Exploring Biophilic Cities as Flourishing Cities

An Interview with Corey Keyes and Tim Beatley

Edited by Carla Jones

The Biophilic Cities Project had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Corey Keyes, Winship Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at Emory University. Dr. Keyes coined the term "flourishing" to describe the presence of positive mental health characteristics rather than solely the absence of mental illness. Keyes has been conducting research on flourishing since the late 1990s and has found that flourishing individuals have the lowest risk of cardiovascular disease, lowest number of chronic physical diseases, and lower health care utilization, among other health benefits (Keyes, 2007). We interviewed Dr. Keyes to explore the relationship between flourishing, nature, and urban life.

Tim Beatley:
Here at the Biophilic Cities Project, we are trying to better understand the benefits of nature-ful cities. The concept of "flourishing" seems like an important one for us to better understand. What is flourishing?

How did the idea evolve? What makes flourishing different as a way of framing mental health?

Corey Keyes:
I would define flourishing as a state in which you feel good about a life in which you are functioning well. It's not just feeling good about your life: it's about feeling good about a life where you feel you're functioning well with purpose, contribution, belonging, and acceptance. You need curiosity, concern, and connection to achieve these things.

In 1998 and 1999, I was finishing up some work on well-being, specifically looking at a concept called social well-being, which is near and dear to my heart. As I came to see these different components of subjective well-being, it occurred to me that we had a long list of signs and symptoms of positive mental health.

Additionally, there is this long-standing interest in psychology and sociology in terms of social indicators. Scholars were interested in emotional well-being: happiness, enjoyment, and pleasure. There's always been an interest in that form of happiness and well-being. In fact, in my opinion, perhaps way too much.

During my Ph.D., I worked with Carol Ritz and introduced this notion of social well-being that mirrored psychological well-being. Only the shift was looking at getting away from emotions and emotional well-being and starting to focus on how people are functioning in the world. Psychological well-being to me represented the pronouns I and me while what was missing was the pronouns we and us.

Once we mapped these relationships out it occurred to me – I had created a diagnosis for positive mental health that sort of mirrored the psychiatric diagnosis. Only I was interested in moving beyond the psychiatric treatment model as the modus operandi for dealing with population mental health. I brought these ideas together by writing measurement rules and introduced the concept in 1999.

I chose the term flourishing because the word mental health is a rather confusing term to many people. It's also used sometimes interchangeably in two ways: mental illness or absence of mental illness. I wanted to be very clear to the world that I was talking not about the absence of mental illness, but the presence of good mental health. Since 1999, we've done a lot of research at the genetic level and at the societal level. We now know that we can prevent mental illness by promoting the concept of flourishing in the population and there are more and more studies being released supporting this.

Per the World Health Organization, depression is already the second-leading cause of burden to societies. By 2030, if we don't change what we're doing, it will be the leading problem. My efforts have been focused on bringing this concept of

Dr. Corey Keyes is the Winship Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at Emory University who researches positive mental health, known as flourishing

Factors and 13 Dimensions Reflecting Mental Health as Flourishing

Dimension	Definition
Positive emotions (i.e., emotional well-being)	
Positive affect	Regularly cheerful, interested in life, in good spirits, happy, calm and peaceful, full of life.
Avowed quality of life	Mostly or highly satisfied with life overall or in domains of life.
Positive psychological functioning (i.e., psychological well-being)	
Self-acceptance	Holds positive attitudes toward self, acknowledges, likes most parts of self, personality.
Personal growth	Seeks challenge, has insight into own potential, feels a sense of continued development.
Purpose in life	Finds own life has a direction and meaning.
Environmental mastery	Exercises ability to select, manage, and mold personal environs to suit needs.
Autonomy	Is guided by own, socially accepted, internal standards and values.
Positive relations with others	Has, or can form, warm, trusting personal relationships
Positive social functioning (i.e., social well-being)	
Social acceptance	Holds positive attitudes toward, acknowledges, and is accepting of human differences.
Social actualization	Believes people, groups, and society have potential and can evolve or grow positively.
Social contribution	Sees own daily activities as useful to and valued by society and others.
Social coherence	Interested in society and social life and finds them meaningful and somewhat intelligible.
Social integration	A sense of belonging to, and comfort and support from, a community.

Note. The 13 dimensions are from Keyes (2005b, Table 1, p. 541).

flourishing into mainstream public health and health care systems. This is based on the premise that if we were to engage in promoting and protecting the things that promote flourishing, we could prevent the exacerbation of mental illness. But it goes beyond that, I've shown in my studies depression is barely the tip of the iceberg. There are lots of people who aren't mentally ill or depressed but are not flourishing. This population presents a bigger problem to society than depression alone. I'm now focused on interventions that can be used at various levels and sectors.

Tim Beatley:
You've discussed the limitations of the word "happiness," yet you use the term in the courses you teach and in the way you talk about flourishing. It sounds like you're not against the term itself, but you're defining it in a deeper way. Is that a correct interpretation?

Corey Keyes:
No, I'm not against the term. In fact, I want the word to be reclaimed in the way that the Greeks thought about it because their notion was that we should create a society of people who essentially are philosophers. I think that was the point of philosophy and that was the point of happiness. It was speaking much more deeply about life and not just about an individual and his or her feelings, but your community and equality. I think that's what happiness is about. It wasn't just a feeling, but an invitation to think seriously about life.

Tim Beatley:
What do you think about the potential of designing and planning communities with an emphasis on the natural world to help people flourish by the measures you've laid out?

Corey Keyes:
I worked with the Healthy Parks, Healthy People initiative by the National Park Service in its infancy and the Green Vets project. I'm extremely interested and, personally, find my greatest peace and flourishing when I'm in nature. I think that is one of the key elements of our life and somehow most urban parks and zoos aren't doing it in the modern city. I had to buy a house in the mountains to escape and be in nature. I live two blocks from the largest park in Atlanta, but that isn't the same as in my cabin. I'm convinced it's not just the things that are in nature, but it's something about how those things are arranged that get us interested in and connecting with other forms of life.

Social well-being is all about connection. Flourishing is, first and foremost, about when we feel at home and connected to the world around us. This is when we feel good and feeling connected to nature is one of the greatest ways of flourishing.

Tim Beatley:
What sorts of reactions do you get when you use the word flourishing?

Corey Keyes:
It's resonating a lot with people in part because the other work that I've done has shown that it's not enough just to feel happy. It's not enough just to have high levels of emotional well-being. It needs to be a derivative of connection, purpose, growth, and acceptance.

There is this kind of happiness exhaustion out there. There is this sense that it's not possible to feel good all the time, to feel constant happiness or pleasure. That's not even the point of life. It's remaining inter-

ested in life, having purpose, contribution and connection. It resonates with people once they understand that's what goes into flourishing.

The pushback I receive is that critics tend to think that flourishing signifies that we're expecting too much of people. When you look at my diagnosis criteria of needing a minimum of 7 out of the 14 symptoms, no one is going to prescribe which ones you must have. In fact, research shows that you don't need to have a specific combination.
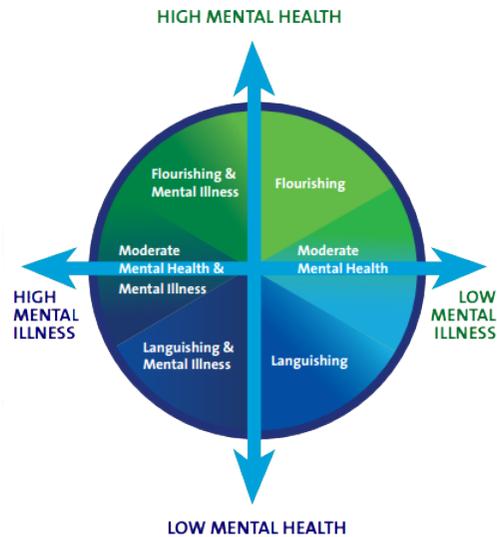
My response is that flourishing doesn't require much more than what most people say they want out of life.

Tim Beatley:
Are there particular things going on in the world right now that you think are undermining flourishing? Are there particular threats or things that you have identified in your work that we ought to be particularly worried about in the modern world?

Corey Keyes:
One threat is that we've totally distorted and shifted the meaning of time. Time has become a currency that stresses us out. One thing I like about nature is how it resets your sense of time. Research shows that when you get people to think of time as money than they are less likely to volunteer or to help each other.
Another threat is social inequality. We're not going to get anywhere with flourishing if we don't deal with that. People who are impoverished can benefit from nature, but that alone will not do it. We need more fairness and equality.

HIGH MENTAL HEALTH

- Flourishing & Mental Illness
- Flourishing
- Moderate Mental Health & Mental Illness
- Moderate Mental Health
- **HIGH MENTAL ILLNESS**
- **LOW MENTAL ILLNESS**
- Languishing & Mental Illness
- Languishing

LOW MENTAL HEALTH

Complete Model of Mental Health conceptualized by Corey Keyes.

Tim Beatley:
I'm impressed that you've identified these different components that create flourishing. It's about relationships between people and it's about trust. Of course, nature isn't the only source for those things, but we argue that it's uniquely suited to bring people together. For example, parks have that ability and then there is evidence about being more generous in the presence of nature, perhaps even being better human beings because of it. Where would nature connect to all the constituent parts of flourishing in your model? Would it fit in a particular place?

Corey Keyes:
Well, that's an interesting question and I think my immediate reaction is that it fits in various ways in all those components.

I think nature creates a certain humility that is lacking in the modern world. It triggers the idea that this is a pretty vast and amazing place and that I might be in control of some of the things around me, but the more I learn about the world around me the more I'm at peace.

About Dr. Corey Keyes:

Dr. Corey Keyes is a Winship Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. His areas of expertise include social psychology and mental health. The research centers he is affiliated with illuminate the "two continua" model of health and illness, showing how the absence of mental illness does not translate into the presence of mental health, and revealing that the causes of true health are often distinct processes from those now understood as the risks for mental illness. This work is being applied to better understanding resilience, prevention of mental illness, and informs the growing healthcare approach called "Predictive Health," which monitors the presence of positive physical and mental health and to develop and apply responses to correct early losses of it to maintain health and limit disease and illness. He has and continues to work on healthcare transformation and public mental health with governmental agencies in Canada, Northern Ireland, Australia, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevent, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the American Association of Colleges and Universities.
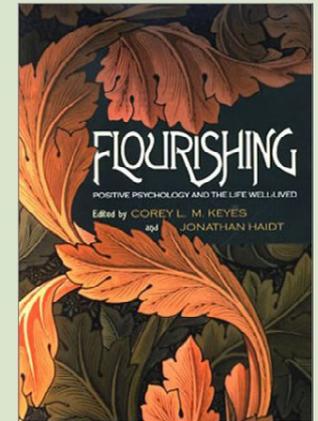
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