

psychology section



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The "New" Positive Psychology

Age-old wisdom and new scientific discoveries remind of us what makes us truly happy

Key Points

- Positive Psychology is a scientifically-based field focused on the human characteristics of positive emotions, virtue, strengths, and character.
- Enduring Happiness (EH) may be increased within a person's Set Range via specific strategies.
- Optimism, savoring, gratitude, virtue, meaning and purpose are some of the key constructs or means for improving life satisfaction or EH.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire... I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.

In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment.¹

Introduction

Frankl's personal experiences and work led him to a deep appreciation of the need for meaning, especially to survive life's tragedies. While long the province of philosophers, religious writers, and poets, understanding and appreciating the need and drive found within us to find meaning has recently been pulled under the umbrella of scientific psychology – what is being called Positive Psychology. This movement, championed by

Martin Seligman, PhD, preeminent clinical psychology scholar and scientist, has moved psychology to seriously consider the "positive side" of human being. Like a breath of fresh air, Positive Psychology seemed to come out of nowhere, unfettering mental health scientists from the nearly exclusive focus on the development and amelioration of psychopathology, built on the disease model. With its focus on concepts like explanatory style, optimism, gratitude, meaning, purpose, virtue, forgiveness, and happiness, this movement has as a principle aim to understand how people can move beyond just not "languishing" (functioning below levels considered normal) but to "flourishing," ie having a rich, full life.⁴ In acknowledgment, the following summary of Positive Psychology owes primarily to Seligman's summative treatment of the area found in his book *Authentic Happiness* and largely recapitulates his work, including content and structure.²⁻⁴

Positive Psychology's Beginnings

Positive Psychology did not, however, come out of nowhere but grows from a strong tradition of study of the human condition. While the roots of Positive Psychology can be traced as far back as great thinkers like Aristotle, the search need not go that far – Seligman and others associated with the Positive Psychology movement have stood on the shoulders of their predecessors, like Aaron Beck, MD, who took an objective, rational, "cognitive" approach to understanding and helping those with depression. For example, Beck found that the presence or absence of evaluations of hopelessness and helplessness are critical to the depth of depression. What's more, helping depressed individuals feel more hope and less helpless, through cognitive training and psychotherapy, enables them to resolve or minimize their depression.^{3,5,6}

A more direct path to Positive Psychology comes from Seligman's own work on "learned helplessness" and later "learned optimism."² These watershed concepts moved the understanding and treatment of depression far along and provided the basis for the emergence of Positive Psychology, with its focus on concepts such as hope and joy. Building on the work of Beck, Seligman discovered that individuals who make evaluations of helplessness can likewise learn to believe that "bad things" are not necessarily permanent and pervasive; they can be "optimistic," leaving the door open to hope, a powerful tool in combating temporary or more permanent depressed and unpleasant states. Another prominent thinker, Ed Diener has built his career on rigorous scientific research of emotions like happiness. In particular, his work on Subjective Well-Being (SWB) has demonstrated that this construct can be measured across cultures and seems to be higher in those countries with greater freedoms and human rights. From the study of depression to well-being, these scholars, and others, have now made Positive Psychology a veritable force in the field.⁷

Positive Psychology Defined

Positive Psychology is the "study of positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions."⁸ A driving goal of this movement in psychology is to identify and promulgate scientifically valid and practically useful means for individuals to "build up" a "good life" as well as "repair" what is "bad."²

In his seminal work on Positive Psychology, *Authentic Happiness*, Dr. Seligman outlines what he and others have "discovered" about being happy and living well. He defines a "full life as experiencing positive emotions about the past and the future, savoring positive feelings from the pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using these in the service of something larger to obtain meaning."³

Before I proceed with greater detail about some of the "findings" of Positive Psychology, I think it useful to make two caveats or clarifications: First, Positive Psychology does not have as its goal to supplant the important contributions that have been garnered from the disease or pathology based model of psychology. Instead, Seligman and others wish simply to give critical attention to an area too long ignored by psychological scientists and theoreticians. (Practitioners, like me, have used many "positive

psychology" strategies and approaches long before the Positive Psychology movement rolled out of academe.) Second, Positive Psychology is not just a variant of philosophies that extol what amounts to nothing more than the virtue of people being Pollyanna. It is a rigorous attempt to understand the "positive" side of the human psyche using a scientific approach modeled on the hard sciences.

Enduring Happiness (EH=S+C+V)

Seligman offers the above equation for the "calculation" of Enduring Level of Happiness (EH), ie, the lasting happiness one experiences over time versus the momentary lifts one feels from a good movie, a bite of chocolate, or some other hedonic pleasure. The "S" stands for "Set Range." According to Seligman, an individual's level of happiness is "regulated" to some degree by the brain like a thermostat regulates temperature. Highs or lows occur, but one's happiness tends back toward a baseline range that seems to be determined by one's genetic makeup. A certain level of happiness seems to run in families, like so many other attributes. How much of one's happiness is biologically determined? As far as any can tell, it seems about 50 percent of one's happiness may be set in a range based on one's genetic inheritance. While this may be malleable to some extent, research has shown that big time lottery winners as well as those that experience major trauma (eg paraplegia) tend to gravitate back as it were toward the level of happiness they had experienced prior to their fortune or misfortune. Perhaps more direct evidence comes from the work of Tellegen and colleagues. These researchers have examined the role of temperament, or genetic factors, in the experience of pleasant and unpleasant affect, by examining twins separated at birth. In general, the findings suggest that heritability of affective responding is at least 50 percent due to genetic factors. The remainder appears to be based on other factors.^{3,9}

Seligman identifies the broad categories of "Circumstances" ("C" in Seligman's equation) and "Voluntary" variables ("V") those that combine to predict the other approximately 50 percent of one's happiness. "Circumstances" refers to those aspects of one's life that influence it but may not be as readily changeable (if at all) as those Seligman refers to as voluntary. Such circumstances are race, gender, education, money/salary, religion, marriage, age,

health, and friends. The findings of research on the contribution, or lack thereof, of these aspects of a person's life have yielded some expected, as well as some surprising, results. Money can't buy happiness, we've heard it said, and this is true it seems as long as people have "enough" to secure their basic survival needs and some cushion to ease their anxiety about the future. In those instances in which people generally have "enough," eg, in America, even the enormously rich gain little satisfaction and happiness over the average Joe and Jane. What's more, materialism seems counterproductive to happiness, adds Seligman. If you focus on money and stuff, you will never have enough of either and may undo some of the happiness you could have...though this is not fully understood.³

Other findings about the circumstances of life and happiness according to Seligman and others include:

"To be happier:

- Live in a wealthy democracy
- Get married
- Acquire a rich social network of friends, family
- Get religion.

Don't bother with these too much to be happier:

- Make loads more money
- Stay perfectly (ie, "objectively") healthy (it is subjective perception of health that matters)
- Get tons of education
- Move to a sunnier climate."

"Voluntary" Happiness

Perhaps the best news of all in Seligman's account of what anyone can do to increase his/her level of EH is that we do have some real control and can have some lasting impact on our satisfaction with life, if we learn to deal in certain ways with the past, present, and future. Supported now in countless studies, (perhaps the most prominent the "Nun Study" – see below), Seligman, and others of scientific repute, have proposed myriad means for coming to terms with the past, making the present better, and being hopeful about the future. Among others, these include the groundbreaking work of Ed Diener on happiness itself, Everett Worthington's study of forgiveness, Seligman's own work on optimism and suggestions to savor the moment and have gratitude. What makes their strategies unique is that they are not only founded on science but also, and more importantly, can be

learned through effort and practice. So many good ideas or general prescriptions do not take one very far on the quest toward greater happiness in life because they either don't really work (eg, making a wish while throwing a coin into a wishing well), or they do not provide adequate instruction on how to implement them. As a once popular song prescribed, "Don't worry; Be happy."^{3,7,9-12}

And Then There Were Nun!? (Or, Is This Too Good to be True?)

We have all heard it before – attitude is everything – but we have also all had the experience that the attempt to profoundly change attitudes, emotions and behavior can be extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible. However, there is now ample evidence to say conclusively that positive emotions or attitudes not only help, and sometimes a whole lot, but can also be generated. First, do they really make all that big a difference? One of the most dramatic and interesting examples of the role of attitudes on happiness and life comes from what is referred to as the Nun Study. In this study, the journals of 178 School Sisters of Notre Dame were evaluated to examine the effects of positive emotions on longevity. Considered a remarkable scientific endeavor because of its design alone, this study further captivated the psychology community when it published the following astounding results: Ninety percent of the nuns, who were determined to be the most cheerful 25% of all the nuns, were alive at age 85 versus only 34% of the least cheerful quarter. And this effect continued for these groups of nuns into their mid nineties. In a word, Seligman tells us it seemed that the happy nuns became old nuns. It didn't matter how the researchers "sliced" the data, the only factor that predicted longevity was the amount of positive emotion expressed in a nun's journal. Clearly, positive emotions can have a profound effect on the very length of life itself.^{3,13,14}

So Are You Happy?

One way to measure whether you are doing all you "positively" can to live a long, full, good life is to determine if you are happy or "satisfied with life." Take the following scale created by Diener et al and see how you compare to others.¹⁵

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 to 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding the item.

- 7= Strongly agree
- 6= Agree
- 5= Slightly Agree
- 4= Neither agree nor disagree
- 3= Slightly disagree
- 2= Disagree
- 1= Strongly disagree

- ___ In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.
- ___ The conditions of my life are excellent.
- ___ I am completely satisfied with my life.
- ___ So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- ___ If I could live my life over, I would change nothing.
- ___ Total

- 30-35 Extremely satisfied, much above average
- 25-29 Very satisfied, above average
- 20-24 Somewhat satisfied, average for American adults
- 15-19 Slightly dissatisfied, a bit below average
- 10-14 Dissatisfied, clearly below average
- 5-9 Very dissatisfied, much below average

You are probably happier than about 50% of people if you score above 23 or so. If you don't, well maybe there are some things worth working on.^{15,16}

How to be Happier

Many things make people happy, and the things that do bring satisfaction, and happiness often differ from person to person. For one person, pleasure may be derived from time with family or jumping out of airplanes, while for another it may mean sitting quietly reading a book or working hard to complete a project. And there are distinctions among the type of things that bring happiness. Knowing these, according to Seligman, is crucial to going beyond momentary amusements and gratifications to the achievement of **enduring happiness**. In general, we can seek pleasure, engage in life more deeply and find meaning and purpose. Researchers like Seligman have gone further

than this kind of high-level academic theorizing and have proposed more specific attitudes and actions that can move us to higher levels of contentment and joy. Among the ideas are some which are considered central to Positive Psychology, like optimism, hope, savoring, living virtuously and doing for others.³

Optimism, as already discussed, was popularized by Dr. Martin Seligman.¹⁷ His studies first on *learned helplessness*, or "giving up happens," and later *learned optimism*, led him to theorize and confirm the power of explanatory style (or how we make sense of the causes of bad and good things that happen to us) in the experience of hope or despair. Especially helpful for the more depressed and anxious among us: hope and optimism are good for all and lead to good things. The idea of optimism as a learned way of explaining events that can improve happiness can be summarized like this:

You will be happier, more optimistic and hopeful if:

1. When something good is happening or has happened, attribute it to a permanent cause that has pervasive impact, eg, a personality trait (I'm a patient person), which will enable you to believe (based on rationality and evidence) that this good thing (and others) will persist and lead to good things in many aspects of life (eg, people will find you easy to get along with because you are patient).
2. On the other hand, when things are not so good, attribute its cause to changing or changeable causes that are isolated in their impact on life, eg, temporary mood or physical state. (I was impatient with the clerk because I was in a hurry and hadn't much rest last night, and this was a passing thing and something I can change. I will not be awful and am not awful to all people at all times.)³

This may sound like just another way of saying one should put a positive spin on life. Not so. Good things don't always last forever and bad things do happen. What's more, bad things are bad things; however, just because they happen does not mean they will

continue or that all things in life are bad. The brain of depressed and anxious people, and others among us, tends to look at the glass as half empty, with pessimism and regret; however, we can train the brain to believe good things will happen, to see good things when they are happening, and realize that bad things are not permanent. This training takes effort, persistence, commitment and practice, and is not easy. But it is worth it. Sure it is easier in the short term to pop a pill, drink a beer, or watch the television, but the lasting effects of all but the former are dubious at best. Pursuit of hedonic pleasure, with moderation, while a reasonable part of everyone's life, will hardly lead to lasting happiness. Optimism and hope however can have an enormous and lasting effect on our quality of life and the quantity of that quality.

Savoring is another valuable strategy for pursuit of a full life. "Stop and smell the roses" we have heard said. The idea here is to take stock and get deeply involved in the things, people and projects of your life, and really focus on what is good about them. If you don't take in the moment, it passes you by. Savoring also means thinking about things and remembering things, even memorializing them after they have happened. In this way we create strong positive feelings and lay down strong positive memories, which are especially helpful when life and circumstances are difficult later.

As Seligman suggests, consider savoring life like this: The next time something really good happens, try this: Take time, lots more time than you usually would, to take in every detail of the event, situation, accomplishment. Consider the environment around you, how you feel, what thoughts you have, how others are or were affected. Then, later, as soon as you get a chance, write this account of things down, in detail, and if possible share this with someone else. Be grateful for goodness in your life and the lives of others, for your talents, skills and good fortune. You could even find a small token to remember this good thing, and put this token on your desk or in your pocket. Then, every time you see this token, take a moment (if you have a chance – better yet, make a chance), and relish this goodness. This is a way to make sure life does not pass you by and that good things go unnoticed. We have an uncanny way of seeing the things that go awry; it takes additional effort to appreciate the small joys of each day of living.³

Virtue

"Man [sic] is unique and unrepeatably above all because of his [sic] heart, which decides his being from within."¹⁸

Living according to values that are not only good for oneself, but also for others and our environment, is a well-documented ideal in human history. These ideas about virtuous living have been codified by the ancients, puzzled over by philosophers and expounded by religious writers of every ilk. Because of their common sense, recurrence and appearance over time and across culture, these prescribed ideals stand up as ways that human beings have found to live well, with themselves and with one another. Seligman is only one of a number of prominent scientists who have admitted the undeniable tenability of the correlative positions that virtuous living is good and that certain virtues seem to be widespread (geographically and over time). Their work seems to confirm that to be satisfied with life one must be good.^{3,8}

Seligman and colleagues have carried out their work, a project to compile and order human virtue, under the name: *Values in Action (VIA)*. They currently propose six superordinate categories or "virtues" under which most universally occurring virtues fall. They are:

1. Love & Humanity
2. Wisdom & Knowledge
3. Courage
4. Justice
5. Temperance
6. Spirituality & Transcendence.⁸

These characteristics of human being, the best of human being, make living with the trials and vagaries of life and living with others not only possible, but deeply gratifying, uplifting, even sublime at times. In an award-winning study on virtue, the Positive Psychology researcher Jon Haidt and colleagues have demonstrated that *elevation* – "warm, open feelings... in the chest...elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty...motivates people to behave more virtuously." It leads individuals to feel more loving and inspired, and to have greater willingness to perform prosocial and affiliative actions. This and other examples lead the Positive Psychology movement to propose that good or virtuous behavior not only lifts the human spirit, making all those who experience such

actions happier, but also “multiplies” good feelings and actions, elevating all those who are touched. Have we not ourselves been moved in recent tragic times by heroism, perseverance, courage, bravery and hope, as we have witnessed police and fire fighters, as well as those in our Armed Services, fulfilling their sworn duty and watched with awe as Iraqis stepped forward in the face of harm to themselves, to make a statement or cast a vote for what they want for their future? Politics aside, there can be no denying that virtue has elevated us all in recent years, and not just because it feels good, but because it has a good purpose – it means something – it is something – something good.^{19,20}

Meaning and Purpose

“...we can discover...meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.”¹

No more profound question exists than “Why?” Why is this, we want to know? Why? What does knowing do for us? Sure, it might serve to reduce our anxiety, that angst that is derived from our built-in survival mechanisms, but perhaps there is more to it. No one knows for sure why, but it seems we quest to know, to understand, to find a reason and/or purpose, a meaning to it all; all that we see, here, touch, feel, experience. We are in need of something; something that fills us up, gets us moving, keeps us going. This thing, according to many, is meaning or purpose. A reason – the reason – to be and keep being. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, we are reminded “...the secret of man’s [sic] being is not only to live but to have something to live for.” Seligman cites “Religiousness” and “Transcendence,” virtues or strengths related to deriving meaning and purpose, as vital to human happiness. In recent introductory work in Positive Psychology at Carle, Drs. Keith White and Holly Mirell, with the help of Shannon Collins, began considering purported predictors of enduring happiness and satisfaction with life. Their work appears to attest to recent, classic, and ancient treatments that propose that for human beings, being happy means finding meaning.^{1,3,8,21}

Conclusion

In the end you might ask, “Are there really happy people? People that stay really happy? Really?” If you will indulge me a moment, let me tell you

about one such person. My Grandma Isam was the happiest person I ever knew. She and my grandpa didn’t have much, in material terms. Both of the era of the Great Depression, their opportunities for material advancement were very limited. Grandma made clothes for my grandpa, canned fruits and vegetables, and never wasted what she had. More importantly though, she always had a good word for others, great generosity despite simple means, and made me (and all those around her) feel deeply loved and cherished. She loved God and her neighbor like no one else I have ever known. Her optimism, joy, and delight in the “small” things made an impression on my soul that I will never forget. She knew how to be happy, grateful, hopeful, and make those around her feel the same. She knew, despite only an 8th grade education, what life was all about and how to be happy, long before the Positive Psychology movement. Somehow she found the secret, and lived it, and while I am sure this was wonderful for her, I can say without doubt that it was life-changing for the rest of us who had the pleasure to know her.

It is amazing what is locked inside the human spirit; the potential to learn, to truly experience deep joy, meaning, and love. This is the great discovery of Positive Psychology. Skeptics, cynics, and pessimists can scoff, but Grandma Isam was right, and now, at long last, we have the research to prove it.

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About the Authors

J.C. Thomas Rogers, MD, FACS

Dr. Rogers, along with fellow Mayo-trained physician Hugh Davison, established an Urbana clinic and hospital in 1931. Today's Carle institutions grew from this partnership. Dr. Rogers, Carle's first general surgeon, retired in 1969. He died in 1987.

John W. Pollard, MD

Dr. Pollard joined Carle Clinic in 1963 as an internal medicine physician specializing in cardiology. During his 34-year tenure, he helped create the Carle Heart Center and served as chief executive officer for the Clinic and Health Alliance Medical Plans.

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