# Developing Skills for Social and Emotional Wellbeing

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## Abstract

Positive social and emotional wellbeing are essential for peoples' general health and quality of life. This workshop will bring together an inter-disciplinary community of wellbeing researchers, designers and practitioners to explore how digital technology can increase wellbeing by enabling users to develop new skills, build on existing personal strengths or social support, and promote self-efficacy more generally. We will jointly reach a better understanding of the opportunities that technology can bring for skills development across a broad range of contexts. Our aim is to consider how digital technology can support wellbeing skills for the general public and also for specific, at-need groups including the care givers of people coping with irreversible loss of mental or physical capacity and psycho-education for people experiencing mental health difficulties.

## Author Keywords

Wellbeing; Education, Communication; Positive Psychology; Social Care; Skills Development.

## Introduction

In recent years, researchers in the field of Psychology and Healthcare increasingly argue that effective support of mental health requires both the treatment of any mental illness and the presence of emotional

wellbeing [6]. This more holistic view is also captured by the World Health Organization [15, p.12], which describes emotional wellbeing as a state "*which allows individuals to realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their community*".
A person's emotional wellbeing is thus not understood as fully dependent on external factors, but also on a set of well-developed social and emotional skills such as strategies for coping with adverse events, emotional awareness, or self-regulation; as well as the person's fundamental sense of self-efficacy, including trust in their ability to grow as an individual, a sense of autonomy, and a feeling of social connectedness [14]. Facilitating the development of these skills is crucial to promoting emotional wellbeing and is a key shared component across prevention-oriented programs in education [4] as well as in mental health therapies [2].

HCI researchers are increasingly exploring opportunities for facilitating emotional wellbeing through digital technology [1]. Part of this work is focused on approaches to promote social connectedness and intimacy [5], or to increase self-awareness and reflection [10]; but also on supporting people with a diagnosis of mental illness, highlighting the potential of technology to augment the delivery of traditional psychotherapy approaches. This includes systems targeted at extending the reach of therapeutic services and promoting clients' engagement [3,7,12].

However, only a few of these systems explicitly discuss, or design for, the development of social and emotional skills needed for achieving emotional wellbeing (for exceptions see [7, 8, 9, 11]). As such we believe that the potential of digital technology to directly scaffold or promote such learning is currently under-researched.

Moreover, most existing applications are informed in their understanding of wellbeing by the medical tradition, which traditionally views wellbeing as the absence of illness. The focus is then on reducing symptoms rather than promoting the person's strengths and ensuring continued growth and self-development. To date, much work has responded to challenges related to enabling access to therapy resources and facilitating treatment. Less consideration has been given to approaches for preventing mental illness and facilitating the social and emotional skills development of the general population [4]; to supporting those who may not be diagnosed with mental illness but still lack emotional wellbeing [14]; or to improving the wellbeing of care givers of people who are less likely to recover from their mental health condition (e.g., people with Parkinson's or dementia).

**Aims of the Workshop**
HCI research on the development of technology to support skills development for social and emotional wellbeing is in its early stages. This workshop therefore aims to bring together a diverse community of researchers and practitioners to explore the opportunities that digital technology offers for the development of the social and emotional skills crucial to form and maintain emotional wellbeing. Overall, the workshop will provide a forum to share expertise across domains; gain a richer understanding of the challenges as well as the design methods to promote the learning of such skills; and set an agenda for future work.

**Topics of Interest**
We invite work from a broad range of contexts in which digital technology could facilitate the development and learning of skills for social and emotional wellbeing, exemplified by three promising directions described

below. Across these and other research areas, we will especially welcome submissions that consider how technology can *'teach and disappear'*, i.e., aim to scaffold users' skills development, but can be removed once the learning is achieved.

*Social and Emotional Learning in Education*
Educational Psychology has a long history of creating social and emotional skills learning (SEL) curricula as preventive programs for both general and at-risk student populations. These have been deployed to millions of pupils [4] and the learning strategies inherent in these curricula help young learners develop skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, coping, or problem solving; all of which help facilitate growth and resilience. Indeed, an increasing body of evidence suggests that such skills can lower the chance of mental health problems at later age and increase emotional wellbeing [14]. However, very little work in HCI has explored this area of research so far. This opens questions around the opportunities that are provided by technology to further augment the learning of students, and to enhance impact, scope and effectiveness of SEL curricula. How can technology effectively reinforce the preventive effects of such programs? And finally, how can SEL curricula inform HCI research, such as guiding the incorporation of the successful strategies to learn social and emotional skills into the design of technology systems in other settings?

*Skills & Techniques for Socially Constructing Wellbeing*
For a variety of health conditions such as chronic pain, Parkinson's or Dementia, full recovery is unlikely. In such cases we require strategies for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing that are respectful of the ongoing and possibly degenerative nature of the difficulties, as well as the loss in physical or mental

abilities that sufferers experience. In such cases, their care-givers (family members, professionals) tend to play a fundamental role in socially co-constructing a person's sense of self and contributing to their social and emotional wellbeing. How can technology assist carers in providing the cared for individuals opportunities to build on their remaining strengths and enable them to maintain a sense of continued growth and development, despite potential limitations in their abilities? How can technology sensitively assist carers to initiate and enrich social interactions that feel meaningful to the person, and enable them to feel socially connected, or experience calm [cf. 13]? In addition, what opportunities are provided by technology to promote the wellbeing and improve resilience skills of the carers, who often experience social and emotional stress as part of their care provision [16]?

*Supporting Skills Learning in Therapeutic Approaches*
In recent years the HCI community has become increasingly engaged with the challenge of designing technology to support mental health interventions. Key challenges in this research have included the need to improve access to professional support and to increase engagement with treatment [2]. In the context of this workshop we are particularly interested in understanding how technology can change the dynamics of therapeutic interventions, support improved psycho-education and self efficacy—critical elements of many interventions—and also allow us to draw more effectively on informal caregivers. Looking beyond the Cognitive Behavioural approaches applied in many computer-supported interventions [e.g. 3], we particularly aim to explore recent work drawing on positive psychology. How can we, for example, design social networking sites or other technologies that would

help clients identify their strengths; sensitively promote social support from their informal caregivers or peers; provide opportunities for growth; or facilitate the development of a lasting, positive self-esteem?

## Intended Audience

This one-day workshop will invite 15-20 participants. It aims to support interdisciplinary discussion around the development of social and emotional skills as a means to enhance and protect peoples' wellbeing (individually or supported by others). It will include discussion and exchange of knowledge around the challenges of developing sensitive design methods and technology in this space, with a view to promote and shape an agenda for future research. Submissions will be solicited from researchers, designers, and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines, including but not limited to education, social sciences, healthcare, HCI and interaction design.

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