

## Positive Psychology: A Search for Well-Being

Many of us spend a significant amount of time focusing on what can we improve about ourselves, including being more healthy, solving our problems, reducing stress, being a better parent, spouse, or family member, and on and on. But life is not all about targeting or avoiding the negatives. It is also important to seek out and pay attention to the positives. An important part of well being is being mindful of your strengths, your fortunes, your loved ones, and your successes. These are key ingredients for good self care.

Unlike traditional psychology that focuses on psychopathology and disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression, etc.), positive psychology is based on the belief that people want more than an end to suffering. We want to lead fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within ourselves, and to enhance our experiences of love, work, and play. [More](#)

Positive psychology emphasizes the importance of going beyond the physical and psychological problems in your life, to incorporating and paying attention to positives in your life.

### What Is Happiness?

It has been suggested that people can take several pathways to reach "happiness":<sup>1</sup>

- 1) positive emotion and pleasure (the pleasant life)
- 2) engagement, being one with and immersed in life (the engaged life)
- 3) meaning—find and serve something that you think is larger than you are (the meaningful life)

Research shows that people pursue happiness along each of these pathways, however the people who are most satisfied orient toward all three, particularly engagement and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Finding short-term pleasure is more simple: Buy something, eat a good meal, or accomplish a task. Cultivate meaning and learning to really *live* life is more challenging. Many of us simply go through the motions. It is important to stay out of our heads and dive into things we enjoy and feel are important. For instance, during family time, you are not really participating if you are thinking about chores that need to be done,

work-related issues, etc. Positive psychology techniques can help you become more engaged and find meaning in your life. [More](#)

## **Do Positive Psychology Techniques Actually Improve Happiness?**

Research study found that people who completed online Happiness Building Exercises were indeed happier.<sup>3</sup> The following exercises left people feeling happier and less depressed for six months:

- 1) Participants identified and used one of their strengths in a new way every day for a week.
- 2) Participants wrote down three things that went well, and why they went well, every day for a week each day.

People who expressed gratitude to someone who had been kind to them, but they had not yet thanked, experienced positive changes for a month. Several other exercises also had some positive benefit. The great thing about these exercises, and those like them, is that they are fairly simple and do not require a lot of time. Taking a few minutes each day can lead to lasting changes in your well-being.

## **Identify Your Strengths**

Most of us have more strengths than we realize. Sometimes we have difficulty noticing them, particularly when people are stressed, depressed, or anxious. Constantly focusing on the negatives of life and yourself is not helpful. One useful strategy is to identify your strengths—not your strengths and weaknesses, just your strengths. Ask yourself what you have to offer along a number of domains including relationships (e.g., family, friend, partner, parent, community, etc.), work (e.g., career, homemaking), character, spirituality, etc. Remind yourself of things you have accomplished. It may be tempting to “yes, but” and identify faults as well, but try to let that go. We spend enough time acknowledging our faults; sometimes it is nice to appreciate our strengths.

The [VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire](#) measures 24 character strengths. What are your top strengths? Registering and creating a password gives you access to this test and several others free of charge.

Once you have identified your strengths it is important for you to stay mindful of them. Set yourself up for a positive outcome by seeking out activities that cater to your strengths. It will be easier for you to be reminded of the things you are good at if you can see your skills in action. Make sure and incorporate them into your daily life through your interactions with others and the world. Remember, research shows that people who identified and used one of their strengths in a new way every day for a week felt happier.<sup>3</sup>

## **Concrete Steps to Bring Positive Psychology Into Your Life**

There are many ways to enhance your well-being without revamping your whole life. There are small things we can do every day. Here are some ideas that researchers studying positive psychology have suggested:

1. Do things that you love. Choose your career and activities in line with your abilities.
2. When you are faced with something negative, try and see the positives. View things through rose-colored lenses. Although some people find this Pollyannaish, optimism and looking on the bright side can be very helpful for your overall sense of well-being.
3. Laugh and smile as often as possible. Laughter is very therapeutic. Believe it or not, sometimes smiling even when you don't feel like it can be a pick-me-up.
4. Do good deeds for others and be a good citizen.
5. Turn obstacles into opportunities. Here's a helpful "CORE" acronym:
  - C = Control and recognize your own power in the situation
  - O = Own your part of the problems and take responsibility for solving it. Life is a transaction—you do have a role.
  - R = Reach—don't let the problem leak into other parts of your life. One negative event does not need to destroy all the other positives in your life.

E = Endurance—don't let things get you down. We all experience bumps that do not need to derail us from the many other important things in life. Keep going!

[More](#)

## Books and Websites

### [Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment](#)

*M.E. Seligman*

### [Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life](#)

*M.E. Seligman*

### [Authentic Happiness](#)

Improve well-being. Registration on this web site gives you access to several online tests that measure your strengths, along with other positive psychology-related resources.

<sup>1</sup>Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>2</sup>Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 25–41.

<sup>3</sup>Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychological Association*, 60, 5, 410–421.