



LIFE SURFING LIFE DANCING

Published in *Life Surfing Life Dancing*
in 2013 by Future Leaders
(www.futureleaders.com.au)

I

Get happy: Using the powerful principles of positive psychology to live your best life!

Timothy Sharp

Historically, psychology has focused almost exclusively on identifying and alleviating problems. We have done a fantastic job of helping people overcome and deal with stress and depression and anxiety and more but ... is that really all we want for life? For too long, we have assumed that an absence of problems is as good as it gets, but is it? If you want more than just an 'OK' life, then keep reading.

Positive psychology is a relatively new discipline in which the ultimate goal is not just alleviating distress, but rather promoting happiness and flourishing — a full sense of mental and physical health and wellbeing. The goal of positive psychology is to help more people live their best lives in which they thrive, not just survive. Even more than this, positive psychology is interested in promoting health and wellness, not just in individuals, but also in couples and families and even more so, in schools and organisations and throughout institutions generally! This chapter has been written to help you understand this exciting new science of happiness and especially, to help you enjoy more of it.

What and why?

I would like to begin by posing and then answering two simple but important questions: What is happiness and why would one want it?

Many readers might assume they know the answer to these questions, especially the first one, but as I will refer to throughout this chapter, there are many myths and misconceptions about happiness and if we do not ever really understand what it is, and just as importantly what it is not, then we will always struggle to achieve and ultimately to enjoy it.

So let us begin with the important assignment of defining happiness. Having read literally thousands of research and popular articles, as well as hundreds of textbooks; having attended many, many conferences and been involved in many, many discussions on this topic, I believe it is worth noting that there is not, actually, common agreement on an answer to this; rather, there are different opinions, although the varied responses to this question tend to fall into one of the following two categories:

- The first and easiest way to think of happiness is as a positive emotion; or more accurately, as a range of positive emotions. Happiness is just one of a number of enjoyable positive emotions, including joy and excitement, calm and contentment and everything in between (including pride and satisfaction and peace and love and so on).
- A second way of thinking about happiness is as shorthand for living ‘the good life’. This is ultimately what positive psychology is interested in — not just enjoying positive emotions, but more so, living a great life that includes positive emotions and pleasure, but also fully engaging in life, building and fostering good quality relationships so one feels connected and as though one belongs, living a life with and on purpose, achieving goals that are meaningful and satisfying, possessing a high level of physical health and wellbeing, and finally, although not to be underestimated, having fun and playing!

As one can see from this two-part definition, happiness is much more than just slapping on a fake smile. It is about smiling, but it is also about making a positive contribution to the world, living healthily and interacting positively with others, which raises another important part of real and meaningful happiness — giving to and being of service to others.

Each of these components of happiness will be discussed in more detail below, but for now, the next question is why would one want to be happy? Although the answer to this might seem obvious, there are many more reasons than many might think!

In short, happiness (by definition) feels good. So the simplest answer to the aforementioned question is that we should want to be happy because it feels nice. This is a perfectly valid reason for wanting happiness in our lives, but it is worth noting that there are many other, just as valid and arguably more important, reasons as well.

In addition to feeling good (controlling for other variables) happy people are also far more likely to:

- be healthier — they get sick less often and if they do get sick they recover more quickly
- have better quality relationships — that is, more satisfied in their relationships and less likely to experience problems (plus more likely to deal with problems effectively)
- perform better academically
- experience success in all areas of life including in the workplace — due to (among other things) optimism and resilience and better use of strengths
- be more resilient
- live longer (and with a better quality of life)
- and much, much more ...

So if feeling good is not enough of a motivation for you, then maybe some of these other positive ‘side-effects’ might be!

A question that I often ponder, then, is why are so many people not as happy as they could be? In response to this I have developed the following response.

The primacy of positivity

Having spent many years working with people trying to find happiness (and achieving various forms of success) I have discovered that one of the main obstacles to happiness is what I have come to call ‘the tyranny of when’. To what am I referring, you may well ask. Well, ‘the tyranny of when’ is the phenomenon we have all experienced at some time or other when we say to ourselves (or to others) that: ‘I’ll be happy when ... when I have more money, when I have a bigger house, when I have a better job, when I lose some weight, when I find the love of my life, when [insert pretty much anything you like in here].’

Now although there is nothing inherently wrong with aspiring to be and to have more; the problem for many people is that (for a variety of reasons) they never get there; and even if they do, they then think of something else that they ‘need’ before they can really feel happy. In recent years, positive psychologists have come to refer to this as the ‘hedonic treadmill’, which is a great metaphor likening the experience to one where we are constantly running as though on a treadmill chasing that carrot, and never actually getting anywhere! As a result, we do not ever really get to experience as much joy or satisfaction as we would like but, even worse than not experiencing positive emotions like happiness, such an approach to life can actually cause us to feel frustrated, disappointed and downright miserable (how else would you feel if you frequently imagined a wonderful reward or prize but never quite got your hands on it?).

But despite being relatively unsuccessful and unhelpful, it is not really all that surprising that many people take this approach, as this is what we have always been taught — that if you work hard you will achieve your goals, and if you achieve your goals you will

then be happy. Except that, as noted above, this approach can, at times, be counter-productive.

With this in mind, and with a view to helping more people find happiness and success, I have developed a new approach — get happy first and then you will be more likely to achieve your goals (whatever they might be — losing weight, getting that promotion, finding the love of your life, and so on). And the good news is, this is not something I just made up. Well, it is something I made up, or at least something on which I put a new twist, but it is based on good, solid science. Technically, it is based on a theory developed by an American academic, Professor Barbara Fredrickson, and it is typically referred to as the ‘broaden and build theory of positive emotions’. Let me explain further.

Traditionally, psychologists have focused on negative emotions, and as a result we know quite a bit about how they affect us. In short, when we experience negative emotions (such as fear or anxiety) we close up. We tend to withdraw physically and psychologically and, as a result, we tend not to cope as well. In contrast, ‘broaden and build’ has come about through the investigation of positive emotions, and what we have discovered is that positive emotions lead to improved performance, coping and resilience via the broadening of our minds and the increased capacity to build on previous experiences.

What this means is that positive emotions are not just nice; they are nice, but they are also much more important than that. What they do is help us enjoy the good times even more *and* (and this is an important ‘and’) help us cope with the tough times. As a result, positive emotions are not just phenomenon we should enjoy after we have achieved something of significance, they are also tools we can use to increase our chances of achieving outcomes of significance.

This is a finding of profound importance, because what it means is that rather than succumbing to the tyranny of ‘when’, we can utilise ‘the power of then’; by which I mean that we can leverage off the idea that if we can create happiness first THEN we can

achieve more of our goals. How great would that be? We get to enjoy the wonders of positive emotions both before and after succeeding in our efforts.

So, in summary, now that we understand what happiness really is and why it is important, we need to avoid the tyranny of *when* and utilise the primacy of *positivity*. Before we look at how to practically do this, there is one more common obstacle to happiness I need to address.

Learning to live with and love imperfections

One of the greatest myths about happiness is that it is something you only experience when everything is just right, resolved, in place ... perfect! But this is just an extension of variant of the just discussed 'tyranny of when'! We never get there; because life is not perfect ... and it never will be. I do not say this to be negative or pessimistic, but rather to be realistic. Because I have no doubt at all that happiness is more likely if we realistically focus on and enjoy the positives in our lives *and* realistically assess and deal constructively with the problems in our lives.

So coming to terms with imperfection, within ourselves and within the world, is vitally important for real and meaningful happiness. It is, in fact, the only real option. Wishing for everything to be perfect is a recipe for frustration and failure. Wanting to be perfect yourself is just as much a certain path to disappointment and depression.

The reality is that being human involves being imperfect; it is just how it is. At the very least we need to accept this and ideally, we will even learn to love this. An approach derived from a Japanese design philosophy has grown in popularity in recent years. Known as 'wabi sabi', it proffers that imperfections are not just normal, they are, in many instances, beautiful. We accept this in nature and sometimes we even accept this in others; accepting it within ourselves can clear the way for markedly more happiness and positivity in our lives!

That being said, and along the same lines, it is important to note that no one should expect to be 100% happy 100% of the time; this would be a totally unrealistic goal and again, one that would be destined to end up in ... unhappiness.

But if we do what we can to be happy as often as possible, accepting that we have imperfections and faults and limitations, noting also that it is important to work towards happiness not just because it feels good, but also because its good for us; and just as importantly, if we practise authentic happiness it is also good for others around us ... then taking care of ourselves ultimately also means taking care of others, and if this sounds good then let's keep going!

And now for the happiness-boosting strategies

Create positive emotion — to begin with, recognise the importance of happiness and make it a priority. Appreciate also the wonderful and varied benefits of experiencing positive emotions. Happiness is not just something that feels good (although it does); happiness also does good. By this I mean that creating happiness will subsequently create inspiration and motivation and energy that will power you on to then achieve more of whatever it is you want to achieve in life. So do whatever you can to create positive emotions as often as possible and remember, everyone is different, so make sure you focus on strategies and activities that resonate with you and with which you feel comfortable.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Put on your favourite music.
 - Better still, put on your favourite music and dance around the room.
 - Even better still, put on your music and dance with a loved one or friend!
- Search the Internet for pictures of cute animals (seriously, this has been proven to enhance positive mood states).

- Search the Internet for funny jokes or buy and read a joke book.
- Watch funny videos (you can either hire these from your local DVD store, download them or even watch them for free on YouTube).
- In addition to funny videos many people will also enjoy watching inspirational videos or movies, which again can be purchased or borrowed in the usual way or watched on sites such as <http://www.ted.com>.
- Engage in some exercise — walking, running, swimming, riding, playing, anything that gets your body moving will almost certainly also get your happy going. Better still, do something active outdoors. Research suggests that the combination of exercise and connecting with nature adds even more benefits than exercise on its own!
- Try some meditation or applied relaxation strategies — this won't lead to laugh out loud happiness but it will definitely contribute to the different, but just as important, calm and content and peaceful type of happiness.
- Practise gratitude and appreciation via one or all of the following:
 - Write down three good things that have happened in the last 24 hours.
 - Write a list of all the things that are going well in your life at the moment.
 - Write a gratitude letter — think of someone who in some way has had a positive impact on your life and write them a short (1–2 pages) letter outlining (as specifically as possible) exactly what they did to or for you and why it had a positive impact. Then post the letter or ...
 - Better still (if the person is geographically available), call this person and arrange to meet for coffee or lunch or a chat (without necessarily explaining why, at this stage). Meet

then at the agreed time, engage in the usual small talk, and then read them the letter (the reason for writing the letter before the meeting and reading it out is to ensure that you clarify your thoughts and maximise your chances of saying what you want to say as eloquently as possible).

- Finally, you can give them the letter to keep as a tangible reminder of your feelings of appreciation.
- Force yourself to smile! You have probably all heard about the suggestion to ‘Fake it until you make it’. Well, there is actually some science to support this approach. In short, participants in a research study were asked to hold a pencil in their mouths with their teeth (which effectively creates a fake smile). These people were then asked to read an article or watch a short video and compared to others, recalled more positive information. These results have been interpreted as meaning that when we are happy we are more likely to perceive the world around us as being positive (we actually see and remember more positive things), which then makes us happier, so we create a positively reinforcing cycle of joy! Although, therefore, faking a smile might seem slightly superficial (and it is) it could kick-start some positive momentum that would then contribute to a more real and meaningful form of happiness.
- In the same vein as the previous suggestion — force yourself to laugh. Go on, try it now and I bet you feel at least a little happier!
- Engage in an activity you love. This could be anything — any hobby or pastime or recreational activity that brings you pleasure. It could be playing music, singing, cooking, drawing, painting, arts and crafts, gardening, and the list goes on.
- Engage in something you are really good at — along similar lines to the previous tip, but this time aimed more at generating satisfaction and pride as opposed to pleasure and joy. Do something

that you believe will provide you with a sense of accomplishment or achievement. These activities might not even be fun, but they are the sort of things we like to do just because we feel good knowing that we are skilled at something, or even because we know they have to be done and it is simply satisfying to tick them off your ‘to do’ list (for example, filing, cleaning, banking, getting rid of old clothes).

Another cluster of strategies that differ slightly from the ones listed above but that still fit into this group of positive emotion boosters are the ones that will (over time) develop optimism and hope. Optimism and hope are vitally important for health, wellbeing and happiness; in fact, some psychologists argue that without hope one can not even begin to contemplate happiness. Accordingly, try some or all of the following strategies to develop an attitude and outlook that is more consistent with living a good life:

- Reflect upon a recent negative life event and ask yourself ...
 - Is it really that bad?
 - For how long is it really likely to last?
 - Just because this is bad does it need to negate the other good things in your life?
 - Are you unnecessarily or excessively blaming yourself for something that has gone wrong that in fact can be attributed to other variables?
- Repeat this for as many negative or stressful life events as you can think of.
- Reflect upon a positive life event and ask yourself ...
 - Are you savouring it as much as you could?
 - Have you publicly celebrated this event or achievement and shared it with others?

- Are you doing all you can to make sure the positivity lasts as long as possible?
- Are you taking full credit for this positive life event and congratulating yourself for bringing it about?
- Repeat this for as many positive life events as you can think of.
- Avoid overly unhelpful, negative and destructive thinking (that causes excessive levels of distress and, therefore, makes it much harder to cope with and enjoy life) such as ...
 - personalising — blaming yourself for things that are beyond your control or not even connected to you or your actions
 - black and white thinking — seeing the world in an excessively ‘all or nothing’ or dichotomous manner
 - catastrophising — making mountains out of molehills
 - overgeneralising — taking one situation or event (typically a negative or unpleasant one) and generalising it to ‘everything’, ‘always’!
 - filtering — blocking out positive information and only focusing on negative details
 - discounting the positives — minimising the importance of positive events (such as brushing off compliments and downplaying achievements)
 - emotional reasoning — mistaking feelings for facts (for example, just because you might, at times, feel stupid doesn’t mean you are!)
 - fortune-telling — predicting the future (usually in a negative way such as assuming the worst)
 - mind reading — believing that we know what others are thinking which, unless you have special super powers, you cannot!

- ‘should’ statements and unrealistic expectations — engaging in statements such as ‘I should ...’ or ‘they should ...’ or ‘the world shouldn’t be like this ...’. This group of thoughts are unhelpful because more often than not they cause disappointment and frustration and even, in more extreme cases, anger.
- In addition to avoiding these extremely unhelpful negative thoughts, ensure also that you actively engage in positive thinking such as ...
 - List all the best things about you (including your strengths and attributes and positive characteristics, and so on).
 - List all the best things about your family and friends, and work colleagues and community.
 - List all the best things about the world in which you live.
- And taking this concept even further ...
 - Write down all the things you are looking forward to in the next 12 months or so.
 - Write down all the reasons why you feel optimistic and hopeful about the future.
 - Write down everything you are doing to make your life, and the lives of others around you, better.
- Want more strategies for even more helpful thinking? Ask yourself ...
 - Is there another, more helpful and/or constructive way I could look at this situation?
 - Am I taking everything into account (i.e. looking at the whole picture)?
 - Do I have everything in perspective?
 - How bad will this seem in a day, a month or a year’s time?
 - How good is this really and am I making enough of a fuss about it?

Building character

As already noted (but it bears repeating), happiness isn't just feeling good, it is also doing good. Although positive emotions are very important for living a happy life, they are not all there is to it. In addition to promoting positive emotion, positive psychology also posits that the good life is built on a foundation of character.

To begin with, it is worth giving some consideration to what is meant by this rather old-fashioned (but lovely and important) word 'character'. According to some of the earliest positive psychology research into what it meant to live a good life, led predominately by the highly regarded and much admired Professor Christopher Peterson (along with the equally influential Martin Seligman), good character was deemed to be the result of the application of 'a family of positive dispositions, characteristics like perspective, teamwork, kindness and hope'. Importantly, these strengths are trait like, but not necessarily fixed or unchangeable. Character was understood as the result of building strengths, and notably these strengths could be built.

Over the last few decades, positive psychologists have also been very careful to try to ensure that character strengths were not just social constructions; all attempts have been made to ensure that the values driving the strengths-based movement are not specific to any one culture or religious orientation. Ideally, therefore, good character is something that would be recognised and appreciated anywhere in the world!

Further, for something to be deemed a character strength it needs, by definition, to be ...

- fulfilling (i.e. it contributes to happiness and satisfaction)
- morally valued in its own right, not just for the outcomes it might lead to
- something that does not, in any way, harm or diminish the happiness of others.

The culmination of this investigation led to the development of a model that has come to be known as the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. This system is divided along the following lines into six groups of strengths:

1. Wisdom and Knowledge: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective
2. Courage: bravery, persistence, integrity, zest
3. Love and Humanity: love, kindness, social intelligence
4. Justice: citizenship, fairness, leadership
5. Temperance: forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence, self-control
6. Spirituality and Transcendence: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality.

Again, these (in principle) cut across all cultures, and it is assumed that everywhere, strengths such as curiosity and open-mindedness, bravery and perseverance, kindness and love, fairness, forgiveness and gratitude are valued and appreciated in their own way and in their own right.

What's most important about this body of positive psychology research is the clear support for the proposition that those who are more aware of and better at utilising their strengths are markedly happier and more successful! So the remainder of this chapter will focus on exactly that — how can you become more aware of and then how can you more fully utilise your strengths?

Step 1: Identifying your strengths

In very simple terms, there are two main strategies you can use to identify your strengths; the first is a formal assessment and the second is more informal. To be perfectly frank, the formal assessment will be more accurate and, therefore, ultimately more helpful, but it does require Internet access and it will take about 20 to 30

minutes. The informal assessment can be done anywhere and anytime but could potentially be biased by your self-perceptions.

I encourage you, therefore, to complete the formal assessment if possible. As noted, this will take less than half an hour (you will be asked to respond to 240 questions), but it could potentially change your life. Just perform a Google search for the 'VIA Institute on Character' (or see the URL at the end of this chapter) and complete the free survey. Once you are finished you will be emailed your 'results', which in simple terms will be a list of character strengths ranked in your order of preference. That is, at number 1 will be your 'top strength', that character strength you use the most and that you use most easily. Following this will be your next 23 strengths in order of preference.

If, for whatever reason, you can't complete this formal assessment then there are a few alternative, less formal options. The easiest option is to just review the list of character strengths included within this chapter and select the ones you believe resonate most with you. While doing so, I invite you to consider the following questions:

- What brings you to life?
- What energises you?
- What do you do that comes most easily to you?
- On what do other people compliment you?
- What is the very best in you?
- When do you feel most you?

In answering these questions, reflect upon some specific, real-life situations and then look for times you have utilised one or more of the strengths listed.

Now, before you read on, I would just like to highlight a few key points for you to seriously consider. First, this approach does *not* measure weaknesses. So even your number 24-ranked strength is *not* a weakness; it is still a strength, but for a variety of reasons,

it is a strength you do not use as often, or a strength that is harder for you to fully utilise. Second, there are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ strengths; they are all equally good. It is just that some work better for different people. And third, any and all strengths can be improved or built upon. So if for any reason you would like to improve your ability to apply one or more strengths, the good news is you can; just like many other areas of life, if you practise something you can get better at it! Which brings us to step 2 ...

Step 2: Utilising your strengths

Having identified your strengths using our ‘Signature Strengths List’, the challenge now is to work out how you can best utilise these strengths as often as possible. With this in mind, I trust you will find the following suggestions (and they are only suggestions) useful; it should also be noted that this list is by no means exhaustive — accordingly, I encourage you to generate additional applications. Please also note that this list is compiled alphabetically (rather than within the ‘clusters’) for ease of use.

Appreciation of beauty

- Visit an art gallery or museum with which you are unfamiliar.
- Start to keep a beauty journal in which you write down every day the most beautiful things you saw.
- At least once a day, stop and notice an instance of natural beauty, for example, a sunrise, a flower, a bird singing.

Authenticity

- Refrain from telling white lies to friends (including insincere compliments).
- Think about your most important values and do something every day that is consistent with them.
- When explaining your motives to someone, do so in a genuine and honest way.

Bravery

- Speak up for an unpopular idea in a group.
- Protest to the appropriate authorities about a clear injustice that you observe.
- Do something that you ordinarily would not do because of fear.

Creativity

- Enrol in a writing, photography, sculpting, drawing or painting class.
- Choose an object at home and find another use for it rather than its typical use — and this does not mean using that spare chair as a clothes rack.
- Send a card to a friend that includes a poem you have written.

Curiosity

- Attend a lecture on a topic about which you know nothing.
- Go to a restaurant featuring cuisine unfamiliar to you.
- Discover a new place in your town and learn about its history.

Fairness

- At least once a day, admit a mistake and take responsibility for it.
- At least once a day, give due credit to someone you do not especially like.
- Hear people out without interrupting them.

Forgiveness

- Let a grudge go every day.
- When you feel annoyed, even with justification, take the high road and do not tell anyone how you feel.
- Write a forgiveness letter; do not send it, but do read it every day for a week.

Gratitude

- Keep track of how many times you say ‘thank you’ during the day and increase the number every day for a week.
- At the end of every day, write down three things that went well.
- Write and send a gratitude letter.

Hope

- Think of a past disappointment and the opportunities it made possible.
- Write down your goals for the next week, the next month, and the next year; then make concrete plans for achieving these goals.
- Dispute your pessimistic thoughts.

Humour

- Make at least one person smile or laugh each day.
- Learn a magic trick and perform it to your friends.
- Make fun of yourself, if only by saying, ‘there I go again’.

Kindness

- Visit someone in hospital or a nursing home.
- When driving, yield to pedestrians; when walking, yield to cars (this latter suggestion also counts as an act of prudence).
- Perform an anonymous favour for a friend or family member.

Leadership

- Organise a social get-together for your friends.
- Take responsibility for an unpleasant task at work and make sure that it gets done.
- Go out of your way to make a newcomer feel welcome.

Love

- Accept a compliment without squirming; just say ‘thank you’.
- Write a brief note to someone you love, and leave it where it will be found during the day.
- Do something with your best friend that he or she really enjoys doing.

Love of learning

- If you are a student, read something that is ‘recommended’ but not ‘required’.
- Learn and use a new word every day.
- Read a non-fiction book.

Modesty

- For an entire day, do not talk about yourself at all.
- Dress in a way that does not call attention to yourself.
- Think of something that a friend does much better than you do, and compliment him or her about it.

Open-mindedness

- In a conversation, play the devil’s advocate and take a position at odds with your private opinion.
- Every day, consider some strong-held opinion, and think about how you might be wrong.
- Listen to a radio show or actively seek out and read a newspaper that espouses the ‘other’ political line.

Perseverance

- Make a list of things to do and do one thing on the list every day.
- Finish an important task ahead of schedule.

- Work for several hours straight without interruptions; for example, no television in the background, no phone calls, no snacks, no checking emails.

Perspective

- Think of the wisest person you know and try to live one day as if you were that person.
- Offer advice only if asked, but then do so as thoughtfully as you can.
- Resolve a dispute between two friends, family members, or co-workers.

Prudence

- Think twice before saying anything other than ‘please’ or ‘thank you’.
- When driving, stay five kilometres per hour under the speed limit.
- Before you eat any snack, ask yourself, ‘Is this worth getting fat for?’

Religiousness

- Every day, think about the purpose of your life.
- Pray or meditate at the start of every day.
- Attend a religious service of a faith unfamiliar to you.

Self-regulation

- Start an exercise program and stick with it every day for a week.
- Refrain from gossiping or saying mean things about others.
- When tempted to lose your temper, count to 10; repeat as needed.

Social intelligence

- Make someone else feel at ease.
- Notice when friends or family members do something that is difficult for them, and compliment them.
- When someone annoys you, understand his or her motives rather than retaliate.

Teamwork

- Be the best team-mate you can be.
- Spend five minutes every day picking up litter on the pavement and putting it in the rubbish bin.
- Volunteer your time to a charitable group.

Zest

- Every day for at least a week, go to sleep early enough that you do not need to set an alarm, and eat a nutritious breakfast when you do wake up.
- Say ‘Why not?’ three times more frequently than you say ‘Why?’
- Do something every day because you want to and not because you need to.

In summary, then, building character comes as a direct result of building on and living by your strengths, which by definition means (in very simple terms) using what you are best at to do what’s best for you and for others. Remember, the use of strengths cannot have a negative impact on or cannot diminish the happiness of any other person, which means that by doing good we’re spreading good. This also raises a very important issue, much discussed within positive psychology, which is that happiness is not a solo sport, but rather is much more akin to a team effort. For real and meaningful happiness, therefore, it is important to think beyond our individual selves.

Reaching out to connect because ‘other people matter’ — these three words were made famous by one of the founding fathers of positive psychology, the late and great Christopher Peterson (who’s already been mentioned in this chapter). When once asked, during a conference panel discussion, to sum up this exciting new science of happiness, Chris responded with these three simple but profound words: ‘other people matter’. This is what separates real happiness (as meant by positive psychology) from selfishness or hedonism, and the notion has subsequently become integral to the study and application of happiness.

It is probably not hard for any of you reading this to believe that happiness is at least partially about our relationships. Linking back to the previous section, constructs (or strengths) such as kindness, love, compassion, social intelligence and more are widely understood to be important to living a good life.

What some might not fully appreciate, however, is that this is not just about being nice; it is about being nice, but it is also about living our best possible lives. Because what we know about the happiest people is that they have both more, and better quality relationships. Further, we know from decades of research that good quality relationships promote positive experiences and positive emotions (such as happiness) as well as buffer against negative experiences and protect us from stress and depression. Good quality social support is integral to resilience; it helps us cope with the tough times and enjoy the good times.

How, then, can you create more happiness by building more positive relationships? Try these simple but powerful and effective strategies:

- To begin with, spend more time with more people (this is what happy people do!)
 - And do this even if you are an introvert.

- And when you do spend more time with more people make sure you engage in more meaningful conversations, as opposed to simple or meaningless chit-chat.
- In particular, spend more time actively attending to your intimate relationships.
 - And when you are spending time with your partner and/or kids, make sure you are really with them.
 - That is, be present and be mindful.
 - Turn off electronic devices (such as the TV) and do not respond to that (email or SMS) message until later.
- Spend more of the time you spend with others (both in your personal and professional relationships) focusing on positives as opposed to negatives (the ideal ratio, according to the research, is about 4 or 5 to 1).
 - This is easy enough to do if you actively look for and highlight what's going well, rather than just focusing on what's not going well.
 - And when you do focus on what's going well, focus on it with energy and enthusiasm. One of the leading researchers (Shelley Gable) in this area argues for the significant benefits of what she calls 'active/constructive responding'. That is, when things go well we should actively respond with constructive, encouraging, supportive and reinforcing comments as much and as often as possible.
- Remember that the previous section on strengths also applies in our relationships.
 - That is, just like focusing on our own strengths enables us to be our best, so too does focusing on others' strengths enable our relationships to be at their best.
 - When interacting with your partner, or child or colleague, therefore, give some thought to what their strengths are and

how these might be beneficial within the context of your relationship.

- Praise often (and with authenticity).
- Communicate often and clearly. Effective communication is at the heart of good quality relationships, but like many of these positive psychology principles, is something many of us could do better by ...
 - keeping as calm as possible as often as possible
 - staying focused on the primary topic and not allowing emotions or anything else to distract us from the key issue at hand
 - listening, listening and listening
 - seeking first to understand, then to be understood (thanks, Steven Covey)
 - accepting that other people have different opinions — and that none are necessarily right or wrong (they are just opinions)
 - acknowledging the other person’s opinion, actively and overtly
 - asserting your own opinion (calmly and confidently and where and when possible, taking into account the impact this assertion might have on the other)
 - avoiding, as much as possible, unhelpful thoughts such as catastrophising, overgeneralising, personalising and especially, mind reading (see the earlier section)
 - taking into account timing and context — that is, where and when would be the best time and place to have this discussion.
- Until disproven, believe the best in others! There is no doubt that bad people do the wrong thing at times but there is also no doubt (supported by numerous studies in a variety of contexts) that most people try to do the right thing most of the time.

And before moving on, an ‘extension’ of this concept importantly takes the idea of building positive relationships and connectedness a few steps further. Although considered by some to be a subcomponent of this same domain, more recently it has been argued that it deserves more attention in and for itself. To what am I referring? I’m talking about the age-old recommendation ... service to others.

Multiple studies have supported the notion that in giving we receive; when we serve others, we also benefit ourselves. The benefits of giving can be described on multiple levels, including psychological (we feel good and feeling good is good for us), social or interpersonal (we connect more and more deeply with others, which enhances relationships and support networks), and even biological (specific hormones and neurotransmitters are released during service type activities that protect against stress and promote positive emotions).

All of this combines to create what has come to be known as the ‘helper’s high’!

The good news is that there are multiple ways to serve others and to give so we should all be able to find something that works for us and that is within our means. To get you going, here are few suggestions for you to think about:

- Give of your time: volunteer somewhere local, or more importantly, somewhere that means something significant to you (depending on whether you care about the environment or animals or disadvantaged youth or, well anything — selecting the most appropriate avenue for your efforts will maximise the benefits you enjoy).
- Give of your money: if you can afford it (and let’s face it, most of us reading this can afford something) donate some cash to what you consider to be a good cause. You do not have to be a millionaire; every little bit counts.

- Give of your experience and expertise: become a mentor to someone who is interested in what you are interested in. Share what you have learned with someone younger and/or less experienced than you.
- Give your possessions: rather than throwing out unwanted clothes or toys, donate them to a good charity. Much of what we discard can be valuable to others and in sharing we are not just doing a good thing for the receiver but we're also often doing a good thing for the environment.

So there you have it; for genuine happiness ensure you have pleasure and positivity in your life *and* that you build character by doing the right thing and by living a life with values. In addition, remember that happiness often occurs in the gaps within the interactions we have with others. Happiness is very much about belonging and connecting, so as well as looking after yourself, look after others because (and I apologise in advance for the repetition of the cliché) ... it really is true to say that in giving we receive.

And before we finish ...

... happiness is not just a psychological construct; it is also physical! It is hard to be happy, for example, if you are sick and tired all the time!

I have briefly referred to aspects of health and wellbeing within this chapter, but I want to formally acknowledge that I do not believe I have come anywhere near close enough to adequately doing this range of topics justice. And I do not have the space within this context to elaborate any further now, but in short, and in addition to all I have written about thus far, your overall happiness will also be related to the ...

- quality and quantity of your sleep
- frequency with which you practise meditation, mindfulness and relaxation

- quality and nutritional balance of your food intake
- extent to which you exercise and/or are active each and every day.

At the risk of oversimplifying, you can significantly enhance your happiness by ensuring you gain adequate, good quality sleep; by practicing some form of meditation on a daily basis; by eating well; and by exercising often. Neglecting any of these will undoubtedly detract from your ability to live your best life so make sure you devote time and attention to creating a happy mind AND a healthy body.

Summary

At The Happiness Institute we have said for many years now that achieving happiness requires nothing more than practising a few simple disciplines, each and every day. I invite you to adopt this approach and to select just a few of the strategies I have outlined in this chapter (to begin with, anyway) and practise them regularly. Over time, they will become natural; over time, they will become more effective; over time, you will enjoy more happiness more easily.

Best of luck on this wonderful adventure we call life, and here is to your health and happiness!

Useful websites

- <http://www.thehappinessinstitute.com>
- <http://www.thehappinessdiet.com.au>
- <http://www.viacharacter.org>

Further reading

S Lyubomirsky, *The how of happiness: a new approach to getting the life you want*, Penguin, New York, 2007.

C Peterson, *Pursuing the good life: 100 reflections on positive psychology*, Oxford University Press, Washington, 2013.

M Seligman, *Flourish: a visionary new understanding of happiness and wellbeing*, Free Press, New York, 2011.

TJ Sharp, *The good sleep guide*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2001.

TJ Sharp, *The happiness handbook: strategies for a happy life*, Finch Publishing, Sydney, 2007.

TJ Sharp, *100 ways to happiness: a guide for busy people*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2008.

Your life handbook is your personal manual to live your best life, containing your mission statement, values, goals, personal strengths, blind spots, and action plans. Start off with a few basic pages, and then build on it. Design your ideal life. Try something different. (c) Get out there in life. Stop watching TV and living vicariously through the TV characters. Go and live the life of your dreams. Be the absolute best in what you do. Go for the #1 position in what you do. Get mentors/coaches. There's no faster way to improve than to have someone work with you on your goals. Not only will they drive you to achieve more, but they'll also share important advice which you can use to create even more success for yourself.