

Flourish in Life and Relationship Coaching

Integrating Faith and the Science of Human Flourishing

By Dr. Catherine Hart Weber

We are hardwired to flourish, along with all of God's creation. That is why, since the beginning of my training as a therapist and then as a life coach and spiritual director, I have integrated the best practices in neuroscience, psychology and spiritual formation to enhance God's desire for our well-being and human flourishing. I aim for intentional living in my own life as well, and am continually reminded of how much this matters, in working with clients and in everyday life.

God's balance of flourishing in beauty through transforming love, goodness and redemption in Christ are His divine antidote to the languishing, vandalizing and brokenness in and around us. This is the hope we recognize in ourselves, those close to us and, of course, those who come to us for counseling and coaching.

The Pursuit of Beauty and Wellbeing

A dear friend of mine who admires pottery came across a large bowl that particularly caught her eye at an art show. It was in an amazing shape of waves, and the beauty captured her heart. But, it was expensive. So she focused on the joy of another potter's three small pots formed together, symbolic of a three-fold cord unbroken.

The next day, however, she just couldn't get the beauty of the wave bowl off her mind. She had to go back and admire it once more. Maybe the artist would be willing to give her a discount? She had saved some Christmas money—for such a time as this.

The potter was flattered at her admiration of his work. They had a great conversation. As she turned to approach him about the beautiful wave bowl, her bag knocked a large vase behind her, which fell to the ground, shattering in small pieces.

She was in shock. How could this happen? She came to pursue and acquire beauty to boost her well-being, and now she was faced with brokenness—that was very expensive! Right then and there, something in her also shattered. She broke down crying, sobbing. It wasn't just about feeling bad for the loss of the art, or the huge cost. It was much more, much deeper.

You see, most of her life is about dealing with or paying for brokenness. She has lived with cancer for over twenty years, consistently for the last twelve years. The fifth round of chemo and treatment she is on costs thousands of dollars. Her life revolves around the damaging consequences of her broken body and other shattered things of life and the people around her.

But it just couldn't end this way. She couldn't just pay for more brokenness and walk away with no beauty. God has always provided a balance of beauty, goodness and wholeness in her life. She exemplifies flourishing fruitfulness. Each fresh new day she embraces answered prayers, deep relationship connections, and daily "love and kisses from God."

God showed up that day in power and beauty, as the potter offered to let her pay wholesale for the broken vase and the wave bowl. She offered to pray for him and his wife and left with a bag of shattered vase pieces as well as a beautiful wave bowl. As God had done so many times before, *he left her with the balance of beauty and wholeness, against the brokenness.*

Flourishing in Well-Being Matters

That's how life can be for us, for those coming to us for counseling or life coaching: keeping the balance of beauty and wellbeing with brokenness and languishing; embracing the balance of both our strengths and weaknesses, happiness and struggles. We teeter on the edge of freedom and fear, of flourishing and languishing. We don't want to deal only with broken pieces keeping us deprived, holding us back.

That's why Jesus came. His love and beauty set us free.

He brings light into our darkness. He makes beauty from ashes. He promises his love, joy and peace—abundant life. Only the Spirit of God can release us, open our eyes and hearts to see all that Christ is, what he provides for us through the cross. What he promises to do in us is goodness, beauty, wholeness—*shalom*.

Beauty matters. The beauty of Christ's transforming life in us matters. A flourishing, thriving, abundant life as a whole person . . . matters. Living out the vision of God's shalom, his love and beauty . . . matters.

We can't escape the pain, darkness, brokenness and vandalizing on this side of his kingdom. But we can open our lives to the Holy Spirit, holding on to our visions of God paying the price, transforming and empowering us now and finally making the whole of creation anew—with love, joy, peace, hope, wholeness and beauty.

Why I Developed Flourish in Life Coaching

In the early stages of the field of psychology, and also of Christian counseling, the emphasis was on curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing gifts and talent. Over the years, however, the focus became more influenced by a medical model of psychological problems and how to remedy them. As a result, great strides were made in understanding and treating many psychological disorders.

However, it is only recently, with the burgeoning growth of strength-based

therapy and Positive Psychology (Science of Well-being and Human Flourishing) and neuroscience, that effort has gone toward research and interventions on resilience, prevention, increasing well-being, fulfillment and the strengths that make life worth living.

These new developments are dramatically changing the way therapists, coaches, mental health practitioners and leaders deal with the average person's life experience and aspirations. Research and interventions are focusing on a reemphasis of the importance of philosophy, theology, religion and the benefits of religious faith and spirituality in building resilience and cultivating positive spiritual character traits and emotions. Flourishing in wellbeing now matters. Character matters.

Rigorous research is now being conducted at top universities on the benefits of faith practice, character traits and emotions of the spiritual life, such as love, compassion, kindness, joy, happiness, gratitude, forgiveness, appreciation, prayer and the benefits of relationships. I believe we, as Christian counselors and coaches, would do well to revive, relearn and discover these breakthrough benefits to our own well-being and ability to flourish and be resilient, so we can pass this on to those we counsel and coach.

Christian Human Flourishing

Innately we know that God didn't create us to wither, just exist or get by. In my life and those I journey with in counseling, coaching, groups and retreats, I have recognized a longing for more than getting over our "issues," living in the hum-drum of the mundane and being overtaken by stresses and worries. We are hardwired with a desire to live more intentionally, to open up to the Spirit of God for more love, forgiveness, compassion, joy, gratitude, peace and hope—the spiritual virtues that bring lasting fulfillment and impact.

This longing to flourish is universal. God designed us for wellbeing—shalom—in all areas of our life systems: our body, brain, mind, emotions, spirit and relationships; in our marriages, as parents, at school, in our work and community, in our churches, with our money, and in all our daily experiences. We long to grow through hard times, live fully alive as our best and most authentic self, cultivating positive spiritual emotions like joy, gratitude and hope.

The big question is: "How do I do that?" In my quest for a response and solutions personally and professionally, I have integrated and developed biblically based interventions and practical guides for tending the soul.

Biblical Basis for Flourish Coaching

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green [fresh and flourishing]. (Ps 92:12-14)

In the beginning, God created all things reflecting his beautiful harmony and wholeness—shalom. Then due to the fall, this earth and its people were and continue to be vandalized and broken. We languish. It's the story of our lives on earth. However, the rest of the story is about God's deep love for us, desiring and providing for our continual transformation and renewal to *flourish*, living fully alive in wholeness. To flourish is to be aware of his amazing grace and presence in the ordinary.

The “flourish” theme resonates with our souls, reaching a deep longing for practical transformation and hope. “This is what I want!” is often what I hear. Flourish Counseling and Coaching is about this redemptive journey back to shalom, “staying fresh and green” even in difficult times.

What Does It Mean to “Flourish”?

You flourish when you have a sense of wellbeing and can function positively in your personal and social life. You flourish when you experience high levels of emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. This includes a life of vigor, vitality, goodness, generativity and continuous growth. You are able to have close relationships and a meaningful and purposeful life. It is a life that has fulfillment, using your strengths to be creative, contributing in meaningful and productive ways. From a Christian perspective, the “fullness of life” and “the good life” is having God's life in us. Living fully alive in the “now.” The journey includes becoming resilient through adversity, during struggles, sadness, sickness and loneliness. It means growing in our gifts and strengths, using them for the good of others, which nourishes and blesses others.

The Spirit of God is our partner on the journey, helping us develop both a spiritual and a psychological immune system, so to speak, to help us effectively deal with life challenges, conflict, stress, anxiety and depression.

The pathways that we journey on and with our clients lead us toward thriving. Integrated wellbeing is the antidote; intentional lifestyle is the medicine; and charismatic, contemplative spirituality is the cure.

Integrated well-being is the antidote. You are created as a whole person, with all life systems designed to work together. Your spirit, mind, brain, emotions, body and relationships—all interact in a highly complex and harmonious way. Most of life involves these life systems:

- Love and relationship system
- Joy and gratitude system
- Peace and tranquility system
- Hope and resilience system

You cannot be spiritually healthy if you are not emotionally healthy. Your thoughts and emotions impact your physical health. When you live within this divine order of faith and science working together, you flourish.

Intentional lifestyle is the medicine. Daily habits and intentional life rhythms in all life systems determine the choices you make for growth, happiness, health and wellbeing. Seventy-five percent of stresses and modern diseases are preventable through lifestyle changes and choices. Intentional wellness living in all areas of life changes thoughts, daily habits— it changes your life.

Contemplative spirituality is the cure. In the midst of the busyness of life, with so many distractions and stressors, it is essential to stay centered and balanced, making time to slow down, be quiet and connect with God. Regular spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, study of the Word, community, serving— ways that draw us close to God and others—help us be attuned to God’s Holy Spirit and presence in our daily life. Intentional sacred rhythms calm your mind, change your heart rate and brain states, providing joy and tranquility.

Faith-Based Flourish Coaching

Flourish in Life Coaching integrates cutting edge new research and interventions in neurobiology, faith-based positive psychology and contemplative Christian spirituality that can be integrated into any model of coaching or counseling. Flourish Growth Groups are also helpful for sharing life stories and the journey of discovery together.

The principles and themes outlined below can be woven into the ongoing coaching relationship, or approached as six-, seven- or twelve-week sessions.

Discover how to flourish: Transforming systems by asking powerful questions and creating honest inventories. The first session or initial phase of coaching includes basic assessment—powerful questions and questionnaires that can be used as you begin with your client on the coaching journey. This covers the foundations of understanding how we are designed to live in shalom—well-being in all life systems: body, mind, emotions, spirit and relationships.

Wellness inventories provide an opportunity to understand a whole person model, assess overall health and wellness, as well as discern areas of flourishing and languishing. The wellness wheel, and other whole-person inventories can be used to help the client identify areas of strength and weakness, setting goals for where to change and grow.

Flourish in relationship with God: God attachment system, known by faith, prayer and spiritual practices. The most important human need in order to flourish is to be loved—not only by others, but especially by God. Our brain and heart are hardwired for love. God’s love changes everything. Our relationship with God and others is what life is all about. We grow and flourish in wellbeing through relationship attachments with God and one another.

In this session or phase of coaching, help the client become aware of their relationship with God, their God image, and how they can explore, receive and absorb God's love before they can truly love themselves and love others. Be sensitive to meet them where they are, and go at their pace, exploring what is most meaningful to them at this time.

Explore spiritual practices, intentional sacred life rhythms with your client such as: prayer, reading Scripture, sacred readings, biblical meditation, spending time in quiet appreciating the beauty of nature and reaching out to others. Loving God and loving others lights up our brains, sustains our health and well-being, and leads to longevity.

Flourish in relationships: Safe-haven relationships and the human attachment system, known by healthy relationship connections and small groups. Healthy attachments are based on who you are, and who you are becoming. God uses our relationships to help us grow and mature our character. Relationships are God's crucible for transformational change—for revealing himself to us as the ultimate safe-haven relationship. Learn and understand how to integrate attachment theory for effective relationship interventions and growth.

Explore the client's relationship attachment "wellness wheel," and other relationship assessments such as love languages, attachment styles and relationship skills for communicating, solving conflict and forgiveness. In what ways are they flourishing in relationships, and how can they be more intentional to grow in the health and balance of their relationships? Who do they do life with? What disconnections, unresolved conflict or un-forgiveness is impacting their life? Encourage resolution, connection with others individually face-to-face and in small groups.

Flourish in positive emotions of joy and gratitude: Pleasure and joy system, known by appreciation, thankfulness and positive emotions. Your joy system is more than feelings. It is a state of being that encompasses your brain, mind, heart and even the cells in your body. All these systems of your life are involved in the pursuit of pure pleasure and enjoyment of positive emotion, and are channeled through the brain's pleasure center. Damaging the pleasure center with overstimulation, abuse or neglect can interfere with the ability to experience joy and other positive emotions. In this phase, assess the emotional health of the client and what drives their life. What factors could be interfering with the health of their pleasure center? In what ways could they create a healthier pleasure/joy system?

Nurturing a grateful heart is one of the primary pathways to a healthier body, a happier mind and relationships. The practice of gratitude can actually change the state of your brain, right down to your neurons. Anger and gratitude can't exist together. Gratitude leads to infusing daily life with happier moods, more optimism, better sleep, lower levels of chronic stress, fewer physical symptoms of illness and pain, and the ability to avoid emotions that cultivate bitterness, envy,

stress and depression when faced with life challenges.

Gratitude and positive emotional vitality expand your mental ability, creativity and problem-solving skills. Gratitude and joy build physical health and good relationships that support you through life challenges. The benefits from counting your blessings are tangible both emotionally and physically. Joy and gratitude bring alive what is good in life and may be even more valuable in hard times. Mounds of research verify that through practical daily exercises, gratitude and joy can be cultivated as a contagious gateway to other positive emotions, creating an upward spiral effect, even facilitating forgiveness.

Explore some of these natural joy and gratitude boosters with your clients, such as counting your blessings, keeping a gratitude journal, writing thank-you notes and appreciation letters, and singing to praise and worship music.

Flourish in peace and tranquility: Stress and tranquility system, known by practicing relaxation and Christian meditation. “A plain and simple life is a full life,” according to Proverbs 13:7 (*The Message*). You are created with the capacity to benefit from a peace and tranquility system. Your para-sympathetic system stabilizes you with peace and tranquility after the sym-pathetic system responds to stress. This is your essential nature that needs to be guarded and cultivated. It is up to you, with the help of the Spirit of God, to maintain this harmonious state, managing your stress response system, worries and other factors that interrupt this serenity.

Explore with your client the causes of stress, worry and anxiety. Explore methods for mental hygiene, healthy habits of the mind, how to cultivate a healthy stress-response system, how to relax the body and calm the mind, and practical antidotes to stress and worry such as mindfulness, meditation and living fully present to the now.

Flourish in hope and resilience during adversity: Hope and resilience system, known by surrender, building buffers, and life purpose and passion. Without hope and a vision for the future, you languish. Although you are created with an amazing capacity for resilience, to cope and bounce back, hope isn't innate. But the Bible reveals and now science proves you can learn to cultivate hope to equip you through struggles. You can even grow, develop character and become a better person through challenging times. Ultimate hope for all things in life is in God. He gives the desires of the heart, direction for each day and into tomorrow. He is your strength through struggles and the keeper of hope and the future.

Help clients learn ways to build their psychological and spiritual immune system, cultivating character and hope in the midst of life challenges. Walk alongside them as they learn to surrender their lives and goals, trusting God to reveal his plan for redemption, restoration and being fully alive in him.

Develop your flourish-in-life plan: Arrange your life to flourish, known by life planning and intentional living. The final phase of Flourish in Life Coaching helps the client learn how to create an intentional life plan, discovering God's life purpose and calling for the season of life they are in. Summarizing what the client has discovered regarding how they can grow and change in each life system, encourage them to develop therapeutic life-style changes in all areas of life.

Exercises to Foster Flourishing

- Healthy nutrition and plant-based diet
- Time outdoors in nature
- Cultivation of healthy relationships
- Restorative recreation
- Relaxation, rest, recuperation
- Weekly Sabbath
- Vacations
- Sleep hygiene: Getting enough sleep at night, including REM sleep
- Stress-management techniques for lowering the stress-response system

Healthy Habits of the Mind and Heart

- Practice and participate in spiritual activities and faith beliefs.
- Make family and close friends a priority (staying close to your "tribe").
- Have close relationships to "do life with."
- Serve others by volunteering, contributing in practical ways.
- Be involved in the community.
- Participate in small groups.
- Belong to a healthy social network.

- Limit television, technology and digital use.
- Have purpose in life.
- Set goals with practical ways to reach them.
- Develop a one- to three-year life plan.

How Does God “Show Up”? Emphasizing an integrative, whole-person perspective and being open to the fullness of the Spirit of God fosters reflection and provision for wellness in all life systems, spiritual growth and stronger relationships. Those coming for counseling and coaching often feel vandalized, wilting, broken in some way, longing for renewal, transformation, to be their best most authentic self, living fully alive in God, experiencing the balance of beauty and goodness. This approach is effective with those who have reflective insight ability, who want to grow, change, get breakthrough from living a stagnant unfulfilled life, dealing with mild stress, anxiety, depression or going through a change or life challenge. Those who experience the Lord work in their life through these principles report that it brought attention to areas in life that, due to neglect, contributed to languishing. Through reflection, assessments and prayer, they discover simple yet profound ways to focus more intentionally and practically during the day on connecting with the source of life, Jesus Christ.

Others note that they are finally able to put into words what they have been trying to articulate and have desired for a long time. They realize a deeper understanding to the words “life abundantly,” being reminded that God did say that if we would seek him, we will find him. And through intentional living, pursuing pathways to thrive, they do.

The focus on living well as a whole person—physical, spiritual and emotional—is important, even as a mature Christian. When life gets out of balance, the coaching relationship can help guide focus on inviting the Spirit of God to reveal how to get back to the basics for wholeness and wellbeing. Integrating these principles also helps remind us that in order to give out we must become a vessel that is first filled with the Spirit, to bear the fruit of the Spirit.

As we walk alongside clients to partner with God, developing a plan to live fully alive, maintain joy and balance during “dry” seasons, we can cultivate spiritual renewal staying balanced as a whole person, growing in the beauty of transformation in Christ.

Based on *Flourish* by Dr. Catherine Hart Weber

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