

Happy Days

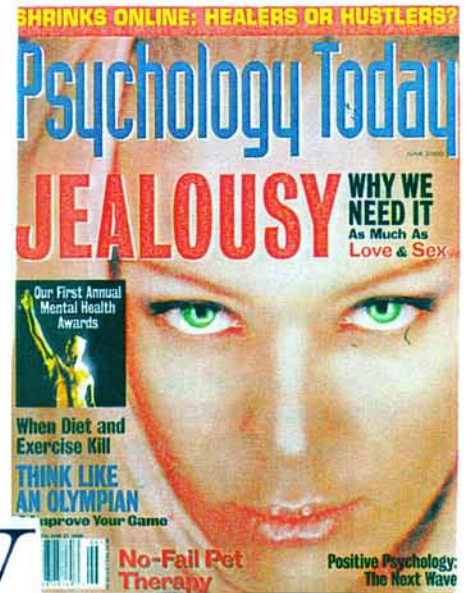
...are here again, as American psychology shifts its focus from what is wrong with humans to what is right. How can “Positive Psychology” improve your life starting today? By Alison Stein Wellner and David Adox

Five-year-old Nikki—overcome by wet, mushy earth—began throwing weeds in the air, dancing, laughing and shrieking while her father, Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D, former president of the American Psychological Association, was trying to garden. Seligman yelled at her to be quiet. She walked away, head down—only to return heroically a moment later: “Daddy, I want to talk to you,” she said. “You may not have noticed, but I used to be a whiner. I whined every day from the time I was 3 until the time I was 5. And, you know, Daddy, on my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn’t going to whine anymore. And that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and I haven’t whined since. And if I can stop whining, Daddy, you can stop being so grumpy.”

It was for good reason that Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, related this innocent exchange to hundreds of colleagues from a podium in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1999.

“Nikki was right,” he said. “For 50 years of my life, I’ve walked around being grouchy and grumpy.” His daughter’s precociousness had inspired an epiphany: “Witnessing Nikki’s potential to see into the soul,” he said, showed him that something was dreadfully wrong with psychology. Why do we only focus on negative behavior patterns, rather than learning to nurture our children’s—and our own—untold strengths? “There is a misguided emphasis in psychology on finding the problem and correcting it.” Seligman mesmerized a professional audience, even bringing tears to some eyes, as he put forth a new school of psychology that seeks to understand and build human strengths.

The overall goal of “positive psychology” is to enhance our experiences of love, work and play. It is a psychologist’s “birthright,” says Seligman, to explore optimism, love, perseverance,



ILLUSTRATIONS: CHRIS GALL

originality, responsibility, good parenting, altruism, civility, moderation and tolerance. "This is a revelation for a group that has focused on dysfunction, illness, healing and coping strategies," which are just a small corner of the mental health field.

It is no surprise that in the psychological literature over the last 30 years, there have been 54,040 abstracts containing the keyword "depression," 41,416 naming "anxiety," but only 415 mentioning "joy."

Furthermore, Seligman believes that only a small number of the 18 million people diagnosed with depression actually suffer from biologically based depression, which, he says, means our conception of depression is all wrong. It is not something created by rejection or childhood traumas that make us feel bad or say negative things, he says. It's much less complex than that. Maybe, "what looks like a symptom of depression—negative thinking—is itself the disease," Seligman says. This thought has driven him to devote a large part of his life's work to learning how to change patterns of negative thinking.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D., is Seligman's partner in the positive psychology movement. As a young boy in Hungary, he witnessed firsthand the devastation of World War II, leaving him, ironically, with a sense of awe: How do we explain those people who remain strong during war, those who are able to withstand tragedy, who are able to live a happy life even when everything else is falling apart? he wondered. Young Csikszentmihalyi's fascination drew him decades later to positive psychology research.

Csikszentmihalyi, a professor at Claremont Graduate University, co-authored with Seligman the introduction to the *American Psychologist's* January 2000 special issue on happiness, excellence and optimal human functioning. Csikszentmihalyi explains that therapy rarely helps us because its goal is to bring us to a normal state, but that "for most people, normal life is not so hot." In his eyes,

traditional psychology has failed at one of its central missions, "the optimization of life."

Although positive psychology is still in its infancy, Seligman projects that the movement's research will yield methods of making exercise less tedious, work more rewarding, relationships more enjoyable—in short, making what is good in life even better. Consider

Martin Seligman has been called 'the Freud of the next century.'



marriage, for example. A good marriage therapist might teach partners how to fight constructively, says Seligman, how to change a bad marriage into a workable one. But, the question is, how do you make a workable marriage sublime? Or take adolescent psychology. Rather than focusing on how to make bad apples less bad, positive psychology asks: How can we build morally exemplary kids?

Seligman says that America at the millennium is entering a world-historic moment similar to that of Athens in the fifth century B.C., Florence in the 15th century or Victorian England in that it is defined by prosperity, freedom and overall well-being. We now have the

luxury to "expand the study of the human mind to include not only illness, but virtues as well," he says, adding that we must do so in order to stay relevant.

Seligman is currently working on a supplement to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the leading authority on mental disorders. "The DSM is the 'knowology' of what's wrong with you. Our book is the 'knowology' of virtues," Seligman told PT. "Positive psychology literature will [use this knowledge of virtues to] teach 'learned optimism'—how to maximize joy and good—which will help prevent depression."

The fledgling movement is already off to an impressive start. In just two years, it has raised several million dollars, including \$800,000 from the Adenberg School of Commitment and \$750,000 from the Templeton Foundation, and, late last year, it held its first-ever Positive Psychology Summit in Lincoln, Nebraska. While one summit participant, psychologist and best-selling author Mary Pipher, Ph.D., went so far as to call Martin Seligman "the Freud of the next century," the man and his field are not without their critics.

Some "humanistic" psychologists claim that Abraham Maslow, Ph.D., and Carl Rogers, Ph.D., came up with the concept 40 years ago—and that Seligman is just "reinventing the wheel." But Seligman counters that there's a big difference between humanistic psychology and positive psychology.

"Maslow and Rogers were hostile toward empirical science and there was never any science in their journals," he says. "For positive psychology, however, there are already at least 60 science-based research projects under way."

Goals of the movement include:

- Developing two complementary branches of science and practice: one that alleviates and prevents negative traits and feelings, and another that promotes well-being.
- Changing the nature of psychotherapy by developing ways to identify and nurture patients' strengths.
- Developing a curriculum for teaching positive psychology, both at universities

and in high-school psychology classes.

- Launching a fund-raising campaign to support expanded scientific research.

While these measures may take years, there are concrete steps we can take right now to bring positive psychology into our lives. Five psychologists tell us how:

1. Whistle While You Work In 1963, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began a long-term cross-cultural study on the quality of life and sense of motivation of artists, musicians and athletes. After conducting more than 8,000 interviews and amassing a quarter of a million questionnaire responses from people around the world, he discovered that one key to human happiness is loving your everyday profession. “Whenever people are doing something they enjoy, something they want to do and keep doing because of

the experience they get from the activity itself, they report very positive phenomenological states.”

Findings were similar across Thai and Cambodian mountain villages, South American peasant communities, Navajo hunters and industrialized European workers. These athletes and creative types were universally absorbed in the moment when engaging in their art; the activities were challenging in accordance with their skill level; and they got immediate positive feedback from their task, he says.

In Csikszentmihalyi’s book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (Basic Books, 1997), he explains that to gain satisfaction from everyday monotony, we should do what athletes and creative types do: choose tasks that are in line with our abilities, set clear goals and seek feedback from friendly observers.

2. See Through Rose-Colored Lenses When you’re irritated or terrified, focus on something positive, advises Dr. Barbara L. Fredrickson, Ph.D., director of the Fredrickson Social Psychophysiology Laboratory at the University of Michigan. Her studies prove that positive thinking and exposure to positive stimuli reduce tension.

In her 1998 study, Fredrickson told participants they would have to give a speech shortly, making them nervous. She then showed several of them a video of a puppy playing and waves lapping at a shoreline. Fredrickson’s team monitored participants’ cardiovascular reactions, since negative emotions such as fear and anger create a measurable physical response. The researchers found that focusing on positive stimuli—in this case, the animal and the ocean—was powerful enough to return the participants to their normal level of cardiovascular function.

But Frederickson is not simply advising, “take your mind off the negative.” When given neutral stimuli—a video of a computer screen saver—participants’ heart rates did not normalize. Shifting the focus to something positive is key, she says.

Fredrickson also found that people who already exhibited good coping skills and a happy demeanor were more resilient and relaxed at the end.

But it’s not just the sunny disposition that’s helping optimists. Professor Chris Peterson of the University of Michigan has found that optimists work hard to live more healthfully. “[They] don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t salt the food, don’t eat those gooey desserts,” he says.

Also, it turns out that nurturing optimistic explanatory styles is a kind of preventative medicine, and it can be taught to children. In Philadelphia, Seligman and his colleagues have been running a middle-school program that teaches kids to deal more effectively with setbacks. Research shows that kids who go through the program are much less prone to depression as adults.

Why might optimists enjoy all these advantages? Several studies point to their key trait—resilience. Because they don’t turn setbacks into catastrophes, optimists are better able to bounce back from emotional and physical stress than others.

While it’s accepted that stress compromises our immune system, psychoneuroimmunologists are now looking at how optimism and positive experiences help the brain and immune system run even more smoothly.

3. Laugh It Up Dacher Keltner, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, studied people who had little reason to laugh: people whose spouses had died six months before. Most psychologists consider a period of sadness or anger after such a traumatic event to be normal and healthy, and positive emotions after the death of a spouse to be pathological. But Keltner—who was struck by how little academic literature focuses on the quirks and patterns of positive human emotion—wasn’t so sure.

He interviewed mourners and noted their tendency to laugh or smile through their sadness just weeks after a loved one’s death. He then discovered that those who had displayed more positive emotions showed less depression and

The Pursuit of Happiness

My turn toward positive psychology occurred a decade ago when, as a psychology textbook author, I came across surprising and vastly underreported data on human happiness. After exploring the works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener and Martin Seligman—the Jedi master of positive psychology—I added happiness and optimism to my texts. Soon after, I wrote *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Avon, 1993), which focuses on subjective well-being, the first of Seligman’s three pillars of positive psychology.

I explore the second and third pillars, positive character and positive communities, in my new book, *The American Paradox* (Yale, 2000). More than ever, we have big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale. We celebrate prosperity but yearn for purpose. We cherish freedom but long for connection. It is time, I conclude, to dream a new American dream, one we positive psychologists hope to help make a reality.

—David G. Myers, Ph.D., psychology professor, Hope College, Michigan.

anxiety two to four years later.

Keltner now speculates that humor can transform the sadness of a tragedy. "Laughter is a healthy mechanism; it allows you to disassociate yourself from the event so you can engage in more healthful and social emotions." But, he adds, the power of laughter needs to be more fully examined by positive psychology researchers.

4. Give the Gift That Gives Back The virtues of "giving" are as underinvestigated as those of laughter. But when you do a good deed, you are helping more than just the recipient. "You are helping everybody," says Jonathan Haidt, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at the University of Virginia.

Of course it feels good to be on the giving end, but Haidt suggests that people witnessing others performing good deeds also benefit; they experience an emotion called "elevation." "If you see someone help others, show gratitude, behave honorably or act heroically, this triggers elevation," he explains. "Elevation makes people more open and loving toward others; it makes them feel better about humanity."

Haidt, who was studying human morality when he first heard of positive psychology a few years ago, believes that human nature's virtuous motives have not been sufficiently appreciated. "Getting deeper into the study of morality showed me that human nature is very much two-sided; for every bad side to our nature, there's a good one."

5. Seize the Power One winter, when he was 12, Paul Stoltz, Ph.D., asked his father a difficult question. Their flight had been delayed, and they were mesmerized by the numbers of "business drones" marching past them through the airport. "Dad, why are these people so dead?" Stoltz asked.

"I guess it's because life is hard," his father answered.

"So am I going to end up like that, too?" Stoltz asked poignantly.

Troubled by that possibility, Stoltz's

father thought for a moment and said, "Some people seem to be able to escape."

Stoltz says this exchange planted the seeds of his research on strategies for dealing with adversity. His method, spelled out in his book *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles Into Opportunities* (Wiley, 1997), uses the acronym CORE to preserve psychological health in negative situations. He explains: "C" is for Control—recognize your own power in a situation. "O" is for Ownership—what part of the problem do you take responsibility for solving? "R" is for Reach—don't catastrophize, and don't let the problem leak into other parts of your life. "E" is for Endurance—don't let adversity get

you down for long. Stoltz believes that, on our own, we can get to the "core" of our potential for happiness. ■

Alison Stein Wellner and David Adox are freelance writers, in Delaware and New York, respectively.

READ MORE ABOUT IT

The Science of Optimism and Hope: Research Essays in Honor of Martin E.P. Seligman, Jane E. Gillham, Ed. (Temple Foundation Press, 2000).

The Optimistic Child, M. Seligman, K. Reivich, L. Jaycox and J. Gillham, Ph.D.s (Harperperennial Library, 1996).



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Dr. Paul G. Stoltz is the National Bestselling Author of two books, including—*Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities*, and *Adversity Quotient @ Work*.

He is the originator of and world's leading expert on the Adversity Quotient® (AQ®) theory, measure, and methodology currently in use by industry-leading companies worldwide. Dr. Stoltz founded PEAK Learning, Inc., a global research and consulting firm, in 1987.



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