



Get Happy: A Positive Psychology Primer

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A shift is taking place in psychology. Since World War II, psychology has focused itself almost entirely upon pathology and healing, but Positive Psychology has appeared, advocating for giving as much attention to strength as to weakness, and showing more interest in recognizing the best things in life than in repairing what has been damaged, and paying as much notice to fulfilling the lives of healthy people as to healing the wounds of those who have suffered. Positive Psychology has sought to change the focus from fixation with repairing the worst in life, to building up more of what is best.

By no means is Positive Psychology new. Psychologically minded people have advocated living the good life for many centuries. Early psychological studies of

giftedness and marital happiness, research into effective parenting, and Jung's investigations into the search and discovery of meaning in life. Especially before World War II, making the lives of all people better and nurturing genius were more central in psychology.

Of course psychological research into identifying and treating mental illness has been rich. Previously intractable illnesses can now be cured or relieved as a result of this work. Positive psychologists are simply saying that the psychology of the twentieth century, despite its remarkable gifts, has been incomplete and unbalanced, neglecting research into happy, satisfied people and vital, thriving communities. In order to improve the human condition, positive psychologists say, it



Positive Psychological Interventions

Here are four activities aimed at improving the experience of positive emotions, like joy, contentment, and gratitude. When we feel good, there can be positive effects in health, creativity, and resilience. Positive interventions help people to optimize family and childrearing, friendship and romance, recreation and leisure, education, work, and service to others.

1. *Three Good Things*

This is also known as a blessings exercise. Positive psychologists have noticed that bad stuff sticks to us like fluff to Velcro, whereas good experiences slip off of us like a fried egg from Teflon. For two weeks take five or ten minutes some time late in the day. During each of the first seven days, simply write down the first three good things that have happened to you that day as they come to mind. Ask yourself why each thing happened. Ask yourself what you can learn from this good thing. Ask how you can get more of this. During the second week continue with what you have been doing previously but begin to look for patterns. For many people, the majority of the blessings relate to certain aspects of one's life. For example, time with children or one's spouse may be the most positive, or it may be about money or work, or may relate to time alone. During this second week, try to broaden your sense of blessings. Try to think of good things happening in other areas. Many people find that this skill sticks. It feels good and we keep doing it.

2. *Long Cuts*

As a way of building positive emotion, it can help to pay attention to savouring day-to-day life. This is fast-paced, driven culture and the



shortcuts we take everyday arguably deprive us of life. Everyday, choose one "long-cut." A two-minute detour on your drive home from work may allow you to see things differently than you normally do. Making a cake from scratch instead of using a mix may help you to slow down.

3. *The Gratitude Letter*

Write a letter today by hand expressing in detail why you are grateful to some particular person. This could be a family member, a friend, someone you *work with, or anyone for whom you are thankful. Go out of your way to read your letter to that person.

4. *Incidental Contact*

Pick a day and make a point of expressing gratitude—eye-to-eye, person-to-person—to everyone you have contact with. The bus driver, the cashier at the store, your child's teacher, and your spouse are likely to feel better for hearing your gratitude, and you're likely to feel better for it too. The idea here is building positive emotional muscle.



is not enough to help those who suffer. It is as important to attend to majority of "normal" people who need help with finding a richer and more fulfilling existence.

At the individual level, Positive Psychology examines well-being, contentment, and explores how it is that normal people flourish under normal conditions, works to find out what enables happiness, how optimism, responsibility, and hope affect health. This psychology asks what makes us wise, and examines the conditions under which talent and creativity bear the best fruit.

Of course individuals and their experiences only exist within a social context, so positive psychology takes community and institutions into account. At the level of family, positive psychology documents the positive qualities of families whose children flourish. The quality of social relationships has a lot to do with happiness. Some families seem to help their children identify and nurture their unique strengths, and helping kids find places in life wherein they can best live out these strengths. Some families are better than others at fostering resilience in their children.

Positive psychology examines institutions which improve the quality of life and thereby prevent the illnesses that emerge when life feels barren and meaningless. Excellent schools encourage positive qualities which counterbalance selfishness, alienation, and the sense of meaninglessness that brings on despair. How can we prevent problems like depression or substance abuse or

schizophrenia in young people who are genetically vulnerable or who live in worlds that nurture these problems? How can we prevent murderous schoolyard violence in children who have access to weapons, poor parental supervision, and a mean streak? In education: nurturing giftedness, creating better schools and educational institutions (and thereby reducing problems which result from bad institutions) A child with exceptional

intellectual abilities needs a very different educational environment than most other kids. Far from being merely tolerable to its employees, great workplaces foster satisfaction among workers, and help employees to feel more fully themselves than they would have without their jobs and workplaces. Positive psychologists try to make sense of these facts.



Martin Seligman

More than just fixing what is broken; positive psychologists also nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is also related to work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. Psychologists starting with positive assumptions work to build on the things that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish. Psychologists encourage clients to recognize their virtues and strengths, talents and abilities, and foster a fuller expression of these. Positive interventions help people to optimize family and childrearing, friendship and romance, recreation and leisure, education, work, and service to others.

Positive Psychology a science of human strength. It makes sense then that as



research, it would address the positive aspects of human experience, the elements that make life worth living. Positive theory aims to understand the good life more fully. Investigation of hope and wisdom, creativity and courage, positive relationships and growthful institutions, and research into relationships between positive emotions and physical health. □

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www.authentichappiness.org Website supports *Authentic Happiness*.

