

Positive Psychology: Authentic Happiness

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This is basically a very condensed summary of Dr. Martin Seligman's book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002)

Happiness and well-being are the desired outcomes of Positive Psychology. The terms *happiness* and *well-being* are used interchangeably as overarching terms to describe the goals of the whole Positive Psychology enterprise, embracing both positive feelings (such as ecstasy and comfort) and positive activities that have no feeling component at all (such as absorption and engagement). It is important to recognize that "happiness" and "well-being" sometimes refer to feelings, but sometimes refer to activities in which nothing at all is felt.

Key points:

- There are several routes to authentic happiness that are each very different.
- You can raise your positive emotion.
- A "happy" individual need not experience all or even most of the positive emotions and gratifications.

Because the ways of enhancing them differ, Seligman divides the positive emotions into three kinds: those directed toward the past, the future, or the present. It is entirely possible to cultivate any one of these separately from the others:

- **Positive emotion about the past** (satisfaction, contentment, pride, and serenity for examples) can be increased by gratitude, forgiveness, and freeing yourself of imprisoning deterministic ideology.
- **Positive emotion about the future** (optimism, hope, confidence, trust, and faith for examples) can be increased by learning to recognize and dispute automatic pessimistic thoughts.
- **Positive emotion about the present** divides into two very different things and this is the best example of radically different routes to happiness:
 - **Pleasures** are momentary, and they are defined by felt emotion. The *pleasures* are comprised of
 - **bodily pleasures** (*such as scrumptious-ness, warmth, and orgasm*) The bodily pleasures are momentary positive emotions that come through the senses: delicious tastes and smells, sexual feelings, moving your body well, delightful sights and sounds.
 - **higher pleasures** (*such as bliss, glee, and comfort*). The higher pleasures are also momentary, set off by events more complicated and more learned than sensory ones, and they are defined by the feelings they bring about: ecstasy, rapture, thrill, bliss, gladness, mirth, glee, fun, ebullience, comfort, amusement, relaxation, and the like.

The pleasures of the present, like the positive emotions about the past and the future, are at rock bottom subjective feelings. The final judge is "whoever lives inside a person's skin," and a great deal of research has shown that the tests of these

states (several of which appear in this book) can be rigorously measured. The measures of positive emotion are repeatable, stable across time, and consistent across situations—the tools of a respectable science.

Pleasures can be increased by defeating the numbing effect of habituation, by savoring, and by mindfulness.

- **Gratifications** are more abiding. They are characterized by absorption, engagement, and flow. Importantly, the *absence*—not the presence—of any felt positive emotion (or any self-consciousness at all) defines the gratifications. The *gratifications* are the other class of positive emotions about the present, but unlike the pleasures, they are not feelings but activities we like doing: reading, rock climbing, dancing, good conversation, volley-ball, or playing bridge, for example. The gratifications absorb and engage us fully; they block self-consciousness; they block felt emotion, except in retrospect ("Wow, that was fun!"); and they create flow, the state in which time stops and one feels completely at home.

The gratifications come about through the exercise of your strengths and virtues. In fact, Seligman asserts that the gratifications cannot be obtained or permanently increased without developing personal strengths and virtues. Happiness, the goal of Positive Psychology, is not just about obtaining momentary subjective states. Happiness also includes the idea that one's life has been authentic. This judgment is not merely subjective, and *authenticity* describes the act of deriving gratification and positive emotion from the exercise of one's signature strengths. Signature strengths are the lasting and natural routes to gratification, and thus the route to “the good life”.

Part II of the book laid out the signature strengths. It also provided tests for you to identify your own signature strengths. Or, more conveniently, if you go to <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx>, you can take the VIA-IS strengths test to identify yours - free.

The twenty-four strengths are divided into six ubiquitous “virtues” clusters, as follows:

Wisdom and Knowledge

1. Curiosity/Interest in the World
2. Love of Learning
3. Judgment/Critical thinking/Open-Mindedness
4. Ingenuity/Originality/Practical intelligence/Street Smarts
5. Social intelligence/Personal Intelligence/Emotional Intelligence
6. Perspective

Courage

7. Valor and Bravery
8. Perseverance/Industry/Diligence
9. Integrity/Genuineness/Honesty

Humanity and Love

- 10. Kindness and Generosity
- 11. Loving and Allowing Oneself to Be Loved

Justice

- 12. Citizenship/Duty/Teamwork/Loyalty
- 13. Fairness and Equity
- 14. Leadership

Temperance

- 15. Self-Control
- 16. Prudence/Discretion/Caution
- 17. Humility and Modesty

Transcendence

- 18. Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
- 19. Gratitude
- 20. Hope/Optimism/Future-Mindedness
- 21. Spirituality/Sense of Purpose/Faith/Religiousness
- 22. Forgiveness and Mercy
- 23. Playfulness and Humor
- 24. Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm

Your highest strengths are your signature strengths.

Seligman's Definitions for finding meaning and purpose in living:

The pleasant life is successfully maximizing positive emotions about the present, past, and future, supplemented by the skills of amplifying these emotions.

The good life consists in using your signature strengths as frequently as possible in the important realms in your life to obtain authentic happiness and abundant gratification – in contrast with the pleasant life, which is about maximizing positive emotion.

The meaningful life has one additional feature to the good life: using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something larger than you are.

A full life is to live all three lives - experiencing positive emotions about the past, present and future, savoring positive feelings from the pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using these strengths in the service of something larger to obtain meaning.

Happiness comes by many routes. Our life task is to deploy our signature strengths and virtues in the major realms of living: work, love, parenting, and finding purpose. Positive psychology is about experiencing your present, past, and future optimally, about discovering your signature strengths, and then about using them often in all endeavors that you value. A "happy" individual need not experience all or even most of the positive emotions and gratifications.

Sources for Happiness and Related Emotional States Tests:

- <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx> official site for all of the tests from Authentic Happiness
- <http://www.reflectivehappiness.com/Happiness/Introduction.aspx> \$9.95 per month membership with 3 tests and more.

Ways to Increase Happiness

There are thousands of books written and hundreds of workshops or seminars on increasing your happiness. Scarce, however, are methods or exercises that one can do that have been scientifically validated to work. That is, few have subjected to a randomized trial experiment with a control group – the definition of a scientific experiment. And, positive psychologists such as Dr. Chris Peterson at the University of Michigan will be quick to remind you that Positive Psychology is a science.

Numerous studies have been conducted which have investigated the relationship of happiness (or components of happiness) to numerous individual or organizational activities or practices using correlation analysis. The difficulty is that correlation does not mean causality. That is, two things may be correlated, but which causes which? Does a successful company cause happy employees or do happy employees cause a successful company? Or does some other factor cause both?

Some exercises suggested by Seligman are noted above. Here are two sources of scientifically valid exercises, with the validated exercises noted:

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410-421.

- Gratitude visit
- Three good things in life
- Using signature strengths in a new way

Otake, K., Shimai, S., Tanaka-Matsumi, J., Otsuim K., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2006). Happy people become happier through kindness: A counting kindnesses intervention. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7, 361–375.

- Counting acts of kindness

Another exercise that appears to have merit, but which has not been scientifically validated is the Reflected Best Self Exercise, available at a cost of \$6 per participant from <http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/POS-Teaching-and-Learning/POS-Tools.htm>

There are numerous other sources of ways to increase other positive emotional states, which in turn, can be expected to increase one's happiness. For example, if a manager creates the environment in the workplace which enables the employees to say "Yes!" to the majority of the 12 questions the Gallup Organization publicized in "First, Break All the Rules", this can be expected to significantly increase employee engagement, which in turn drives employee job satisfaction, which is a major component of one's happiness with life. Similarly, building on an organization's strengths using the practices of Appreciative Inquiry creates similar results. These will be the subject of other modules.

In *Authentic Happiness*, founder of positive psychology Martin Seligman points out that we have two distinct ways of experiencing happiness in the present: pleasures and gratifications. Let's start with pleasures. [Table of Contents](#) [Play to Your Signature Strengths](#). [Capitalize on Your Signature Strengths](#). [Stop the Pursuit of Authentic Happiness](#). [Find Contentment Instead of Happiness](#). [Further Reading](#). [Read Next](#).