



PEACE AT WORK
PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT AND CARE ENHANCEMENT

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PERSONAL FULFILLMENT

UNIT 13

03/2025



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Learning Objectives

By the end of this learning unit, participants will be able to:

- Recognise how social structures (education, community, workplace culture) shape opportunities for personal fulfillment.
- Identify common societal barriers, such as inequality exclusion, and cultural pressures that can hinder well-being.
- Apply practical strategies for strengthening personal fulfillment through community participation, supportive networks, and reflective practices.
- Evaluate the role of workplaces and civic engagement in creating environments that support both individual and collective well-being.
- Design a personal or team action plan to leverage social resources for improved life satisfaction and resilience.

Introduction



Personal fulfillment is often seen as a private journey, achieving personal goals, realising potential, and living a meaningful life. Yet, the conditions that enable fulfillment are profoundly influenced by the society in which we live in. Access to education and healthcare, supportive community networks, fair workplaces, and inclusive policies can shape our sense of purpose and belonging.

In today's interconnected world, many people face challenges such as economic insecurity, cultural pressure, and social isolation that can limit their opportunities to thrive. Understanding how these social dynamics interact with personal well-being is essential for building resilience and creating environments where individuals can flourish.

This unit explores the relationship between social context and personal fulfillment, highlighting barriers, showcasing good practices, and offering practical tools to help learners align personal aspirations with supportive community and social structures.

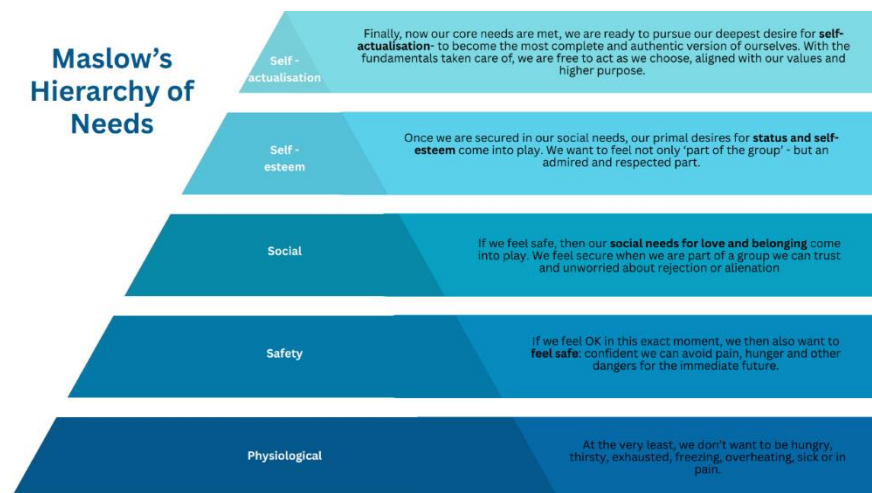
Understanding Personal Fulfillment in a Social Context

Personal fulfillment is often thought of as an individual pursuit, achieving one's goals, realising potential, and finding meaning in life. However, no one lives in isolation. Our opportunities, values, and sense of purpose are profoundly shaped by the society we live in.

From early childhood through adulthood, social structures such as education, healthcare, employment systems, and cultural norms influence the way we define success and well-being. Taking into account some examples:

- A supportive community network can encourage learning and resilience.
- Inclusive work environments can help individuals feel that their contributions in their position matter.
- In contrast, economic inequality, discrimination or lack of access to basic services can limit people's ability to thrive.

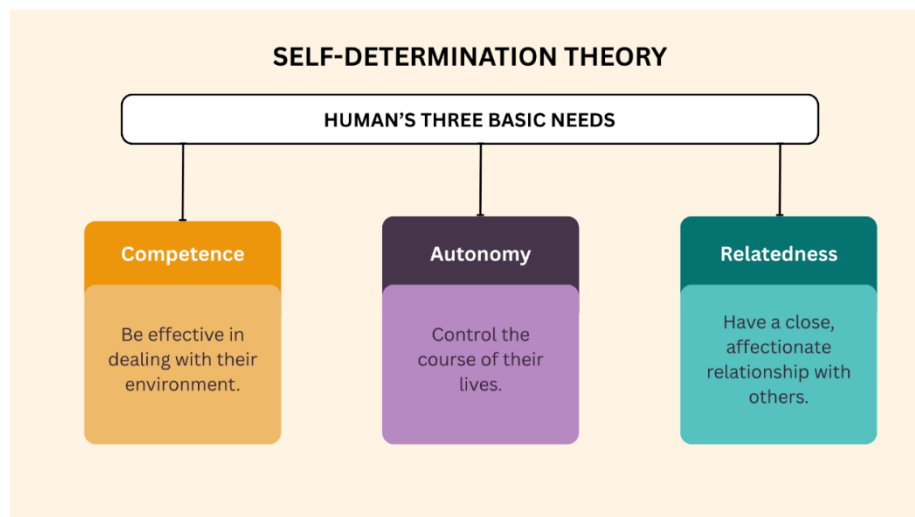
Research in psychology and sociology has long explored what drives people to grow, connect, and thrive. One of the earliest and most influential frameworks, [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs \(1943\)](#), describes how human motivation moves from basic needs, such as safety and belonging, toward higher levels like self-esteem and self-actualisation. When these needs are unmet, personal growth can stall; when they are supported, individuals tend to flourish. [Read more about Maslow's theory here.](#)



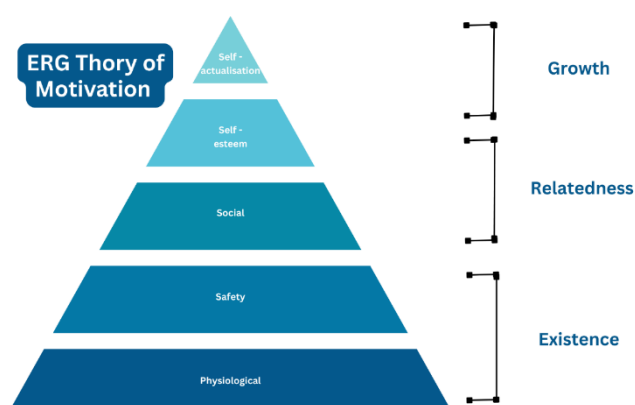
Building on this idea, [Self-Determination Theory \(SDT\)](#) by Ryan and Deci (2000; 2008) offers a modern, evidence-based understanding of what sustains well-being across cultures and life stages. SDT identifies three essential needs:

- 1 Autonomy: the ability to make meaningful choices in life.
- 2 Competence: feeling capable, effective, and able to influence outcomes.
- 3 Relatedness: having authentic, supportive relationships.

When these needs are met, motivation becomes more intrinsic and authentic. People engage in activities because they want to, not because they have to. Curious to explore how these needs connect to real world well-being? Visit the official Self-Determination Theory website for short articles and tools: <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>.



Other models, like Alderfer's ERG Theory, simplify these needs into Existence, Relatedness, and Growth, showing how personal and social fulfillment are intertwined. [Learn more about ERG Theory here.](#)



In essence, fulfillment is not purely personal. It depends on the social environment that either nurtures or restricts autonomy, competence, and connection. Societies that value inclusion, learning, and participation make it easier for individuals to meet these needs and live meaningful, balanced lives.

Social Factors that Challenge Personal Fulfillment

Modern societies offer many opportunities for growth, but also present obstacles that can erode well-being and a sense of purpose.



Inequality and Exclusion

Income disparities, limited access to education or healthcare, and social stigma around gender, ethnicity or disability often restrict opportunities for self-development. People who feel excluded or discriminated against may experience chronic stress and lower motivation to pursue personal goals ([Brandt et al., 2022](#); [Kirkbride et al., 2024](#); [Lee et al., 2024](#); [Siersbaek et al., 2023](#)).

Urbanisation and Social Isolation

While cities provide opportunities for education and career prospects, they can also create feelings of anonymity and loneliness. Weak social ties and lack of a sense of belonging are linked to reduced life satisfaction and even poorer physical health outcomes ([Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015](#)).

Cultural Expectations and Social Comparison

Cultural messages, such as family traditions and media portrayals of success, shape what people believe they should achieve. In the age of social media, constant comparison to curated online images can heighten feelings of inadequacy, especially among young adults ([Fardouly et al., 2015](#)).

Job Insecurity and Economic Pressure

Unstable work, frequent career transitions or unemployment can undermine both autonomy and self-esteem. People under financial stress often postpone education, skill development or community participation, all of which can support fulfillment ([Najjemba, 2023](#); [Pires, 2025](#)).

Distrust and Weak Community Engagement

Communities with lower levels of trust and civic participation typically offer fewer opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, and mutual support. This limits both collective and individual growth ([Ehsan et al., 2019](#); [Kayi & Ozgulnar, 2019](#); [Snel et al., 2022](#)).

Positive Social Conditions and Good Practices

A supportive society can create the conditions for individuals to flourish. Several examples illustrate how this can be achieved:

Inclusive Education and Lifelong Learning

Accessible, affordable education helps individuals develop competencies and pursue meaningful careers. Public-funded universities, online courses, and employer sponsored training programs can open doors for groups that might otherwise be left behind ([Dostie, 2015](#); [OECD, 2021c](#)).



Community Networks and Social Capital

Strong social networks, from local volunteer groups to professional mentoring schemes, provide not only practical support but also a sense of belonging and shared purpose ([OECD, 2018a](#); [2021a](#); [2021b](#); [2023](#); [2024a](#); [2024b](#)).

Workplace as a Social Environment

Organisations that embrace diversity, fair treatment, and opportunities for skill development contribute to employees' sense of fulfillment. Practices such as recognition programs, flexible

work arrangements, and open communication foster engagement and resilience ([Kelly et al., 2022](#); [Shiri et al., 2022](#); [Liu et al., 2023](#); [Leuhery, 2024](#)).

Participation and Civic Engagement

Opportunities to take part in local decision-making processes, such as neighbourhood initiatives, school parent boards or environmental projects, help individuals feel that they can shape the world around them. This strengthens both personal agency and social cohesion and their sense of belonging ([Fenn et al., 2023](#); [Mesa-Vieira et al., 2023](#); [Dudowitz et al., 2020](#)).

Strategies and Tools for Individuals and Organisations

While social contexts shape opportunities, individuals and organisations can adopt approaches and strategies to enhance fulfillment.

For individuals:

- **Network mapping:** Identify your own sources of support (friends, family, colleagues, community groups, etc.) and invest in maintaining them ([Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015](#); [Cohen & Wills, 1985](#)).
- **Lifelong learning mindset:** Pursue courses, workshops or self-guided learning that aligns with personal interests and the evolving job markets ([UNESCO, 2022](#)).
- **Purpose Journaling:** Reflect regularly on activities and relationships that feel meaningful and energising ([Steger et al., 2008](#); [Burton & King, 2004](#)).
- **Setting boundaries:** Learn to say “no” to social or cultural pressures that conflict with personal values ([Neff & Germer, 2013](#)).

For organisations and communities:

Mentoring and peer support programs:

Pair newcomers or vulnerable groups with experienced members to enhance inclusion ([Allen et al., 2008](#)).

Recognition of diverse contributions:

Celebrate achievements beyond economic performance, such as knowledge sharing and community volunteering ([Brun & Dugas, 2008](#); [Kelly et al., 2022](#)).

Hybrid social spaces:

Create safe, inclusive physical or virtual spaces where people can connect beyond work positions and roles ([Howard-Grenville et al., 2019](#)).

Culturally sensitive policies:

Acknowledge and respect cultural differences in communication, work styles and expectations ([Nishii, 2013](#); [Mazur, 2010](#); [Hofstede et al., 2010](#)).

Barriers and New Approaches

Some barriers may remain, even when suitable practices are being applied.

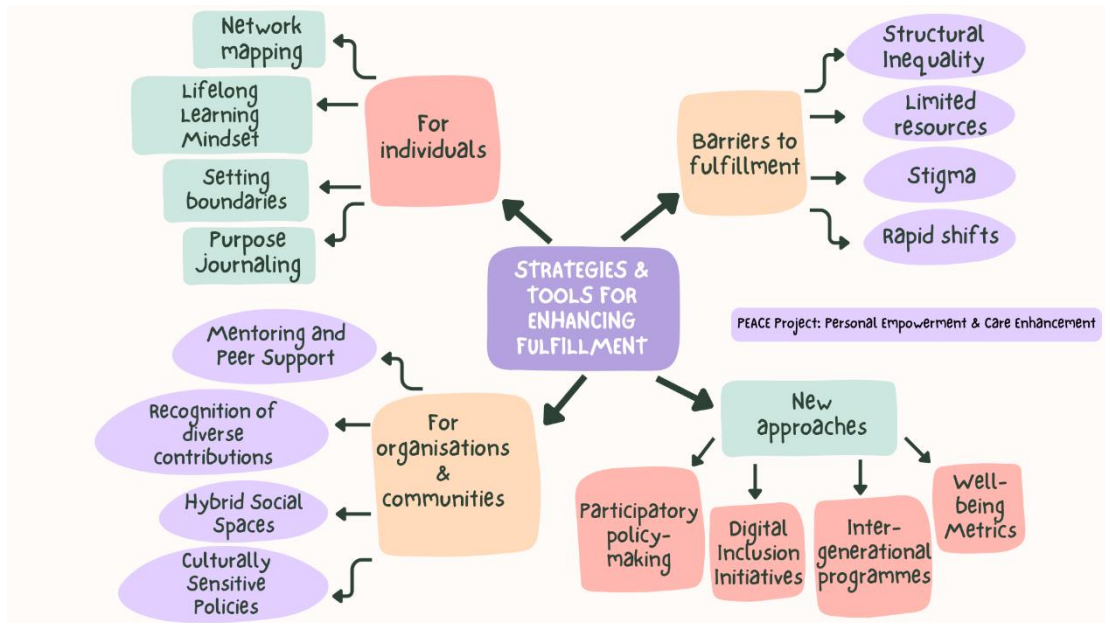
Barriers:

- Persistent structural inequality and discrimination ([Marmot, 2017](#); [CSDH, 2008](#)).
- Limited resources for marginalised communities (OECD, [2024b](#); [2024c](#)).
- Stigma surrounding mental health or support requests ([WHO, 2022a](#); [Corrigan et al., 2014](#)).
- Rapid technological and economic shifts that outpace institutional adaptation ([Schwab, 2016](#); [WHO, 2022b](#)).

Emerging practices aim to address these barriers - New approaches:

- **Participatory policy-making:** Inviting citizens to co-create local policies improves relevance and engagement ([UNDP, n.d.](#); [OECD, 2020a](#)).
- **Digital inclusion initiatives:** Providing access to devices, internet and digital skills to reduce gaps in opportunity ([United Nations EOSG, 2023](#); [OECD, 2018b](#)).

- **Intergenerational programs:** Connecting youth and older adults to share skills and experiences strengthens social cohesion ([Murayama et al., 2019](#); [Haton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000](#)).
- **Well-being metrics:** Moving beyond GDP to measure collective progress using indicators of quality of life and mental health ([OECD, 2020b](#); [Stiglitz et al., 2009](#)).



Practical Tools

Personal Fulfillment Map:

In this activity, you'll reflect on what brings you balance and meaning in everyday life. Explore three key areas of your well-being, yourself, your relationships, and your community and think about where you feel strong and where you'd like to grow. Ask yourself:

- ❖ What gives me energy and fulfillment?
- ❖ What challenges hold me back?
- ❖ What small steps can I take to strengthen my connections and sense of purpose?

Reflection: Which of these areas feels most fulfilling right now? Which one could I focus on to feel more balanced?

Area	My strengths	What energises me	My current challenges	Actions to Nurture Growth
Self	(e.g., emotional awareness, hobbies, self-care)			
Relationships	(e.g., friends, family, colleagues)			
Community	(e.g., volunteering, civic engagement, belonging)			

Community Engagement Planner:

This activity invites you to think about how you can take an active role in your community, whether it means joining, creating or supporting something that matters or is relevant to you. You'll identify what motivates you, you'll define your role, and set a simple and realistic goal to make a positive impact around you. Ask yourself:

- ❖ What kind of community project inspires you?
- ❖ Why does it matter to me personally?
- ❖ What is one small action I can take to get me started?

Meaningful change often begins with one small, but consistent step

Step	Description	Example/Notes
1. Identify a local initiative or group	(e.g., neighbourhood project, NGO, volunteers' program for a local festival)	
2. Define your motivation	Why do I want to participate? What personal or social value does it have?	
3. Clarify your role	(e.g., volunteer, coordinator, participant, mentor)	
4. Set a small, achievable goal	(e.g., attend one meeting, propose an idea, invite other people)	
5. Assess the potential impact	How does this contribute to my well-being and the community's well-being?	

Barrier Analysis Table:

In this activity, you'll explore the obstacles that may hold you back from personal fulfillment or social engagement. You'll reflect on how these barriers affect you and others and identify practical ways to overcome them.

Ask yourself:

- ❖ What challenges make it hard for me to grow or connect?
- ❖ Which of these can I change on my own and which need collective action?
- ❖ What support or resources could help me move forward?

Understanding a barrier is the first step toward turning it into an opportunity.

Obstacle	How it affects me/others	Cause	Possible action	Resources or support needed
e.g., lack of time	I feel disconnected from others	Poor time management	Dedicate 1 hour weekly for volunteering	time planner, accountability partner

Activities

- **Reflection prompt:** Think of a time when community support helped you achieve a personal milestone. What factors made that possible?
- **Self- assessment quiz:** How fulfilled do you feel in your social context?

Read each statement and rate how true it feels for you on a scale from 1 (Not true at all) to 5 (Very true).

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Autonomy						
1	I feel free to make choices that reflect my true values.					
2	I can express my opinions openly, even if they differ from others'.					
Competence						
3	I feel capable and effective in most things I do.					
4	I have opportunities to develop my skills and use my strengths.					
Connectedness						
5	I feel supported by people who care about me.					
6	I contribute to my community or workplace in a meaningful way.					

Scoring (for self-reflection):

- **22-30 points:** You experience strong fulfillment and connection in your current social environment.
- **15-21 points:** You're doing well, but one area (autonomy, competence or connectedness) might need some attention.
- **Below 15 points:** Consider exploring which needs feel unmet and what small steps could improve them.

Which area, autonomy, competence or connectedness, feels most important for my growth right now? What one action could I take this week towards this goal?

Group activity:

In small groups, design a community-based initiative that could improve a specific domain, like public space, access to education, mentoring or well-being offered services.

Summary – Key Takeaways

Personal fulfillment does not happen in isolation. It grows within a social ecosystem shaped by public policies, workplace cultures, communities, and shared values. The opportunities people have to thrive or the barriers they face depend greatly on how these systems interact.

When inequality, isolation or stigma persist, they quietly limit individual potential and weaken the social fabric. Yet, when societies invest in inclusion, connection and mutual trust, they create the conditions for both personal and collective growth.

True well-being emerges when individual aspirations align with supportive environments, when people feel seen, valued and empowered to contribute. Each one of us, as individuals, organisations and citizens, plays a role in shaping these conditions. By combining self-awareness with socially responsible action, we can build communities where fulfillment is not a privilege, but a shared possibility.

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Further resources

[TEDxBeaconStreetSalon, The Essential Power of Belonging by Caroline Clarke \(2019\)](#)

[Kurzgesagt – In a Nutshell, Optimistic Nihilism \(2017\)](#)

[On being - Conversations on Meaning, connection and Change with Krista Tippett, podcast series \(2003 - ongoing\)](#)

[Greater Good Science Center UC Berkeley, The science of Happiness, podcast series \(2025 - ongoing\)](#)

[Stanford Social Innovation Review \(Open Articles\)](#)

[OECD Well-being Data Monitor](#)

[WHO, Social Determinants of Health](#)

OECD (2018), Indicators for Resilient Cities, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6f1f6065-en>

Case Study 9: Finding Belonging in a New Community

Brief Description:

Maria is a 35 year old teacher, recently moved from a small town to a large urban area after a change in her career. Although she was excited about her new role, she soon began feeling isolated and disconnected. The city's fast pace, limited social interaction at work and lack of community ties left her with a sense of emptiness.

When Maria discovered a local community centre that organised language classes, creative workshops and volunteering opportunities, she decided to participate in a weekend program supporting migrant families. Gradually, she built new relationships, shared experiences and started feeling a part of the community and something meaningful. Her participation gave her not only social connections but also a renewed sense of purpose and belonging.

Problem Description:

Maria's main challenge was social isolation and the lack of meaningful connection after relocating. Her work environment was mainly task oriented with minimal social interaction and she struggled to find a sense of community in the urban setting.

Emotional/Physical Effects:

- Feelings of loneliness and self-doubt
- Increased stress and insomnia
- Low motivation and emotional fatigue

Response/Intervention

Through her participation in the community centre's volunteer program, Maria connected with others and discovered shared values and purpose. Her engagement in collective activities helped her restore her sense of belonging and strengthened her confidence. This experience also improved her emotional well-being, reduced her stress levels and enhanced her sense of belonging, illustrating the power of social participation in personal fulfillment.

Reflection Questions

1. What social factors made it difficult for Maria to adapt to her new environment?
2. How did community engagement influence her emotional and social well-being?
3. What strategies could organisations or communities implement to help newcomers integrate more easily?

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