# Achieving full psychological functioning:
# The dimension of personal growth

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*Los grandes avances médicos logrados en las últimas décadas han posibilitado un inusitado aumento de la esperanza de vida en buena parte de la población mundial, especialmente en los países desarrollados. Sin embargo, este notable incremento de la salud física de las personas contrasta con las elevadas cifras de enfermedades mentales que asolan en numerosas sociedades contemporáneas. En aras de prevenir y reducir la alta incidencia de problemas de salud mental, en los últimos años estamos asistiendo a un creciente interés por el estudio científico de los recursos psicológicos personales como garante de un funcionamiento psicológico pleno. En consonancia con este planteamiento, numerosos enfoques psicológicos enfatizan la importancia de promover el desarrollo de las capacidades y potencialidades individuales, en la medida en que esta dimensión de crecimiento personal se erige en uno de los factores más genuinos y representativos del bienestar psicológico. El presente trabajo pretende profundizar en la comprensión de este pilar esencial del bienestar humano. En primer lugar, se realiza un sucinto recorrido histórico del constructo crecimiento personal, desde su pionera concepción aristotélica hasta su operativización por parte de psicólogos relevantes como Maslow, Rogers, Jung o Frankl, entre otros. Estas aportaciones conforman la raíz por la que se nutre la psicología contemporánea a la hora de explicar y definir este tópico. En concreto, y apoyándonos en diferentes teorías, enfoques y corrientes psicológicas ampliamente aceptadas en la actualidad, analizamos en este artículo aquellos recursos más estrechamente asociados al crecimiento personal, entre los que se encuentran la autodeterminación, el estado de flujo, el mindfulness, la compasión y el capital psicológico.*
*Palabras clave: Crecimiento personal, Bienestar psicológico, Funcionamiento psicológico positivo, Recursos personales, Prevención.*

*The great medical advances achieved in the last decades have allowed an unusual increase in life expectancy in a large part of the world population, especially in developed countries. However, this remarkable improvement in the physical health of people contrasts with the high numbers of mental illnesses that plague in many contemporary societies. In order to prevent and reduce the high incidence of mental health problems, in recent years we are witnessing a growing interest in the scientific study of personal psychological resources as a guarantor of full psychological functioning. In line with this approach, numerous psychological proposals emphasize the importance of promoting the development of individual capacities and potentialities, to the extent that this dimension of personal growth stands as one of the most genuine and representative factors of psychological well-being. This paper aims to deepen the understanding of this core pillar of human well-being. Firstly, there is a brief historical journey of the personal growth construct, from its pioneering Aristotelian conception to its operationalization by relevant psychologists such as Maslow, Rogers, Jung or Frankl, among others. These contributions constitute the root for which contemporary psychology is nourished when explaining and defining this topic. In particular, and relying on different theories, approaches, and psychological currents widely accepted today, secondly, we analyze in this paper those resources most closely associated with personal growth, among which are self-determination, flow, mindfulness, compassion, and psychological capital.*
*Key words: Personal growth, Psychological well-being, Positive psychological functioning, Personal resources, Prevention.*

## INTRODUCTION

Good health and well-being are one of the cornerstones of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development enacted by the United Nations in 2015. However, among the great challenges for the achievement of this goal is to reduce the high numbers of mental illnesses and substance use disorders that plague many contemporary societies. According to recent estimates, approximately one in six people worldwide (between 15 and 20% of the population) suffer from at least one mental disorder or substance abuse disorder, with anxiety disorders (3.76% of the world's population), depression (3.44%), consumption of alcohol (1.4%) and other drugs (e.g., tobacco, cannabis, cocaine) (0.94%) among the most prevalent (Global Burden of Disease, 2018).

Historically, mental health interventions have adopted a reactive approach, focusing on disease and deficit, and thus on the relief and reduction of distress and suffering. In recent decades, however, we are witnessing a progressive change in the concept of health, in which aspects linked to optimal positive functioning receive increasingly more attention. This neophyte approach originated in the proliferation of Welfare States after World War II, when health began to be conceptualized beyond the mere absence of disease, that is, as a resource to promote people's quality of life (World Health Organization, 1986). However, it is not until the beginning of this century that there is real interest in the scientific study of well-being as a guarantor of people's health.

Well-being studies have been organized around two great research traditions (Ryan & Deci, 2001): one mainly related to the enjoyment of a pleasant life (hedonic well-being) and another linked to the development of human potential (eudaimonic well-being). Although there is evidence that both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being prevent the onset of psychopathological states or, at least, contribute to mitigating their symptoms (Chakhssi et al., 2018; Kimiecik, 2016), in this paper, we shall focus on the role played by the eudaimonic well-being and, specifically, on one of its most representative dimensions, as an exponent of optimal positive functioning (Díaz et al., 2006), personal growth.

## 2. EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING AND PERSONAL GROWTH

In his Ethics to Nicomachus (Ross, 1925), Aristotle points out that, of all goods attainable by man, the ultimate end is to attain virtue, eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is the attainment of self-excellence or self-perfection (McDowell, 1980), according to one's individual capabilities and potential.

Personal growth is therefore a central dimension within the eudaimonist outlook of well-being. Ryff (1989) defines personal growth as the eagerness experienced to continue to grow and develop to the maximum all one's potentials and abilities, being nonconformist with past achievements, trying to take on new challenges that allow one to grow as a person and achieve one's full self-realization. It is, as Robitschek (1998) points out, an active and intentional commitment to one's psychological growth, which would have both a cognitive (e.g., "I know how to modify things that I want to change in my life") and a behavioral implication (e.g., "If I want to change something in my life, I start the process of change") in the pursuit of intraindividual development.

Research finds that personal growth is a robust predictor of mental health (Robitschek and Keyes, 2009; Ryff, 2017), so, in the following pages, we will delve into the analysis of this construct, taking a brief historical journey since its operationalization by different psychological currents, to address its relationship with various core psychological variables in the achievement of optimal positive functioning.

**FIGURE 1**
**MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF MODERN PSYCHOLOGY TO THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL GROWTH**



## 3. THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL GROWTH IN MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

The zeal to continue to grow and develop to the maximum all our individual potentials until achieving excellence, which Aristotle—and, by extension, the eudaimonist approach—indicates is the supreme goal of the human being, has had a remarkable impact on modern Psychology, due to the humanistic current, theories of adult development, and the sociological perspective (Figure 1).

### 3.1. Personal growth in Humanistic Psychology

Several authors ascribed to Humanistic Psychology have made considerable contributions to the concept of personal growth. For Maslow (1968), humans are biologically equipped with tendencies that naturally drive them towards constant development and self-improvement (self-actualization). The process of personal growth would take place once individuals have satisfied their most basic needs (i.e., physiological needs) and, therefore, focus all their capacities on their full individual development. Rogers (1961) shares with Maslow the idea that personal growth is a central need present in all individuals. The tendency to self-actualize, says Rogers, is inherent to the human being.

For Jung (2003), people must undergo a process of individuation, based on which they will achieve full awareness of who they really are. Individuation, therefore, constitutes a basic process of personal maturation, of self-knowledge, in order to become oneself. For his part, Frankl (1962) considers that, rather than the search for oneself, the individual fundamentally pursues finding a meaning in life. Thus, human beings reach self-transcendence, fullness, when they are fully aware of their relationship with the world around them and, as a result, manage to find a purpose for their existence beyond themselves.

### 3.2. Contributions from other psychological currents to understanding personal growth

Apart from humanistic approaches, other theoretical developments such as those of Erikson, Bühler, Neugarten, or Vaillant, framed within the theories on adult development argue—in line with the perspective subscribed by Maslow and Rogers—that, during adulthood, there is a natural tendency towards personal growth, determined by the development of personal maturity and experiential wisdom (Ryff, 1982). From this perspective, maturity and well-being would go hand-in-hand, both becoming the two facets of what King (2001) calls the "good life."

Contrary to this perspective, sociological approaches (Levinson, 1986; Pearlin, 1982) argue that adult life does not necessarily lead to greater maturity. The way individuals face vital challenges will determine whether they experience a breakthrough, stagnation, or a setback in their personal growth. In this way, not everyone would be able to fully develop their individual capabilities and potentials. On the contrary, the possibility of people's being able to exceed their own self-referred standards and perfect themselves as individuals will be conditioned both by internal and socio-environmental factors. Approaches such as that of Bauer and McAdams (2010) would be ascribed to this current.
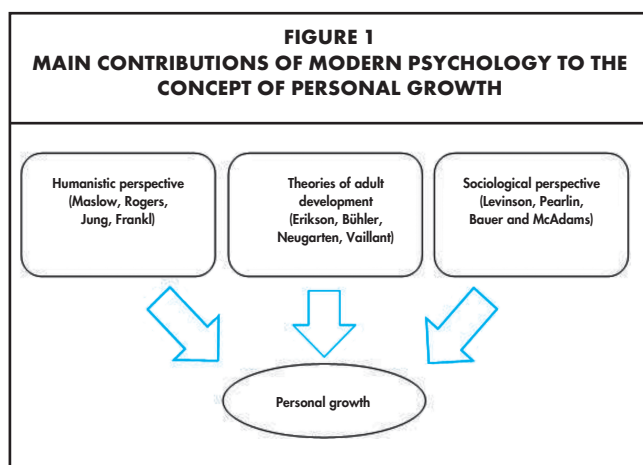
For these researchers, eudaimonic growth will be achieved only if individuals strike a balance between their intellectual and socio-emotional growth.

Individuals who are oriented towards their personal intellectual development attach great importance to increasing their self-knowledge (or others' knowledge of themselves), although they do not necessarily seek to feel these experiences deeply. The latter is relevant to those who are oriented towards socio-emotional personal growth, in the sense that their priority is to strengthen and deepen the feelings and emotions that underlie their own psychosocial lives (e.g., feel fully alive, cultivate meaningful personal relationships, contribute to the development of society and new generations, etc.). Understanding those feelings and emotions, however, would be secondary.

In turn, both types of personal growth (intellectual and socio-emotional) can be expressed at an intrapersonal and an interpersonal level. According to McAdams et al. (1996), intrapersonal growth is experienced when individuals perceive a high capacity to influence their environment, achieve important results for themselves, and reach an optimal level of self-management. Interpersonal growth would be determined by the degree to which individuals consider satisfied their needs of friendship and love; their relationships with different groups of their environment, with society in general, with humanity and/or with divinity; and they are in a position to help and care for others. These four aspects of personal growth (intellectual, socio-emotional, intrapersonal, and interpersonal) can be combined orthogonally, forming a 2x2 matrix (Table 1).

## 4. PERSONAL GROWTH IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERVENTIONS IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Taking as reference the contributions of the humanistic current, as well as of the theories of adult development and sociological approaches, but fundamentally under the notion of eudaimonic well-being, the concept of personal growth is now one of the pillars of the so-called Positive Psychology. Focused on understanding the factors that promote human flourishing and analyzing their contribution to human health (Seligman, 2011), Positive Psychology has gained remarkable interest in recent years as an effective field of intervention in the prevention and improvement of mental disorders, both in the clinical and non-clinical population. These disorders include depression, anxiety, or abuse of addictive substances (Bolier et al., 2013; Rashid, 2015; Schotanus-Dijkstra, 2018).

Interventions in Positive Psychology are based on the promotion of a broad and heterogeneous volume of personal psychological resources, many of which contribute significantly to individuals' experience of a high degree of personal growth. Some of these resources, widely considered in intervention programs, are self-determination, flow, mindfulness, compassion, and psychological capital. We will now delve into the analysis of these variables.

### 4.1. Self-determination

The self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) posits that human beings have the need to engage in activities that allow the full development of their individual capacities and potentialities until self-realization is achieved. This theory defends the existence of three innate and universal psychological needs that lead to the achievement of personal growth: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Any behavior aimed at satisfying these three needs would be inherently motivating and, therefore, fully self-determined, to the extent that it is freely chosen, without interference or external influences.

In addition, this type of behavior is a protector factor against mental health problems (Dreison et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2016), as shown in the health-related behavioral change model (Ryan et al., 2008) (Figure 2). According to this model, interventions that promote (a) a climate of support for the adoption of autonomous behaviors (i.e., behaviors that are performed because they are in themselves important or valuable to the person, and not due to social pressures, extrinsic rewards, or the avoidance of adverse consequences), as well as (b) the pursuit of intrinsic vital aspirations (i.e., achieving personal growth) foster the satisfaction of the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In turn, these three satisfied needs would be related to better mental health (e.g., lower tendency to depression, somatization, anxiety, and higher perceived quality of life).

The model depicted in Figure 2 reflects the close relationship between intrinsic motivation and personal growth, as several studies have empirically corroborated. For example, Carver and Baird (1998) demonstrated that orientation to goals based on intrinsic motivation is positively associated with self-realization, while goals based on extrinsic motivational styles correlate negatively with it. From this consideration, intrinsic motivation or interest would be one of the factors that contribute more to the process of seeking and developing human potential (Schwartz & Waterman, 2006), with this search being its main objective (Vitterso & Soholt, 2011). In this sense, Waterman et al. (2008) point out that intrinsically motivating activities are those that are carried out, not only for the pleasure they

| | TABLE 1<br>TYPOLOGIES OF PERSONAL GROWTH<br>(BAUER & MCADAMS, 2010) | |
|---|---|---|
| | **INTRAPERSONAL GROWTH** | **INTERPERSONAL GROWTH** |
| **INTELLECTUAL GROWTH** | Increasing conceptual knowledge of the self Conceptual exploration and learning for self-knowledge | Increasing conceptual knowledge of other people and of social relationships Boosting the intelectual development of others |
| **SOCIO-EMOTIONAL GROWTH** | Deepening experience of the self and of one's own actions and life situations Strengthening significant individual potentials | Deepening experience of others and of social relationships Promoting the capacities to act fairly and in solidarity Boosting other people's growth |

provide, but also for the feeling of self-realization that the individual experiences when performing them. In particular, activities performed due to intrinsic motivation have a number of characteristics that link them to the experience of high levels of personal growth:

✔ Balance between challenge and ability.
✔ Perception that the activities themselves promote the development of the individual's maximum potential.
✔ Willingness to invest considerable effort in self-improvement.
✔ The belief that these activities are really important for oneself.
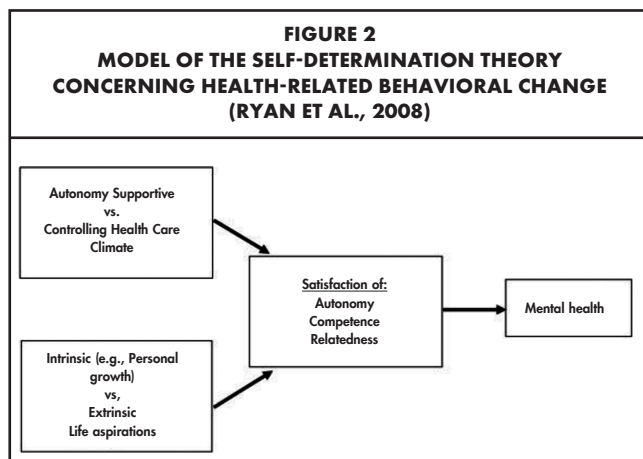
## 4.2. Flow

Intrinsically motivating activities have also been conceptualized in terms of autotelic or self-reinforcing activities, as the individual achieves a maximum degree of engagement while performing them. This complete absorption, in which the individual becomes engaged to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, or any other aspect outside of the activity, is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has called flow or optimal experience.

Although intrinsic motivation and flow are closely related, the link between the two is unequal, insofar as an intrinsically motivated person will always show great interest, but will only reach the flow state at certain times (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Flow, in turn, is a much more intense experience (Waterman et al., 2003). Accordingly, Sansone and Harackiewicz (1996) have characterized the flow state as an archetype of intrinsic interest.

Flow does not constitute a static and momentary state, but instead a dynamic one, such that satisfaction is experienced while performing the activity, not only at the end of the activity (Salanova et al., 2005). Various traits allow identifying the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990):

✔ There are clear goals with great personal significance.
✔ Engagement in activities that strike a balance between high challenge and a high level of capacity.
✔ The focus is fully on what is being done.
✔ The individual experiences a sense of control over his own actions and his immediate environment.



**FIGURE 2**
**MODEL OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY CONCERNING HEALTH-RELATED BEHAVIORAL CHANGE (RYAN ET AL., 2008)**

✔ Complete lack of concern regarding possible failure.
✔ Distorted perception of the length of time (usually referring to a feeling that time passes faster than normal).

The engagement in activities that allow us to experience flow is not only a protector factor against adversity and pathology (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), but also a pathway for personal growth (Bonaiuto et al. 2016; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2002). However, Waterman and collaborators (Waterman et al., 2008; Waterman, Schwartz et al., 2003) point out that there is an asymmetrical relationship between the experience of flow and personal growth, in the sense that flow is experienced more frequently. The main difference between the two constructs is that flow is linked to the performance of a particular activity, but it is only experienced with respect to that task. Personal growth, on the other hand, is a much broader, long-term experience of individual development and self-expression, the result of engagement in intrinsically motivating activities. In such activities, individuals may reach the state of flow, but this is not a sufficient condition for them to perceive that their individual capacities and potentials reach their maximum development. However, the more daily activities performed that lead to experiencing flow, the greater the number of vital moments with high personal significance individuals will perceive (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), which will contribute significantly to their personal growth.

## 4.3. Mindfulness

Inspired by the principles of Buddhist meditation, mindfulness is now a therapeutic resource widely used in Western psychology. Over the past few decades, mindfulness techniques have demonstrated their effectiveness in many psychological well-being improvement programs (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Burke, 2010), as well as in psychopathological treatments to counteract anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), depression (Romero et al., 2020) or stress (Martín-Asuero & García-Banda, 2010). Its use has spread worldwide and has also expanded to other areas such as work (Goilean et al., 2020) or education (García Campayo & Demarzo, 2015).

Although there is no unanimous agreement on the definition of this construct, in general, mindfulness is described as a state of the human mind characterized by attention and full awareness, through which the individual actively and reflectively focuses on the present reality, accepting it without intending to judge, control, or modify it (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2016).

Mindfulness has also been defined in terms of a self-regulatory ability (Brown & Ryan, 2003), an acceptance ability (Linehan, 1994), or in terms of attentional control (Teasdale et al., 1995). Mindfulness therefore generates self-knowledge, that is, it facilitates the discrimination of our own behavior. It also involves observing our private events without judging them or judging ourselves, accepting them as they are, abandoning struggle and control, maintaining a calm and attentive attitude.

Baer et al. (2006) indicate the following key elements of mindfulness:

✔ Acting with awareness. Unlike our natural tendency of a rambling mind, that is, jumping from one thought to another unconsciously, mindfulness involves paying attention moment to moment, but in a relaxed way, without stressful vigilance.

✔ Observing the present moment. The idea is to "observe" our own thoughts and emotions as they emerge, without seeking to control them. The goal is not to modify, repress, or replace a thought we do not like. It seeks to disentangle ourselves from them, considering them as simple experiences.

✔ Describing: The thoughts and sensations of which we are aware are described as they are experienced, both verbally and non-verbally.

✔ Non-judging of inner experience. The experience is accepted radically, without valuing or labeling it. The positive or negative, the perfect or the imperfect, in their varying degrees, are accepted as natural experiences.

Non-reactivity to inner experience. We generally tend to react immediately and hastily to stimuli, which often produces a sense of regret for the response. Mindfulness allows the individual to create a space between the stimuli (internal and external) and the given responses (internal and external), providing additional time to think about what is the most appropriate response.

Several papers have shown that remaining focused on the "here and now" is an important path to personal growth (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chang et al., 2015; Iani et al., 2017). In fact, the pursuit of self-liberation with the goal of attaining personal growth is one of the main reasons for people to practice meditation with mindfulness (Pepping et al., 2016; Shapiro, 1994). Indeed, during the formal practice of mindfulness, the individual goes from the "doing mode" to the "being mode" (Segal et al., 2002). In the "doing mode," our efforts are focused on achieving a certain goal, for which we seek to bridge the gap between our present reality and how we would like things to be. Therefore, if our efforts are geared towards achieving results, in all likelihood, our concerns will focus primarily on resolving issues such as "Am I capable of doing it?" or "What will happen if I cannot do it?", generating states of anxiety due to the fear of failing. On the other hand, in the "being mode," the present reality is accepted as it is, developing a state of mindfulness about each of the experiences undergone at each moment. In this way, any possible conflict between the desired and the real states disappears. On the contrary, our attention is on the process, on the "how can I do it?" that is, the focus is fully on the definition of the steps necessary to achieve the goal.

Likewise, people who feel self-realized show some characteristics also considered as key elements in mindfulness (Ellis, 2004): they enjoy actions as ends or pleasures in themselves, they are fully aware of their feelings without trying to suppress them, they show high self-acceptance, tolerate difficulties, and are flexible and open to change.

### 4.4. Compassion

Compassion has gained great attention over the past decade as a complement to mindfulness. In fact, in the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness and compassion are considered the two wings of the bird of wisdom, both being essential to be able to fly. Hence, they are usually practiced together, taking advantage of their respective contributions (García Campayo & Demarzo, 2015) (Table 2).

From a psychological perspective, compassion refers to the sensitivity to one's own and others' suffering, coupled with the desire to help prevent such suffering (Gilbert, 2015). Thus, compassion-focused therapies draw on the thesis that pain is inseparable from the human being (e.g., the death of a loved one, a disease, a romantic breakup) and, as such, is inevitable. But usually, this primary pain is often accompanied by secondary suffering (Young, 2005), which emerges when we resist accepting pain, when we blame ourselves or others for the situation, and when we anticipate the future (e.g., thinking that no one will ever love us again, that we've lost everything, that we shouldn't have done this or said that). Secondary suffering would be primarily responsible for our distress, as it keeps the pain alive in our minds, but it is avoidable (García Campayo & Demarzo, 2015), so it is the center of attention in compassion-focused therapies.

One of the most conceptually and empirically accepted models of compassion is the one developed by Neff (2003). According to this model, three qualities define compassionate people:

✔ Self-kindness, understood as a propensity to treat oneself well, with affection and understanding, rather than self-criticizing or recurrently self-blaming for mistakes.

✔ Common humanity, assuming that pain and malaise are part of life and, as such, inherent to human beings, to the extent that we are all imperfect and vulnerable. The opposite would lead us to isolate ourselves, thinking that our situation and our suffering are unique.

✔ Mindfulness, an attribute that alludes to the ability to detect suffering in oneself and in others, without intending to judge, deny, or flee from it. According to Neff, mindfulness would help the person to not

| | **MINDFULNESS** | **COMPASSION** |
|---|---|---|
| **Question that is answered** | What is the experience here and now? | What does the person need now to be well and reduce suffering? |
| **Goal** | To become aware of the real experience and accept its nature | To comfort the person in the face of suffering, understanding that primary pain is inherent to the human being |
| **Risk of each therapy if not balanced with the other one** | Accepting people's distress, forgetting their needs (affect), focusing exclusively on the experience. Eventual lack of motivation and an ethical and compassionate attitude towards oneself and the world | Not accepting the experience of suffering, which is inevitable. Not focusing on the here and now, on the real nature of things, and wanting to seek solutions for the future |

TABLE 2
SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF MINDFULNESS AND
COMPASSION THERAPIES
(GARCÍA CAMPAYO & DEMARZO, 2015)

over-identify with suffering, getting trapped by it.

Compassion is not only revealed as an effective psychological resource to prevent and reduce negative affect, depression, stress, and anxiety (Muris et al., 2016; Pauley and McPherson, 2010; Trompetter et al., 2017). It is also a significant predictor of positive psychological functioning (Neff et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2016). In this sense, one of the main benefits of compassion is that it promotes an eagerness to achieve personal growth in the individual (Aranha et al., 2019; Neff et al., 2007). Far from leading to complacency and self-indulgence, compassion promotes a more realistic self-assessment (Leary et al., 2007), leading to greater acceptance and willingness to assume one's mistakes and to focus on self-improvement and the search for the best version on oneself (Breines & Chen, 2012; Zhang & Chen, 2016).

## 4.5. Optimal positive functioning in the organizational field: psychological capital

Scientific interest in optimal positive functioning has transcended the clinical field, also becoming very relevant in other areas such as the organizational area. In this sense, over the past two decades, there has been a growing focus on the study and application of human resources, capacities, and potentials that contribute to achieving a more adaptive functioning and increasing the well-being of the worker within the organization (Luthans, 2002). Ultimately, the goal is to identify the psychological variables that may constitute effective job resources to facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives, reduce job demands and pressures that may entail a significant cost to the workers' physical and psychological health, and stimulate workers' personal growth (Demerouti et al., 2001).

To this end, Luthans et al. (2007) proposed the construct of psychological capital as a paradigmatic exponent of positive organizational behavior. The term psychological capital refers to a state of positive psychological development characterized by:
✔ Relying on one's ability to strive and succeed in tasks that involve a challenge (self-efficacy).
✔ Persevering in objectives and, when necessary, reorienting them to achieve success (hope).
✔ Making positive attributions to present and future performance (optimism).
✔ Resisting and recovering from adversity to achieve success (resilience).

Psychological capital is an eminently plastic psychological resource and, as such, can be enhanced and developed (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). In fact, it is adaptive, not only from a productive point of view, favoring workers' commitment to the organization, their performance and job satisfaction (Datu et al., 2018; Djorouva et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2014), but also their mental health. Thus, on the one hand, numerous works have found a significant negative relationship between psychological capital and depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, or substance abuse (Krasikova et al., 2015; Rahimnia et al., 2013; Rehman et al., 2017). On the other hand, psychological capital stands as a predictor of psychological well-being (Baron et al., 2016; Hernández-Varas & García-Silgo, 2021), contributing significantly to individuals' personal growth (Culbertson et al., 2010; Manzano-García & Ayala, 2017).

The four components of psychological capital (self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience) not only exert a synergistic action in their relationship with personal growth but also, individually, they seem to contribute to its attainment, as explained in the next sections.

### 4.5.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy plays a central role within the socio-cognitive theory proposed by Bandura (1997). This construct refers to the belief in one's competence to perform a task, achieve a goal or successfully overcome a certain obstacle, and it is one of the most important determinants of motivation and human behavior. The more confidence individuals have in their competence in the face of a particular situation, the greater the chances that they will try to cope with it and strive and persist to overcome any difficulties that arise. Given its influence on cognitive, affective, and motivational processes (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020), a large body of studies have highlighted the role of self-efficacy as a promoter and protector of people's health and well-being (Chenoweth et al., 2017; Schönfeld et al., 2016). In this sense, self-efficacy would favor individuals' initiative to enhance their personal growth (Luszczynska et al., 2005; Ogunyemi & Mabekoje, 2007).

### 4.5.2. Hope

According to Snyder (2000), hope is a positive motivational state defined by the combination of a high level of energy oriented towards a specific goal (agency) and the ability to plan the pathways that lead to achieving it (willpower). In other words, hope requires individuals to trust that the intended goals are affordable, as well as their own ability to plan the right strategies to achieve them. In this way, people who tend to perceive their day-to-day with hope often harbor widespread expectations of success (Luthans & Jensen, 2002) and are more prone to seek their personal growth (Meyers et al., 2015; Tong et al., 2010).

### 4.5.3. Optimism

Optimism has been conceptualized from two complementary approaches. One, more limited to a specific situation, and the other, focused on a broader perception of life events. In line with the first perspective, Seligman (1998) defines optimism as a style or tendency to explain positive events that happen to us alluding to internal, stable, and generalized factors (e.g., intelligence, ability) and negative events in terms of external, unstable, and specific factors (e.g., bad luck, a bad day). This style would oppose pessimism, characterized by judging positive events by attributing them to external, unstable, and specific causes (e.g., luck, someone else's help) and negative events to internal factors, (e.g., clumsiness, lack of capacity). From a more global perspective, optimism has also been defined as the widespread expectation that the future will lead to successful results (Carver & Scheier, 2001), as opposed to the pessimistic view, whose expectation for future events tends toward negativity.

While the component of optimism that is part of the psychological

capital takes into account the two approaches described above (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017), it seems that the people who possess this characteristic are certainly flexible and realistic in their valuations (Snyder, 2000), in the sense that they can judge objectively whether a particular situation, either a success or a failure, is attributable to internal or external factors.

The characteristics inherent in optimism—positive future expectations, flexibility, and adaptability—make this psychological resource a significant predictor of mental health, acting as a protector factor against stress (Puig et al., 2021) and depression (Alarcon et al., 2013), and favoring the experience of high personal growth in different populations (Augusto-Landa et al., 2011; Segovia et al., 2015).

*4.5.4. Resilience*

Comparing it with certain materials capable of withstanding collisions without consequences, the term resilience has currently been adopted in Psychology to refer to those individuals who, in the face of very negative situations such as war, a natural catastrophe, a serious illness, and even experiences such as job loss or a romantic breakup, not only resist its impact, but achieve a positive adaptation. The capacity of resilience, as explained by Lemay (2000), therefore entails much more than resisting the blow. It is about metamorphosing it, while bringing out the best in oneself, even if one is not initially aware of one's personal resources, and learning to live with suffering constructively, developing new adaptive capacities. It involves the ability to thrive, mature, and improve one's competences in adverse conditions (Gordon, 1996).

It is precisely this capacity for transformation, growth, and improvement that links resilience to personal growth, so that the individual becomes stronger and more successful in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001), evaluating it as an opportunity to develop individual potentialities (Malaguti, 2005). From this consideration, resilience stands as a powerful psychological resource to promote people's optimal positive functioning (Di Fabio & Pelazzeschi, 2015; Seaton & Beaumont, 2015).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The health and well-being of human beings are among the priorities of the Goals of Sustainable Development. In line with this ambitious goal, the approach to this paper adheres to the promising line of research that claims the protective role of personal growth, conceptualized as the eagerness to achieve the best of oneself in mental health. In the light of the approaches to Positive Psychology—succinctly presented throughout this work—the development of human potentials and capacities seems to play a significant role, both in the prevention of and recovery from conditions and pathologies that are currently highly prevalent (i.e., depression, anxiety, or abuse of substances with addictive potential), and in the promotion of individual well-being. In this sense, resources such as self-determination, flow, mindfulness, compassion, and psychological capital have widely demonstrated their efficacy in contributing to the achievement of optimal positive functioning in different populations and age groups.

The promotion of human beings' personal growth as the ultimate exponent of eudaimonic well-being thus becomes a socially and politically desirable objective, with a special priority in the most vulnerable groups and contexts. From this consideration, the design and application of interventions based on Positive Psychology, either from a preventive-educational perspective or from a clinical-rehabilitative approach, become a highly adaptive tool to ensure a healthy life and to promote universal well-being.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is not conflict of interest.

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