

# Positive Psychology: Building a Life of Meaning and Flourishing

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Positive psychology is a recent branch of psychology whose purpose was summed up in 1998 by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: "We believe that a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities." Positive psychologists seek "to find and nurture genius and talent", and "to make normal life more fulfilling", not simply to treat mental illness. The field is intended to complement, not to replace traditional psychology. It does not seek to deny the importance of studying how things go wrong, but rather to emphasize the importance of using the scientific method to determine how things go right. Researchers in the field analyze things like states of pleasure or flow, values, virtues, talents, as well the ways that they can be promoted by social systems and institutions.

## Background

Several humanistic psychologists--such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Erich Fromm--developed theories and practices that involved human happiness. Recently the theories of human flourishing developed by these humanistic psychologists have found empirical support from studies by positive psychologists. Positive psychology has also moved ahead in a number of new directions.

Positive psychology began as a new area of psychology in 1998 when Martin Seligman, considered the father of the modern positive psychology movement, chose it as the theme for his term as president of the American Psychological Association, though the term originates with Maslow, in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*, and there have been indications that psychologists since the 1950s have been increasingly focused on promoting mental health rather than merely treating illness. Seligman pointed out that for the half century clinical psychology "has been consumed by a single topic only - mental illness", echoing Maslow's comments. He urged psychologists to continue the earlier missions of psychology of nurturing talent and improving normal life.

The first positive psychology summit took place in 1999. The First International Conference on Positive Psychology took place in 2002. More attention was given by the general public in 2006 when, using the same framework, a course at Harvard University became particularly popular. In June 2009, the First World Congress on Positive Psychology took place.

## Historical roots

Positive psychology finds its roots in the humanistic psychology of the 20th century, which focused heavily on happiness and fulfillment. Earlier influences on positive psychology came primarily from philosophical and religious sources, as scientific psychology did not take its modern form until the late 19th century. (See History of psychology)

Judaism promotes a Divine command theory of happiness: happiness and rewards follow from following the commands of the divine.

The ancient Greeks had many schools of thought. Socrates advocated self-knowledge as the path to happiness. Plato's allegory of the cave influenced western thinkers who believe that happiness is found by finding deeper meaning. Aristotle believed that happiness, or eudaimonia is constituted by rational activity in accordance with virtue over a complete life. The Epicureans believed in reaching happiness through the enjoyment of simple pleasures. The Stoics believed they could remain happy by being objective and reasonable, and they describe many "spiritual exercises" that have been compared to the psychological exercises employed in CBT and Positive Psychology.

Christianity continued to follow the Divine command theory of happiness. In the Middle Ages, Christianity taught that true happiness would not be found until the afterlife. The seven deadly sins are about earthly self-indulgence and narcissism. On the other hand, the Four Cardinal Virtues and Three Theological Virtues were supposed to keep one from sin.

During the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment, individualism came to be valued. Simultaneously, creative individuals gained prestige, as they were now considered to be artists, not just craftsmen. Utilitarian philosophers such as John Stuart Mill believed that moral actions are those actions that maximize happiness for the most number of people, suggesting an empirical science of happiness should be used to determine which actions are moral (a science of morality). Thomas Jefferson and other proponents of democracy believed that "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are inalienable rights, and that it justifies the overthrow of the government.

The Romantics valued individual emotional expression and sought their emotional "true selves," which were unhindered by social norms. At the same time, love and intimacy became the main motivations for people to get married.

#### Methods

"Happiness" encompasses many different emotional and mental phenomena (see below). One method of assessment is Ed Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale. This 5-question survey corresponds well with impressions from friends and family, and low incidences of depression.

The "Remembering self" may not be the best source of information for pleasing the "Experiencing self"

Rather than long-term, big picture appraisals, some methods attempt to identify the amount of positive affect from one activity to the next. Some scientists use beepers to remind volunteers to write down the details of their current situation. Alternatively, volunteers complete detailed diary entries each morning about the day before. An interesting discrepancy arises when researchers compare the results of these short-term "experience sampling" methods, with long-term appraisals.

Namely, the latter may not be very accurate; people may not know what makes their life pleasant from one moment to the next. For instance, parents' appraisals mention their children as sources of pleasure, and yet 'experience sampling' indicates that they were not enjoying caring for their children compared to other activities.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains this discrepancy by differentiating between happiness according to the 'Experiencing Self' compared to the 'Remembering Self'. Kahneman explains that, when we are asked to reflect on experiences, memory biases like the Peak-End effect (e.g. we mostly remember the dramatic parts of a vacation, and how it was at the end) play a large role. One of his more striking findings was in a study of colonoscopy patients. By adding 60 seconds to this invasive procedure, Kahneman actually got participants to report the colonoscopy as more pleasant. He accomplished this by making sure that, for the extra 60 seconds, the colonoscopy instrument was not moved, since movement is the source of the most discomfort. Thus, Kahneman was appealing to the Remembering Self's tendency to focus on the end of the experience. Such findings help explain human error in Affective forecasting - people's ability to predict their future emotional states.

Michael Argyle developed the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire as a broad measure of psychological well-being. This has been criticized as an aggregate of self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest and kindness, sense of humor and aesthetic appreciation.

### **Neuroscientific approach**

Neuroscience and brain imaging has shown increasing potential for helping science understand happiness and sadness. Though it may be impossible to achieve any comprehensive measure of happiness objectively, some physiological correlates to happiness can be measured. Stefan Klein, in his book *The Science of Happiness*, links the dynamics of neurobiological systems (i.e., dopaminergic, opiate) to the concepts and findings of positive psychology and social psychology.

Nobel prize winner Eric Kandel and researcher Cynthia Fu describe their findings that depression can be diagnosed very accurately just by looking at fMRI brain scans. The idea is that, by identifying neural correlates for emotions, scientists may be able to use methods like brain scans to tell us more about all the different ways of being "happy".

### **Evolutionary approach**

The evolutionary perspective offers an alternative approach to understand what happiness or quality of life is about. Briefly, it focuses on the questions: What features are included in the brain that allow humans to distinguish between positive and negative states of mind, and how do these features improve humans' ability to survive and reproduce? It claims that answering these

questions points towards an understanding of what happiness is about and how to best exploit the capacities of the brain with which humans are endowed. This perspective is presented formally and in detail by the evolutionary biologist Bjørn Grinde in his book Darwinian Happiness.

### **General findings by topic**

Money, once one reaches middle class, may be best spent ensuring one's job and social ties are enjoyable.

Happiness has become a very popular discussion topic in popular culture, especially in the Western world. There are many studies being done to demystify the factors that play into happiness. Although "happiness" can be used to refer to many things, the following describes research that is generally related.

One website, Subjective Well-Being Across Cultures, takes an inside look on the differences of happiness on an international level. Eunkook M. Suh, a professor at University of California, and Shigehiro Oishi, a professor at University of Minnesota, discuss key components to different cultures' views on what creates well-being and happiness. An example of how much well-being can vary is illustrated by a study of over 6,000 students in 43 nations to identify their "mean of Subjective Well-Being" on a scale of 1-7. The rate varied wildly, with China coming in at 3.3, and Brazilians at 6.2. Other studies suggested that two of the main factors for this variation are wealth of the country, and whether the country is individualistic or collectivist. They authors go into more detail about how these matter.

### **Age**

The Midlife crisis may mark the first reliable drop in happiness during the average human's life. Evidence suggests that, with the exception of the years 40 - 50, most people generally get happier as they get older. Researchers specify that people in both their 20s and 70s tend to be happier than during midlife, although the measures of happiness change at different rates (e.g. feelings of stress and anger tend to decline after age 20, worrying drops after age 50, enjoyment had been very slowly declining but finally starts to rise after 50, etc.). These findings are based on decades of data, and controls for cohort groups; the data avoids the risk that the drops in happiness during midlife are due to populations' unique midlife experiences, like a war. The studies have also controlled for income, job status and parenting (as opposed to childfreedom) to try and isolate the effects of age. Researchers found support for the notion that there are changes inside of the individual with age that affect happiness.

This could be for any number of things. Psychological factors could include a greater awareness of one's self and preferences; an ability to control desires and hold more realistic expectations;

getting closer to death may motivate people to pursue more goals; improved social skills, like forgiveness, may take years to develop; or happier people may live longer and are slightly overrepresented in the elderly population. Chemical changes that come with age may also be playing a role.

Other studies have found that older individuals report more health problems, but fewer problems overall. Young adults reported more anger, anxiety, depression, financial problems, troubled relationships and career stress. Researchers also suggest that depression in the elderly is often due largely to passivity and inaction - they recommend that people continue to do the things that bring happiness, even in old age.

### **Buying happiness**

In his book *Stumbling on Happiness*, psychologist Dan Gilbert describes research suggesting that money makes a big difference to the poor (where basic needs are not yet met) but has greatly diminished effects once one reaches middle class (i.e. the Easterlin paradox). Professor of Economics Richard Easterlin notes that job satisfaction does not depend on salary. In other words, having extra money for luxuries does not increase happiness as much as enjoying one's job or social network. Gilbert is thus adamant that people should go to great lengths in order to (a) figure out which jobs they would enjoy and (b) find a way to do one of those jobs for a living (that is, provided one is also attentive to social ties).

Studies have routinely showed that nations are happier when people's needs are met. Some studies suggest, however, that people are happier after spending money on experiences, rather than physical things.

### **Education and intelligence**

English poet Thomas Grey said "Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise." Research suggests that neither a good education nor a high IQ reliably increase happiness. Anders Ericsson argues that an IQ above 120 has a decreasing influence on success. Presumably, IQs above 120 do not go much further to cause other happiness indicators like success (with the exception of careers like Theoretical physics, where high IQs are more predictive of success). Above that IQ level, other factors start to matter more, like social skills or a good mentor. One of the main benefits of intelligence and education may simply be that it allows one to reach the middle-class level of need satisfaction (as mentioned above, being richer than this seems to do little for happiness).

Martin Seligman has said that "As a professor, I don't like this, but the cerebral virtues -- curiosity, love of learning -- are less strongly tied to happiness than interpersonal virtues like kindness, gratitude and capacity for love."

## Parenting

While parenting is sometimes held as the necessary path of adulthood, studies are actually mixed as to whether parents are more likely to report being happier than non-parents. When quantitatively measured by self-report, researchers have found that parents prefer doing almost anything else to looking after their children. On the other hand, parents in self-reports are happier than non-parents. This may be due to already happy people tending to have more children than already non-happy people or that more long-term having children gives more meaning to life. One study found having up to three children increased happiness among married couples, but not among other groups with children. Proponents of Childfreedom maintain that this is because one can enjoy a happy, productive life without ever being a parent.

## Weather

There is some evidence that suggests that sunnier climates do not predict happiness. In one study, both Californians and Midwesterners expected the former's happiness ratings to be higher due to a sunnier environment. In fact, the Californian and Midwestern happiness ratings did not show a significant difference. Other researchers say the minimum daily-dose of sunlight is as little as 30min.

That is not to say that the weather is never a factor for happiness. Some psychologists suggest changing norms of sunlight in particular can cause Seasonal affective disorder.

## Religion

Various studies have examined the relationship between Religion and happiness.

## Changes in happiness levels

The human ability of emotional Hedonic Adaptation explains why beauty, fame and money do not generally have lasting effects on happiness (this effect has also been called the Hedonic treadmill). The tendency to adapt is clearly illustrated by studies showing that lottery winners are no happier years later. Other studies have shown that, after equally few years, paraplegics are almost as happy as control groups that are not paralyzed (p. 48). Daniel Kahneman explains that "they are not paraplegic full time...It has to do with allocation of attention". Contrary to our impact biases, lotteries and paraplegia do not change experiences in the ways we think, or even to as great a degree. After adaptation, the paraplegics almost returned to their baseline happiness. Adaptation is much slower for other distracting life changes, like the death of a spouse, or losing one's job. These events can show measurable changes in happiness levels for several years. Thus, adaptation does mitigate the emotional effects of many life events, but not entirely.

Some research suggests that large portions of happiness are within a human's control.

Research indicates that genetics play a very significant role in determining one's baseline happiness levels, according to David Lykken. In her book *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky similarly argues that people's happiness varies around a genetic set point. Importantly, an individual's base-line happiness is not entirely determined by their genetics, and not even by the early life influences on those genetics. Whether or not a person manages to elevate their base-line to the heights of their genetic possibilities depends partly on factors including actions and habits. Some happiness-boosting habits seem to include gratitude, appreciation, and even altruistic behaviour. Other habits and techniques of increasing happiness have emerged from research and are discussed on this page.

Besides training new habits and antidepressants, getting better exercise and a healthier diet have proven to have strong effects on mood. In fact, exercise is sometimes called the "miracle" or "wonder" drug - alluding to the wide variety of proven benefits that it provides.

## **Gender**

Gender effects on wellbeing are paradoxical in that while men report feeling less happy than women, women are more susceptible to depression. Possible explanations include that women may experience more variance (more extremes) in emotion, although women are generally happier.

## **Marriage**

Martin Seligman writes that "Unlike money, which has at most a small effect, marriage is robustly related to happiness.... In my opinion, the jury is still out on what causes the proven fact that married people are happier than unmarried people." (pp. 55-56) There is also little data on alternatives like Polyamory. On the other hand, at least one large study in Germany found no difference in happiness between married and unmarried people.

## **Personality**

An emotionally stable (the opposite of Neurotic) personality correlates well with happiness. Not only does emotional stability make one less prone to negative emotions, it also predicts higher social intelligence - which helps to manage relationships with others (an important part of being happy, discussed below).

Cultivating an extroverted temperament may correlate with happiness for the same reason: it builds relationships and support groups. Some people may be lucky, then, that many personality

theories leave room for the idea that individuals have some control over their long term behaviours and cognitions. Genetic studies indicate that it is genes for personality (specifically extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness) and a general factor linking all 6 traits that account for the heritability of subjective well-being.

### **Social ties**

In the article " Finding Happiness after Harvard" George Vaillant concludes a study on what aspects of life are important for " successful living". Back in the 1940s Arlie Bock, who was in charge of the Harvard Health Services, started a study by selecting 268 Harvard students from graduating classes of 1942, 43', and 44'. He wanted to find out what aspects of life create "successful living". In 1967 psychiatrist, George Vaillant helped continue the study, he did follow up interviews with many of the students, now in their 50's, to see how their lives were going. Then in 2000 Vaillant again interviewed these students on the progress of their lives. The characteristics Vaillant was observing were health, close relationships, and how one dealt with their troubles. George Vaillant found that a key aspect to successful living is healthy and strong relationships.

A widely publicized study from 2008 in the British Medical Journal reported that happiness in social networks may spread from person to person. Researchers followed nearly 5000 individuals for 20 years in the long-standing Framingham Heart Study and found clusters of happiness and unhappiness that spread up to 3 degrees of separation on average. Happiness tended to spread through close relationships like friends, siblings, spouses, and next-door neighbors, and the researchers reported that happiness spread more consistently than unhappiness through the network. Moreover, the structure of the social network appeared to have an impact on happiness, as people who were very central (with many friends, and friends of friends) were significantly more likely to be happy than those on the periphery of the network. Overall, the results suggest that happiness can spread through a population like a virus.

### **Culture**

One website, Subjective Well-Being Across Cultures, takes an inside look on the differences of happiness on an international level. Eunkook M. Suh, a professor at University of California, and Shigehiro Oishi, a professor at University of Minnesota, discuss key components to different cultures' views on what creates well-being and happiness. An example of how much well-being can vary is illustrated by a study of over 6,000 students in 43 nations to identify their "mean of Subjective Well-Being" on a scale of 1-7. The rate varied wildly, with China coming in at 3.3, and Brazilians at 6.2. Other studies suggested that two of the main factors for this variation are wealth of the country, and whether the country is individualistic or collectivist. They authors go into more detail about how these matter.

## Political views

Conservatives are happier than liberals. One explanation being greater acceptance of income inequalities in society.

## Theory

### Broad theories

Some researchers in this field posit that positive psychology can be delineated into three overlapping areas of research:

Research into the Pleasant Life, or the "life of enjoyment", examines how people optimally experience, forecast, and savor the positive feelings and emotions that are part of normal and healthy living (e.g. relationships, hobbies, interests, entertainment, etc.). Martin Seligman says that this most transient element of happiness may be the least important, despite the attention it is given.

The study of the Good Life, or the "life of engagement", investigates the beneficial effects of immersion, absorption, and flow that individuals feel when optimally engaged with their primary activities. These states are experienced when there is a positive match between a person's strength and the task they are doing, i.e. when they feel confident that they can accomplish the tasks they face. (See related concepts, Self-efficacy and play)

Inquiry into the Meaningful Life, or "life of affiliation", questions how individuals derive a positive sense of well-being, belonging, meaning, and purpose from being part of and contributing back to something larger and more permanent than themselves (e.g. nature, social groups, organizations, movements, traditions, belief systems).

These categories appear to be neither widely disputed nor adopted by researchers across the 12 years that this academic area has been in existence. Martin Seligman originally proposed these 3 categories, but has since suggested that the last category, "meaningful life", be considered as 3 different categories. The resulting acronym is PERMA (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and purpose, and Accomplishments).

### A portrait commemorating a family's day together

Professor Philip Zimbardo suggests we might also analyze happiness from a "Time Perspective". Zimbardo suggests sorting people's focus in life by valence (positive or negative) but also by their time perspective (past, present, or future orientation). Doing so may reveal some conflicts between individuals to be conflicts, not over whether an activity is enjoyed, but whether one prefers to risk delaying gratification further. Zimbardo also believes that research reveals an optimal balance of

perspectives for a happy life; he says our focus on reliving positive aspects of our past should be high, followed by time spent believing in a positive future, and finally spending a moderate (but not excessive) amount of time enjoying the present.

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions suggests that positive emotions (e.g. happiness, interest, anticipation) broaden one's awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions. Over time, this broadened behavioral repertoire builds skills and resources. For example, curiosity about a landscape becomes valuable navigational knowledge; pleasant interactions with a stranger become a supportive friendship; aimless physical play becomes exercise and physical excellence.

This is in contrast to negative emotions, which prompt narrow survival-oriented behaviors. For example, the negative emotion of anxiety leads to the specific fight-or-flight response for immediate survival.

Below, research is sorted according to which of Seligman's categories it may be most (but not strictly) related (i.e. the "pleasant", "good", or "meaningful" life). Since these are still fuzzy classifications, research mentioned in one section may be quite relevant in another.

### **The pleasant life**

Simple exercise, such as running, is cited as key to feeling happy.

Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs in which more primitive desires must be met (basic physiological, sense of safety) before social needs can be met (e.g. intimacy), and certainly before one can effectively pursue more conceptual needs (e.g. morality).

There is evidence suggesting that negative emotions can be damaging. In an article titled "The undoing effect of positive emotions", Barbara Fredrickson et al. hypothesize that positive emotions undo the cardiovascular effects of negative emotions. When people experience stress, they show increased heart rate, higher blood sugar, immune suppression, and other adaptations optimized for immediate action. If individuals do not regulate these changes once the stress is past, they can lead to illness, coronary heart disease, and heightened mortality. Both lab research and survey research indicate that positive emotions help people who were previously under stress relax back to their physiological baseline. Other research shows that improved mood is one of the various benefits of physical exercise.

### **The good life**

Ideas of well-being as a good life trace their origins to Aristotelian ideas of eudaimonia. A range of concepts have grown out of this model including self-efficacy, personal effectiveness, flow,

mindfulness etc.

Self-efficacy is one's belief in one's ability to accomplish a task by one's own efforts. Low self-efficacy is associated with depression; high self-efficacy can help one overcome abuse, overcome eating disorders, and maintain a healthy lifestyle. High self-efficacy also improves the immune system, aids in stress management, and decreases pain. A related but somewhat differing concept is Personal effectiveness which is primarily concerned with the methodologies of planning and implementation of accomplishment.

## **Flow**

Flow, or a state of absorption in one's work, is characterized by intense concentration, loss of self-awareness, a feeling of being perfectly challenged (neither bored nor overwhelmed), and a sense that "time is flying." Flow is an intrinsically rewarding experience, and it can also help one achieve a goal (e.g. winning a game) or improve skills (e.g. becoming a better chess player). Anyone can experience flow in many different regards, such as play, creativity, and work. To experience flow, one needs to have the correct ratio of challenge for their particular skill set. Therefore, if one is very skilled in a certain regard, they need a lot of challenge or if they are unskilled they need a small amount of challenge. If one is too challenged it results in a state of anxiety and if one is not challenged enough the result is boredom. Being challenged means flow is, of course, temporarily exciting and stressful, but this Eustress is not harmful because it is not chronic stress.

Czikszentmihalyi identifies nine elements of flow: 1. There are clear goals every step of the way, 2. There is immediate feedback to one's action, 3. There is a balance between challenges and skills, 4. Action and awareness are merged, 5. Distractions are excluded from consciousness, 6. There is no worry of failure, 7. Self-consciousness disappears, 8. The sense of time becomes distorted, 9. The activity becomes "autotelic" (an end in itself, done for its own sake)

## **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness, may be defined as the intentionally-focused awareness of one's immediate experience. The experience is one of a moment-by-moment attention to thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and surroundings. To practice mindfulness is to become grounded in the present moment; one's role is simply as observer of the arising and passing away of experience. One does not judge the experiences and thoughts, nor do they try to 'figure things out' and draw conclusions, or change anything - the challenge during mindfulness is to simply observe. Benefits of mindfulness practice include reduction of stress, anxiety, depression, and chronic pain. See also Reverence (emotion).

Advocates of focusing on present experiences also mention research by Psychologist Daniel

Gilbert, who suggests that daydreaming, instead of focusing on the present, may impede happiness. Other psychologists (see Zimbardo's "Time Perspectives" above) say that it is still important to spend time recalling past positive experiences, and building positive expectations for the future.

### **The meaningful life**

After several years of researching disgust, University of Virginia professor Jonathan Haidt and others studied its opposite, and the term "elevation" was coined. Elevation is a moral emotion and is pleasant. It involves a desire to act morally and do "good"; as an emotion it has a basis in biology, and can sometimes be characterized by a feeling of expansion in the chest or a tingling feeling on the skin.

### **Optimism and helplessness**

There is reason to focus on one's immediate locus of control, and to recognize that this behaviour - from everyone - would solve massive world issues

Learned optimism is the idea that a talent for joy, like any other, can be cultivated. It is contrasted with learned helplessness, which is when one believes that they have no control over what occurs, rather it is something external that dictates their ability to accomplish a task, succeed, etc. Learning optimism is done by consciously challenging self talk if it describes a negative event as a personal failure that permanently affects all areas of the person's life. Reports of happiness have also been correlated with the general ability to "rationalize or explain" social and economic inequalities.

Hope is a learned style of goal-directed thinking in which the person utilizes both pathways thinking (the perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals) and agency thinking (the requisite motivations to use those routes).

Author and journalist J.B. MacKinnon provides a cognitive tool for avoiding helplessness (e.g. paralysis in the face of earth's many problems) in the form of what he calls "Vertical Agitation". The concept comes from research on denial by sociologist Stanley Cohen. Cohen explains that, in the face of massive problems, people tend towards learned helplessness rather than confronting the dissonant facts of the matter. Vertical Agitation, according to MacKinnon, means focusing on only one portion of the problem at a time, and holding oneself accountable for the solving of that problem - all the way to the highest level of government, business and society (e.g. advocating strongly for one thing: eco-friendly lightbulbs). This allows each individual in society to make the vital "trivial" (read:small) changes, without being intimidated by the work that needs to be done as a whole. Mackinnon adds that this will also keep individuals from getting too 'holier than thou' (harassing friends and family about every possible improvement).

## Good work

As mentioned above, having more money does not reliably cause more happiness. Psychologist Howard Gardner has done more extensive research on what it takes to do good work at one's job. He says young generations (particularly in the United States) have been taught to focus on selfish pursuit of money for its own sake. Gardner's alternatives loosely follow the pleasant/good/meaningful life classifications; he believes young people should be trained to pursue excellence in their field, as well as engagement (see flow, above) in accordance with their moral belief systems.

## Strengths and virtues

The Buddhist saying that "Life is Suffering", according to Jordan Peterson, refers to the fact that nature can be harsh and indifferent, which highlights the importance of cultivating virtues

Research and clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson argues that it is natural (but of course not good) for human beings to suffer a great deal. He says this is because living beings are limited and restrained in many important ways. For this reason, Peterson adopts a Buddhist saying that "Life is suffering". He does not think this view is pessimistic, and asserts that accepting the universe's harsh indifference towards living things can free one from the expectation that they should always be happy. This realization can ultimately help one overcome suffering, which is no longer unexpected. This also means that individuals should be all the more delighted when they flourish, when others flourish, or when they build a society where flourishing is anywhere near the norm at all. To Peterson, virtues are important because they give people the tools to escape suffering (e.g. the strength to admit dissonant truths to themselves). Peterson thus believes that suffering is sometimes caused by a false philosophy (one that denies how natural suffering is), and sometimes by a lack of strong virtues - on our part or on the part of people that affect us.

The development of the Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) handbook represents the first attempt on the part of the research community to identify and classify the positive psychological traits of human beings. Much like the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) of general psychology, the CSV provides a theoretical framework to assist in understanding strengths and virtues and for developing practical applications for positive psychology. This manual identifies six classes of virtue (i.e., "core virtues"), made up of twenty-four measurable character strengths.

The introduction of CSV suggests that these six virtues are considered good by the vast majority of cultures and throughout history and that these traits lead to increased happiness when practiced. Notwithstanding numerous cautions and caveats, this suggestion of universality hints that in addition to trying to broaden the scope of psychological research to include mental wellness, the

leaders of the positive psychology movement are challenging moral relativism and suggesting that we are "evolutionarily predisposed" toward certain virtues, that virtue has a biological basis.

Comedians are considered masters of humor.

The organization of these virtues and strengths is as follows:

Wisdom and Knowledge: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, innovation

Courage: bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality

Humanity: love, kindness, social intelligence

Justice: citizenship, fairness, leadership

Temperance: forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence, self control

Transcendence: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

The organization of these virtues into 6 groups is contested. It has been suggested that the 24 strengths identified are more accurately grouped into just 3 or 4 categories: Intellectual Strengths, Interpersonal Strengths, and Temperance Strengths or alternatively Interpersonal Strengths, Fortitude, Vitality, and Cautiousness. These general traits, and even their classifications, have emerged independently elsewhere in literature on values. Some examples have been described by Paul Thagard, including Jeff Shrager's workshops that attempt to discover the habits of highly creative people.

## **Application**

Practical applications of positive psychology include helping individuals and organizations identify their strengths and use them to increase and sustain their respective levels of well-being. Therapists, counselors, coaches, and various psychological professionals, as well as HR departments, business strategists, and others are using these new methods and techniques to broaden and build upon the strengths of individuals who are not necessarily suffering from mental illness or disorder.

Researcher Dianne Hales described a person as emotionally healthy as someone who exhibited flexibility and adaptability to different circumstances, had a sense of meaning and affirmation in life as well as an "understanding that the self is not the center of the universe", had compassion and the ability to be unselfish, along with increased depth and satisfaction in intimate relationships, and who had a sense of control over the mind and body.

Proponents of replacing Gross domestic product with Gross national happiness as the predominant measure of a nation's success often cite positive psychology research.

## Life coaching

In his paper *The Primacy of Positivity*, Dr Timothy Sharp argues that happiness is an important first step in achieving success and productivity in one's life. Dr Sharp's 'The Happiness Institute' promotes the achievement of happiness and positive emotions. Sharp believes that positive psychology better equips coaches because it helps individual clients to achieve their goals and to progress effectively. For instance, Dr Sharp's uses positive psychology as a method of weight loss, known as *The Happiness Diet*. Positive Psychology is used to promote happiness which in turn can increase one's commitment to traditional methods such as diet and exercise.

In Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 book "*The Power of Positive Thinking*" the positive psychology concept of optimalism is introduced. Optimistic thought has led to a significant market for self-help books as well as feel-good religious movements such as the prosperity gospels of Robert H. Schuller.

## In education

Positive psychology is beneficial to schools and students as it encourages individuals to strive to do the best they can whereas scolding has the opposite effect. Clifton and Rath discuss the research conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Hurlock in 1925, who designed a study where fourth, fifth and sixth graders were either praised, criticized or ignored based on their work on math problems. The study found that students who had been praised improved by 71%, those who were criticized improved only by 19%, and those who had been given no feedback improved only by 5%. This early study illustrates that praise is the most effective method of fostering improvement.

According to Clifton and Rath ninety nine out of one hundred people would prefer to be around positive people. People believe that they work more productively when they are around positive people. Positive emotions are contagious so having a teacher or student who is positive can help the other students to be positive and work to the best of their abilities. If there is one negative person, it can ruin the entire positive vibe in an environment. Clifton and Rath believe that 'positive emotions are an essential daily requirement for survival'.

In 2008 a whole-of-school implementation of Positive Psychology was undertaken by Geelong Grammar School (Victoria, Australia) in conjunction with the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. This involved initial training of teaching staff in the principles and skills of positive psychology. Ongoing support was provided by The Positive Psychology Center staff remaining in-residence for the entire year (Seligman et al. 2008).

Staats, Hupp and Hagley (2008) have used positive psychology to explore academic honesty, by identifying positive traits that were displayed by heroes and then determining if the presence of these traits in students could be used to predict their future intent to cheat. Their research has

resulted in 'an effective working model of heroism in the context of the academic environment' (Staats, Hupp & Hagley, 2008).

## **Applications to Clinical Psychology**

A strengths-based approach aims to change clinical psychology to have an equally weighted focus on both positive and negative functioning when attempting to understand and treat distress. The rationale is based on several empirical findings. Positive characteristics interact with negative life events to predict disorder (so studying only negative life events would produce misleading results). Interventions that focus on strengths and positive emotions can be as effective in treating disorder as other more commonly used approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy. The terms positive clinical psychology and other terms are a bit odd as this field has always had scientists and clinicians that address quality of life outcomes. While positive psychology can inform clinical psychology, it is not helpful to stretch beyond this point. This is about changing priorities to address the breadth and depth of the human experience in clinical settings.

### **In the workplace**

Positive psychology has also been implemented in business management practice, but Wong & Davey (2007) acknowledges that although managers can introduce this concept to a workplace, they don't always have the ability to apply it to employees in a positive way. Furthermore, if positive psychology must be applied to an organisation with transparency if it is to be welcomed and committed to by employees. Managers must also understand that the sheer implementation of positive psychology will not combat any commitment challenges they may face. However, it may help employees to be more optimistic to new concepts or management practices.

In their article *The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?*, S. Lyubomirsky et al. say: "The cross-sectional evidence reveals that happy workers enjoy multiple advantages over their less happy peers. Individuals high in subjective well-being are more likely to secure job interviews, to be evaluated more positively by supervisors once they obtain a job, to show superior performance and productivity, and to handle managerial jobs better. They are also less likely to show counter-productive workplace behavior and job burnout."

Positive psychology, when applied correctly can provide employees with a greater opportunity to use skills and vary work duties. However, It is important to remember that changing work conditions and roles can lead to stress amongst employees if they are not properly supported by management in their venture. This particularly holds true for employees who must meet the expectations of organisations with unrealistic goals and targets.

So how does an organization implement change? Lewis et al. (2007) have developed Appreciative

inquiry (AI) which is an integrated, organizational-level methodology for approaching organizational development. Appreciative inquiry is based on an understanding of how organizational resourcefulness is generated through accessing many human psychological processes, such as positive emotional states, imagination, social cohesion and the social construction of reality.

### **In offender rehabilitation**

Traditionally, working with offenders has focused on their deficits (with respect to socialization, schooling etc.) and other "criminogenic" risk-factors. Rehabilitation more often than not takes the form of forced treatment or training for the good of the community. The experience with this approach has not been very rewarding. Positive psychology has made some inroads recently with the advent of the "Good Lives Model", developed by Tony Ward, Shadd Maruna and others with respect to rehabilitation: "Individuals take part ... because they think that such activities might either improve the quality of their life (an intrinsic goal) or at least look good to judges, parole boards and family members (an extrinsic goal)."

### **Other future research**

Positive psychology research and practice is also currently being conducted and developed in various countries throughout the world. In Canada, for example, Charles Hackney of Briercrest College applies positive psychology to the topic of personal growth through martial arts training, and Paul Wong, president of the International Network on Personal Meaning, is developing an existential approach to positive psychology.

An 'intense affect' can certainly be considered with cognitive and behavioral change, which is more slight and complex and is becoming a legitimate area of study, specifically with the links in cognition and motivational responses. For researchers to make further progress there is a need for past theories and methods to be overcome and to encourage the more contemporary research, says Isen (2009). Chang (2008) believes emotional intelligence is not definitive to positive affect and researchers have a number of paths that allow the enhancement of emotional intelligence; however more study is required to track the gradient of positive affect in psychology.

### **Academic Programs that Teach Positive Psychology**

The University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center has developed a masters degree program in positive psychology (MAPP) which is described which they designate "the world's first degree program in positive psychology". This relatively new degree program is under the direction of The Center for Applied Psychology's "senior scholar," James Pawelski, Ph.D. In addition to his work as administrator of the program, Pawelski also teaches courses on "positive intervention" in

the program. In a lecture presented at the John C. Dalton Institute of College Student values, Pawelski describes the degree as consisting of monthly intensives coupled with online course work which can be "pursued without interrupting your career." The degree "explores the history, theory, and basic research methods of positive psychology", "focuses on such issues as the empirical study of positive emotions, strengths-based character, and healthy institutions", and mentors the student in using "these aspects of positive psychology in" their "particular professional setting."

Another academic program that focuses on training students in Positive Psychology and features both an M.A. and Ph.D. tracts, is offered at the Claremont Graduate University's School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences and is affiliated with the school's Quality of Life Research Center. This program "aim to provide excellent graduate education and to facilitate the production of practical knowledge" and emphasizes "sampling methods as well as more traditional experimental and quasi-experimental designs, surveys, and interviews, our faculty and students focus their research on life-long processes and outcomes of behavior as they affect the quality of life".

## **Criticism**

Sample (2003) notes that it is argued by Steven Wolin, a clinical psychiatrist at George Washington University in Washington DC, that the study of positive psychology is a reiteration of older ways of thinking in positive psychology.

The uptake of positive psychology by the popular press, primarily promoting among other claims the health benefits of positive psychology. Snyder and Lopez (cited in Held 2004, p. 17) warn of possible damage to the field of positive psychology through the scientific community becoming caught up in the media's claims of positive psychology. Warning researchers of the field, Snyder and Lopez suggest that they remain within the parameters of scientific professionalism and utilise any research or studies appropriately.

Some negative attributes of positive psychology as described by Held (2004) include the movement's lack of consistency towards the aspect of negativity. She raised issues with the simplistic approach taken by some psychologists in the application of positive psychology. A 'one size fits all' approach is not seen by Held to be beneficial to the advancement of the field of positive psychology, and she suggested a need for individual differences to be incorporated into its application.

Held (2004) argued that while positive psychology makes contributions to the field of psychology, that it is not without its faults. Her 2004 article in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, vol.44, no.1. offered insight into topics including the negative side effects of positive psychology, the negativity that can be found within the positive psychology movement and the current division

inside the field of psychology caused by the differing opinions held by psychologists on positive psychology.

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