# Thriving: The development of the SPARC model

People who work in behavioral health have long asked what it takes for a person to do well in life. Survival, well-being, happiness, and flourishing have all been offered as answers. We focus on thriving, because thriving points to something we can observe: what is actually changing in a person's life. It points toward a life that feels fulfilling.

This brief explains what we mean by thriving and why we've chosen it as the lens for our work. It also introduces a new model of the pathways to thriving developed by our Expertise and Behavioral Health Innovation team to situate Understood.org's impact within the broader field of behavioral health, while intentionally accounting for neurodivergence.

## SPARC

Our model, SPARC, is grounded in self-determination theory and positive psychology. Self-determination theory has a long history in disability research and practice, which is part of why we built on it. From that foundation, SPARC describes the pathways to thriving through five dimensions: self-concept, purpose and meaning, autonomy, relationships, and capacity. Movement in any one dimension can support a person on the path to thriving.

## Key takeaways

**Thriving gives us a meaningful way to understand how people are doing.**

- Well-being tells us how people feel about their lives. Thriving tells us what's actually changing.
- Thriving is where development and success meet.
- Because thriving is observable, it's something we can recognize and support.

**Our model is grounded in self-determination theory and positive psychology.**

- Positive psychology offers a map to understand well-being, happiness, flourishing, and thriving.
- Self-determination theory describes what people need to thrive.
- Competence, autonomy, and relatedness map to where neurodivergent people are most often let down.
- SPARC describes the pathways to thriving for neurodivergent people.
- Each dimension of SPARC influences the others, so a change in one can cascade — forward or backward.

## Thriving gives us a meaningful way to understand how people are doing.

> Well-being tells us how people feel about their lives. Thriving tells us what's actually changing.

When it comes to understanding behavioral health outcomes, general well-being scales are often used. They're simple and broadly applicable. Two common examples are the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale and the World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index. They do real work, and we use them.

Well-being, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), describes how people feel about and evaluate their lives.. The WHO frames well-being as covering quality of life along with the capacity of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. The WHO also recognizes that social, economic, and environmental conditions shape a person's well-being. That framing matters when we consider the many settings people navigate every day.

So how does thriving differ?

Well-being tells us how people feel about their lives. Thriving can include well-being, but it goes a step further by looking at observable changes in people's lives — what's actually happening, not just how they feel. Both matter, and we'll keep using both ideas across our work.

It's worth being clear that these two terms aren't used consistently in the research literature. There isn't one standard or established way to define or use them. Some researchers treat thriving as a form of well-being. Others treat the two as separate. This brief treats them as distinct for a practical reason: As a nonprofit focused on helping people thrive at scale, we need a reliable, evidence-grounded way to understand both how people feel in the moment and how their lives change over time. This helps us know whether we're making the difference we aim to make. It lets us learn what's working, improve our approach, and track progress over time.

Take a person who says their work life is good. That tells us something real and worth knowing. But it doesn't tell us how things changed — whether they've built new skills, gained more choice over how they work, or strengthened their relationships with colleagues. Changes like these are how a person moves toward thriving. Asking about them directly makes them things we can help with.

This is why our work centers on thriving.

## Thriving is where development and success meet.

Thriving is simply where development and success meet. When progressive self-improvement and a favorable outcome occur together, a person is thriving.

Thriving takes into account a person's physical, psychological, and social development stages. It also accounts for external factors by treating success as temporal and contextual.

What does this mean?

Let's say a person has been experiencing symptoms of anxiety, and those symptoms are worse in social situations. They decide to learn a new coping method — one designed to ground them in social settings and lessen the intensity of their symptoms. In other words, they've chosen to focus on self-improvement in the area of psychological development.

Later, they encounter a social situation that would typically surface their symptoms. They use the coping method they just learned, and they navigate the situation with minimal symptoms. That's contextual success. Development plus success in context means this person could be considered thriving.

## Because thriving is observable, it's something we can recognize and support.

Thriving is both an internal and an observable experience. We can see a person's development and success for ourselves. We can observe symptoms of anxiety in social situations with and without a coping method. We can confirm the success that followed the development.

That gives us a clearer view of positive human development and of how people are meeting the everyday challenges of life.

Well-being speaks to an overall state that often reflects momentary experience. Thriving lets us look at a person's life in motion and through change. The coping method in our example may only work in social situations. That person may need a different method for work situations. So we might say they're thriving socially while still working toward thriving at work.

Through this lens, doing well in life doesn't have to stem from major change — nor does it have to be true across all areas of life. A person can thrive in the parts of their life that matter most to them, while other parts remain a work in progress.

# Our model is grounded in self-determination theory and positive psychology.

> Positive psychology offers a map to understand well-being, happiness, flourishing, and thriving.

Before describing our foundation, it helps to place it in the wider conversation. Researchers have **mapped four philosophical traditions** related to well-being, happiness, flourishing, and thriving. These four traditions — utilitarian, virtue, hedonic, and eudaimonic — are a useful map of how the field has thought about what it means to live well.

The **utilitarian tradition** positions human fulfillment as producing the maximum amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. It prioritizes the collective good over individual paths to happiness. Critics have argued that a focus on the utilitarian tradition can sometimes lead to a pseudo cost-benefit analysis of happiness focused on rational decision-making at the expense of the individual. In popular culture, we have come to know this as "**The Trolley Problem**," or the forced choice between causing the death of one or the death of many by pulling a lever to divert a runaway trolley.

The **virtue tradition** focuses on the character strengths of individuals to develop human fulfillment. These character strengths can include traits such as wisdom, bravery, gratitude, and justice. Critics state that there is a risk of cultural or ethical relativism in that the traits identified originate from Western philosophical traditions rooted in individualism. Essentially, what is considered morally good can differ from culture to culture, with some cultures emphasizing collectivism to achieve moral good.

The **hedonic tradition** identifies the pursuit of pleasure and good things as the path to human fulfillment. Finding pleasure can take the form of physical, mental, and intellectual pursuits. Given its focus on the individual, critics have argued that the pursuits of the individual could be considered immoral by society (e.g., stealing or infidelity) or abandon what is considered a societal good (e.g., truth or knowledge). Indeed, the representation of the hedonic tradition in popular culture tends to embrace the positioning of the critics (e.g., Hedonismbot in *Futurama*).

Our model sits closest to the **eudaimonic tradition**, in which doing well is based on positive growth and development. It's the idea that we can develop the best in ourselves to have a life well-lived. Critics point to the ambiguity of this tradition and argue that it lacks actionable paths forward.

So how do we define a life well-lived?

## Self-determination theory describes what people need to thrive.

That question was taken up by **self-determination theory**, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Self-determination theory holds that people need three things in order to grow and do well:

- **Competence:** Feeling effective at what you do
- **Autonomy:** Having choice and control over your own life
- **Relatedness:** Feeling connected to and cared about by other people

When these three needs are met, we can begin to understand the motivation behind a person's behavior. It's worth noting that self-determination theory predates the positive psychology movement by roughly two decades. It came out of research on human motivation and carries a large body of evidence behind it. It's not a branch of positive psychology. Positive psychology has drawn **substantive criticism**. Because self-determination theory rests on its own evidence base, our model does not rise or fall with that debate.

## Competence, autonomy, and relatedness map to where neurodivergent people are most often let down.

We chose self-determination theory as our foundation for a specific reason. Its three needs describe, almost exactly, the places where neurodivergent people are most often let down.

- **Competence:** People are frequently judged against standards set for others, in settings that were not designed for them. Years of that can leave someone believing they're not capable, when the *setting* was the barrier.
- **Autonomy:** Decisions about school, services, and accommodations are often made *for* people rather than *with* them. This is one reason self-advocacy and self-determination have been priorities in the disability community for decades.
- **Relatedness:** Stigma, bias, and being misunderstood can cut people off from the connections and communities that support growth.

Self-determination theory also has a long history in disability research and practice, where it has shaped work on self-advocacy, transition planning, and student-led planning. That gives our model a foundation that the disability field already recognizes.

Self-determination theory tells us what people need. But it doesn't tell us which behaviors move a person toward thriving. What are those behaviors?

Positive psychology offers several models that try to name them. One of the best known is the PERMA model, proposed by Martin Seligman. He described five building blocks:

- **P**ositive emotion: Happiness, joy, hope, and satisfaction
- **E**ngagement: Being absorbed in activities, experiencing "flow"
- **R**elationships: Feeling closeness and connection to others
- **M**eaning: Serving a cause higher than oneself
- **A**ccomplishment: Achieving goals, mastery, and competence

Each building block in Seligman's model contributes to a good life while also being something that can be pursued for its own sake.

PERMA is a useful map of behaviors that contribute to a good life, and it continues to shape work across the field. But our focus is narrower, and the role we play in the support ecosystem asks more of our model. To serve neurodivergent people, we needed a foundation built with them in mind from the start. That is why we bring lived experience into everything we build.

It also means accounting for the systems people navigate every day. Goal attainment can be limited when an environment was not designed with the needs of neurodivergent people in mind. Positive emotion can be shaped by societal stigma. And PERMA does not emphasize identity, which is central to how many people experience neurodivergence — and to how we can create positive change.

So how do we build a model that works for everyone?

SPARC

SPARC describes the pathways to thriving for neurodivergent people.

SPARC is a new model of the pathways to thriving. It can apply to anyone, but it was built specifically for neurodivergent people.

Self-determination theory is our foundation. Competence, autonomy, and relatedness appear directly in SPARC as **capacity**, **autonomy**, and **relationships**. We drew on the eudaimonic tradition for its focus on growth, and on PERMA as one useful map of contributing behaviors.

But SPARC is not an adjusted version of an existing model. It adds two dimensions that neither PERMA nor self-determination theory treats as central: **self-concept** and **purpose and meaning**. Both matter a great deal for people whose sense of themselves has been shaped by stigma and by environments that weren't built for them.

SPARC is meant to serve **the estimated 15% to 20% of people** who are neurodivergent, including people who are dyslexic or who have ADHD. It was built to center on their needs by a group of experts who all have lived experience with neurodivergence.

We also want to be clear about what SPARC does *not* cover. SPARC doesn't describe every pathway to thriving. Maslow placed physiological needs and safety at the base of his hierarchy for good reason: food, housing, physical health, and freedom from harm come first. When those needs go unmet, the dimensions in our model can be nearly impossible to address.

These foundational elements are not less important. They're often harder to secure for neurodivergent people, and they shape everything above them. We haven't built them into SPARC, though, because they're not an area where we believe we can drive change at scale. Our work is designed to meet people where brief, accessible support can make a real difference — and we recognize that, for many, that support rests on needs that others are better positioned to address.

# SPARC

SPARC has five dimensions. Each is an area where change can move a person along the path to thriving:

- **S**elf-concept: Identity coherence (Who I am)
- **P**urpose and meaning: Narrative integration (Why what I do matters)
- **A**utonomy: Value-aligned agency (What I choose)
- **R**elationships: Relational embeddedness (Who I am connected to)
- **C**apacity: Action feasibility (What I can do)

## Self-concept

Self-concept is a person's view of themselves based on personal beliefs and responses from others. A sense of accomplishment and pride often feeds into the development of a positive self-concept. For example, completing a difficult work task and receiving positive feedback from a supervisor may create a positive self-concept.

An important note is that self-concept is not always an accurate reflection of reality. Often, it's an internalization of difficult experiences or criticism. Stigma, for example, can be internalized into a person's self-concept.

## Purpose and meaning

Purpose provides a person with intention and aim, while a sense of meaning is feeling connected to something beyond the self.

Purpose can be a simple goal, like getting a job, or a larger goal, like changing a system. On the other hand, a sense of meaning can be based on a person's day-to-day life, like finding meaning in caring for a pet or being part of a team or group. However, a sense of meaning can also have a larger, existential meaning, like having a calling or feeling a connection to spiritual life.

## Autonomy

Autonomy strongly relates to self-determination. Autonomy means having the freedom to make choices and act in ways that reflect personal values and interests.

For example, it could mean a student having the tools to write a school essay in their own voice. Or it might mean a parent caring for their child in a way that reflects what they value.

## Relationships

Relationships encompass a sense of belonging, both through connections with other people and through community.

Connections with others can occur across a person's lifespan. For example, one of the most important factors in positive development for a child is a supporting and affirming relationship with their primary caregiver. As we age, we may form connections with educators, friends, managers, neighbors, and more.

Connections with the community often mean that a person has multiple "communities of participation." Friendship groups, school communities, affiliation groups, or workplaces can provide a sense of relatedness and belonging beyond personal relationships.

## Capacity

Capacity is the capability to achieve, do something well, or be proficient at a task.

Capacity can be cultivated through pride in a large accomplishment or from a sense of "I can do this" in everyday tasks.

Each dimension of SPARC influences the others, so a change in one can cascade — forward or backward.

## SPARC

So how does SPARC contribute to thriving? Through a cascading effect, where a change in one SPARC dimension makes change in another more likely. Remember that a person must experience both development and success within a context to be considered thriving.

Let's go back to our earlier example of the person navigating symptoms of anxiety in social situations. Quite a few SPARC dimensions were already in play before the person decided to learn a new coping method.

### Self-concept

Before a person can navigate what they are experiencing, they have to acknowledge it. That means reflecting on what it means for and to them, and being able to say, "This is something that exists in my life." To be clear, this does not mean acceptance. A person can acknowledge something without accepting it, since acceptance involves coming to terms and being OK with a situation. In our example, this would mean the person has a self-concept of "I am someone who is navigating symptoms of anxiety."

### Relationships

Once a person's self-concept has shifted or been refined, they may turn to their relationships for support. Following their acknowledgment that they are someone who is navigating symptoms of anxiety, they may reach out to a friend for advice or talk to their partner about how they can navigate these symptoms together. Vulnerability with these connections may lead to stronger and more affirming relationships.

### Capacity

As the person begins to navigate their symptoms of anxiety with the support of their relationships, they may start to think about addressing their challenges more directly. They have managed some challenges already. They believe they can manage the rest, and they're ready to try. At this point they may learn a new coping method for their symptoms of anxiety in social situations.

None of these shifts on its own is "thriving." But together, they set the stage for the development (learning the coping method) and the success (using it later in a social situation) that make up thriving.

Moving from dimension to dimension isn't a linear path. It's iterative, shaped by what a person experiences within each dimension. Positive experiences can carry someone forward. Negative ones can set them back.

Dimensions can also pull against each other. A person who takes on a demanding new role may build capacity while losing time with the people who support them. A young adult who makes a choice that fits their own values may strain a relationship with a parent who wants something different for them. Autonomy and relationships can be in real tension, and choosing one can carry a genuine cost.

Setbacks are part of the path too. A single dismissive comment from a manager can feel like it's undone months of work on self-concept. A move, a job loss, or a change in services can shrink a person's capacity through no fault of their own. Progress in one dimension does not protect the others. And setbacks don't necessarily erase the progress made.

We think this is worth saying plainly. Thriving is not a ladder people climb once. It is uneven, and it depends a great deal on whether the settings around a person are enabling or disabling. That's why we focus on the next small step rather than a finish line.

## Why this matters

Our work rests on a simple belief: Small changes in behavior can lead to big change over time. Behavior change is critical to supporting thriving for neurodivergent people.

Across our society — in our homes, communities, and institutions — neurodivergent people must navigate a world that wasn't shaped for them. Their experience is often misunderstood, undiagnosed, or dismissed. This creates stigma, bias, misconceptions, and deficit narratives that can have lasting effects that persist throughout their lives.

That's why Understood offers expert-vetted resources and tools designed to drive behavior change and to help people find the right next small step on the path to thriving.

This can result in a world where everyone can thrive in work, school, and life.

## Summary

Thriving is where development and success meet. It can include well-being, but it goes further by looking at what's actually changing in a person's life. That's why we've made it the lens for our work. Our model is grounded in self-determination theory and positive psychology. Self-determination theory's three needs — competence, autonomy, and relatedness — describe the places where neurodivergent people are most often let down. SPARC builds on that foundation to describe the pathways to thriving through five dimensions: self-concept, purpose and meaning, autonomy, relationships, and capacity. Each one influences the others, so progress in a single dimension can cascade. Thriving is rarely linear, and it depends a great deal on whether the settings around a person are enabling or disabling. Focusing on small changes in behavior can lead to big change over time. Helping people find the right next small step on the path to thriving can result in a world where everyone can thrive.

## Next steps for Understood

We're exploring a multi-phase research study to develop a valid and reliable scale that measures the five SPARC dimensions, so we can see how people are moving along the pathways to thriving. Scope and timing are still being determined. In keeping with Understood's mission, any scale we develop would use accessible and universal design to promote neuroinclusion in scale development. Alongside the research, we'll keep building practice. We'll continue to create free tools and resources designed to promote thriving at scale and to use what we learn from them to sharpen the model.

## Connect with us

We're always looking to collaborate and partner with others on our research. Reach out to our team at evaluation@understood.org to learn more.

# Other reference materials

The team at Understood referenced a wide range of literature for this research. Sources cited in the brief are linked in the text. The works below were helpful background:


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