

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Positive psychology is a recent branch of psychology that "studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive". Positive psychologists seek "to find and nurture genius and talent", and "to make normal life more fulfilling", not simply to treat mental illness. Positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that seeks to understand positive emotions such as joy, optimism and contentment. Positive psychology is interested in the conditions that allow individuals, groups and organizations to flourish. The field of psychology has proven effective in studying and treating mental illness. The field has proven so effective that some believe it's time to stop directing research toward what makes us mentally ill and start studying what makes us happy. This new subfield is called positive psychology.

Keywords: *Positive psychology, mental illness, psychological techniques, mental maladies, human happiness, Motivation, Personality*

The field of positive psychology is a young one. It was born in the late 1990s under the guidance of University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman. Since then, it has gained some traction among psychologists and the public, especially since proponents are looking for ways to apply accepted psychological techniques to investigating happiness. Positive psychologists face some challenges, however: Psychology successfully brings "people up from negative eight to zero, but [it's] not as good at understanding how people rise from zero to positive eight," writes positive psychologists Shelly L. Gable and Jonathan Haidt [Gable and Haidt]. They say it's time that the field explores the phenomenon of happiness with the same scientific rigor and discipline it used to study mental maladies. After all, everyone wants to be happy.

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.

Current researchers in positive psychology include Sonja Lyubomirsky, Martin Seligman, Ed Diener, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, C. R. Snyder, Christopher Peterson, Barbara Fredrickson, Donald Clifton, Albert Bandura, Shelley Taylor, Charles S. Carver, Michael F. Scheier, Carol Dweck and Jonathan Haidt.

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*. 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. In June 2009, the First World Congress on Positive Psychology took place.

Positive Psychology Components

Happiness, Mental health, Motivation, Positive mental attitude, Confidence, Conspiracy, Courage, Creativity, Curiosity, Hope, Kindness, Leadership, Love, Love of learning, Mental health, Mercy, Meta learning, Mindfulness, Positive affectivity, Positive organizational behavior, Praise, Prudence, Psychological resilience, Wisdom, Gratitude.

Positive Psychology

"Positive psychology is concerned with understanding when and why people thrive, not in ignoring reality. I'm a good example of this point: Most of the work that I presented to the selection committee to win the Templeton prize last year focused on the negative effects of optimism on immune parameters."

It's a field that has rapidly become one of the hottest areas of psychological research. Pioneered, at least in part, by Martin Seligman, the 61-year-old former president of the American Psychological Association and best-selling author, positive psychology is built on the idea that to be truly happy, people must draw upon what Seligman calls "signature strengths"—integrity, critical thinking, street smarts, love of beauty, kindness, perseverance—to reach their full potential.

Optimism

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They also showed higher "natural killer cell cytotoxicity," which reflects the ability of T-cells to actually kill cancer cells in the laboratory.

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One of the many institutions, organizations, and individuals who have brought both enthusiasm and millions of research dollars to positive psychology is John Templeton, a 90-year-old megamillionaire investor and philanthropist interested in questions of religion,

humanity, and the soul. The Templeton Positive Psychology Prize is awarded annually to four researchers in the social sciences who are under 40 or who have spent less than 12 years in the field. Segerstrom received a total of \$100,000—a \$70,000 research grant and \$30,000 for personal use.

The burgeoning field is not without its critics—led, until his death in November of last year, by the late Richard Lazarus, who was a professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley noted for his work on coping. Lazarus disapproved of the rise of positive psychology, which he belittled in scholarly journals as “happiology,” driven by “zealots and simplistic thinking.” Such academic criticism is, for Segerstrom, positively unfounded.

“I do describe my area of research under the rubric of positive psychology,” she explains. “I think the objections to this umbrella term come from critics who think that positive psychologists would be intolerant to science that shows any drawbacks to qualities such as happiness and optimism. However, the people I know in the field, including previous winners of the Templeton prize, are good scientists first and so-called positive psychologists second.

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Which brings us back to those seemingly contradictory results. Like Segerstrom herself, who relaxes from the pressures of academia and research by playing her violin with Kentucky’s Lexington Symphony and Lexington Community Orchestra, understanding optimism and the immune system requires versatility.

It turns out that, like most things in life, the effects of optimism on the immune system are a product of the circumstances. According to Segerstrom, “disappointment theory” fails on several levels.

“Setbacks are inherent to almost every worthwhile human activity, and a number of studies show that optimists are in general both psychologically and physiologically healthier.”

“First,” she says, “when studies have looked at what happens to optimists when things go wrong, they do not show more disappointment or despair than pessimists, and sometimes they show less. Second, if generally positive thoughts and feelings (as in optimism) confer vulnerability, then generally negative thoughts and feelings (as in neuroticism) should be protective. I don’t know of any studies that show this, but I know lots of studies that show the opposite—that negative thoughts and feelings increase vulnerability to stress. Finally, if optimists fell into disappointment and despair every time they had some trouble reaching a goal, they would never achieve long-term positive outcomes. Setbacks are inherent to almost

every worthwhile human activity, and a number of studies show that optimists are in general both psychologically and physiologically healthier.”

Segerstrom’s research is revealing that there are situations in which optimism is a stress reliever and situations in which optimism itself is a stressor. She cites the law student study as an example:

“Take the case in which some of the first-year law students remain in their hometowns to go to school, and others travel to new places. If we look at the people who go away from home, the optimists have higher immune parameters than the pessimists midway through the semester. Consider that they are devoting 100 percent of their time and energy to law school—they are dealing with just one thing.

“On the other hand, take the people who stay home. In addition to law school, they’re still in the middle of all their existing personal and family relationships, friendships, social groups—all the obligations they had before. Sometimes social networks are understanding of schooling that requires some 40 hours of study per week beyond class time. More often they are not, so there are enormous pressures if you try to maintain your relationships. In this group, the optimists had lower immune parameters, because, we believe, of what’s called the persistence model. Meaning that these optimists simply kept trying harder, kept believing they could have it all.”

You can almost hear the lazy grasshopper saying “I told you so” to the industrious ants. But that is not Segerstrom’s point.

“When optimists encounter a setback or slowed progress,” she emphasizes, “they are less likely than pessimists to just give up. They might keep trying or even redouble their efforts. The persistence model brings in physiology and says that when this happens, there could be some physiological costs. In the short term, when you run into trouble, it is easier on your body to give up than to keep trying. However, giving up is not a good answer if you ever want to achieve your goals, so it’s probably healthier in the long run to pay the short-term cost associated with staying engaged with your goals.”

Segerstrom—who over a short period of time has applied for tenure, gotten engaged, begun wedding plans, and bought and begun remodeling a house—could well use her own photo to illustrate the persistence model. She has a plethora of what she describes as “positive expectancies.” She can see the ultimate payoff—something pessimists, studies show, share a general inability to do.

Which leads to a predictable question: Is the optimism researcher herself an optimist? Segerstrom, who never introduces herself as a psychologist on airplanes, for fear of spending the next three hours listening to “very inappropriate disclosures,” graciously replies that she feels “more comfortable calling myself an optimist now that we’re defining that in terms of

the persistence model. I don't identify very well with the carefree, it's-all-good notion of optimism, but I do certainly identify with the 'long-term reward if you make it through' idea!"

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Proof that, while the power of positive thinking may often be less jet engine and more '72 Volkswagen climbing a long hill, it is wise to be optimistic, even in the face of setbacks. Sooner or later, your killer cells will thank you.

Todd Schwartz is a Portland writer who is pretty optimistic—but takes a multivitamin anyway.

Traditionally in psychology, the focus has been on identifying and treating mental health problems such as depression. This is critically important for those facing mental illness however, it provides an incomplete picture of mental health.

Positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that shifts the focus from what is clinically wrong, to the promotion of wellbeing and the creation of a satisfying life filled with meaning, pleasure, engagement, positive relationships and accomplishment.

Gable and Haidt (2005) defined positive psychology as "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions".

Positive psychology is not about putting on a happy face all the time. Life can be hard and disappointments and challenges are inevitable. However, scientific research has shown that there are some strategies and skills that allow people to navigate the challenges of life more effectively and enjoy life despite the upsets.

Practical strategies to increase your psychological well-being

1. Enhancing pleasure

Savouring: Savouring is the awareness of pleasure and of giving deliberate conscious attention to the experience of pleasure. Fred B. Bryant and Joseph Veroff of Loyola University have identified five techniques that promote savouring:

- Sharing with others - Seek out others to share the experience and tell others how much you value the moment. This is the single strongest predictor of the level of pleasure
- Memory building - Take mental photographs, or even a physical souvenir of the event, and reminisce about it later with others
- Self-congratulation - Don't be afraid of pride; tell yourself how great you are and remember how long you have waited for this to happen
- Sharpening perception - Focus on certain elements and block out others, like closing your eyes and listening to the music

- Absorption - Allow yourself to become totally immersed and try not to think, just 1
- Avoid forming habits: Rapidly repeated indulgence in the same pleasure does not work. Neurons are wired to respond to novel events, and not to fire if the events do not provide new information. Seek out a variety of experiences and spread out pleasurable events over time. Surprise yourself or others with small presents of pleasure.

2. Engagement

Mindfulness: Mindlessness pervades much of human activity. We act and interact automatically, without much thinking. Mindful attention to the present moment can be developed through meditation and mindfulness based therapies. Through mindfulness we can focus our perspective and sharpen our experience of the present moment.

Nurture relationships: Your income level has a surprisingly small effect on your psychological well-being. The most fundamental finding from positive psychology is that strong personal relationships have the greatest impact on your satisfaction with life. Make sure that you invest time and energy in your friends and family.

Identify and use your strengths: Think about your personal strengths and how you might use them in your everyday life. Are you a leader, playful, fair, curious or original? Do you have a good sense of perspective? Do you love learning? Are you genuine? Are you good at teamwork? If you have internet access you can take an online test on Martin Seligman's website (www.authentic happiness.org) to explore your personal strengths. Cultivate and use your strengths at work, in family life and in your leisure time.

Seek out 'flow' experiences: Through his research, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi sought to understand how people felt when they most enjoyed themselves and why. He developed the concept of 'flow' which describes a state of joy, creativity and total involvement. Problems seem to disappear and there is a feeling of transcendence. 'Flow' is the way people describe their state of mind when they are doing something for its own sake. Some activities consistently produced 'flow' such as sport, games, art and hobbies.

Sikszentmihalyi has identified the key ingredients to creating these optimal experiences:

- The task is challenging and requires skill
- We concentrate
- There are clear goals
- We get immediate feedback
- We have deep, effortless involvement
- There is a sense of control
- Our sense of self vanishes
- Time stops

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