Foundational Systems Approach to Human Wellbeing

Introduction

Mental health, wellbeing and human functioning are commonly addressed through complex frameworks and interventions that often focus on symptoms rather than underlying needs. While psychological therapies and pharmacological treatments have demonstrated value for many, a significant subset of individuals experience persistent difficulties despite these interventions (Fava & Davidson, 1996; Cuijupers et al., 2020). This phenomenon raises the question: are we treating root causes or merely treating secondary effects?

The Five Pillars framework proposes a foundational approach to assessing human wellbeing. Rather than beginning with diagnostic labels or complex treatment plans, the Five Pillars (Sleep, Food, Connection, Expression, Meaning) evaluates whether the fundamental conditions necessary for coping and resilience are present. If these pillars are maintained, many common psychological and physical challenges become more manageable and the pathway to accurate diagnosis conditions is clarified.

The Five Pillars Framework

1. Sleep

Sleep is widely recognised as a cornerstone of both mental and physical health. Regular, restorative sleep supports cognitive function, emotional regulation, immune function and general wellbeing (Walker, 2017). Sleep deprivation, conversely, is linked to mood disorders, impaired decision making and chronic disease (Banks & Dinges, 2007). The Five Pillars check evaluates the presence of consistent, restorative sleep, including sleep onset, continuity and waking refreshed.

Example: Individuals with treatment-resistant depression frequently exhibit disrupted sleep patterns. Addressing sleep deficits can substantially improve treatment response (Harvey, 2011)

2. Food

Nutrition provides the energy and micronutrients necessary for physical and cognitive function. Disordered eating, malnutrition or irregular caloric intake can exacerbate stress, fatigue and mood disturbances (Jacka et al., 2017). The Five Pillars check asks users to consider appetite, ability to eat, tolerance to food and consistency of intake, emphasizing energy availability over dietary perfection.

Example: Patients with chronic conditions such as Fibromyalgia often report worsened symptoms during periods of poor nutrition or inconsistent meals (McBeth et al., 2009).

3. Connection

Humans are inherently social beings. Strong social bonds reduce stress, enhance coping and promote mental resilience (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). Connection is not limited to people; it may also include interactions with animals, engagement with nature or involvement in shared communities. The Five Pillars check assesses meaningful connection across those domains.

Example: Loneliness has been shown to increase mortality risk, comparable to other well-established health risk factors such as obesity or smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

4. Expression

Expression allows individuals to release internal pressures and communicate their internal states. Modes of expression include talking, writing, art, music, movement or creating/building (Kerr et al., 2019). Limited or blocked expression can exacerbate stress and contribute to psychological strain. The Five Pillars check evaluates whether an individual has accessible outlets for meaningful expression.

Example: Art therapy and journaling interventions have demonstrated measurable benefits in reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms (Bolwerk et al., 2014; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

5. Meaning

Meaning encompasses purpose, values, belief systems, curiosity and perceived coherence in life. While happiness is subjective, meaning provides direction and motivation, enabling individuals to navigate challenges (Frankl, 1946; Steger, 2012). The Five Pillars check evaluates whether a sense of meaning exists, irrespective of mood or motivation.

Example: Studies of patients with chronic illness indicate that individuals with higher perceived meaning exhibit better coping, resilience and quality of life (Park, 2010).

Integration and Application

The Five Pillars framework is designed as a preliminary, systems-based assessment. Rather than explaining why an individual is struggling, it identifies where fundamental needs may be unmet. This allows clinicians, patients and caregivers to prioritize interventions at the foundational level before pursuing symptom-specific treatments.

Edge Cases: While most psychological and neurological conditions interact with one or more pillars, certain conditions, such as autism spectrum disorders or psychopathy, may not be fully explained by pillar deficits. In these cases, the Five Pillars framework helps distinguish between unmet fundamental needs and conditions requiring specialist intervention.

Example: An individual presenting with chronic fatigue, mood instability and social withdrawal may initially appear “depressed.” If the pillars of sleep, food and connection are compromised, remediation of these areas can reduce the severity of symptoms without misdiagnosis.

Philosophical and Practical Considerations

The Five Pillars framework is rooted in humanist and systems-based perspectives. Its design prioritizes simplicity, accessibility and minimal judgement. By removing moral interpretation from suffering, the model emphasizes that struggle is a sign of unmet conditions, not a flaw in character. This aligns with contemporary critiques of over-medicalisation in mental health, where structural, environmental and lifestyle factors are often underappreciated (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007)

Practical Use:

- Self-assessment: Individuals can use the checklist to identify areas of strain.
 - Clinical assessment: Professionals can use pillar evaluations to guide foundational interventions before symptom-specific treatments.
 - Research: The framework can support studies investigating treatment resistance and resilience by isolating unmet foundational needs.
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Conclusion

The Five Pillars Check represents a straightforward, foundational approach to human wellbeing. By evaluating Sleep, Food, Connection, Expressions and Meaning, it provides a systematic way to determine whether basic needs are met. This preliminary assessment can enhance diagnostic clarity, support resilience and empower individuals to address the roots of their struggles.

Authors Note:

"This framework emerged from iterative personal observation and research. While it's grounded in evidence, it remains a developing model open to refinement based on future study and feedback."

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