

POSITIVITY REVISITED

Yesterday I noticed three similar items, which converged to prompt revisiting Positivity. The first was a newspaper article about the president of the McLean High School PTA in Virginia who is leading a campaign to foster more authentic fulfillment and less debilitating stress for teenagers competing for acceptance into our country's top colleges and universities. The second was a television interview with Arianna Huffington who was promoting her new book, Thrive, about redefining success. That success isn't about money and power, but instead focuses on creating a life of well being, wisdom and wonder. The third was Catholicism's Pope Francis who is emphasizing humility, relationships and service rather than status, aloofness or indifference. These three awareness's happening within that same hour reminded me of the overall focus of Positive Psychology.

Central Goal of Positive Psychology

A central goal of Positive Psychology is to facilitate people moving far beyond doing badly (clinical psychology) or just doing all right. The focus is to activate positive emotions and optimal functioning. This is more readily attainable by identifying our "signature strengths", what we are naturally good at. Of course, we need to be thoroughly self-valuing and self-accepting to connect with our unique gifts. Humility is defined as accepting both our strong and weak points and then liking ourselves just as we are. We then have energy to grow and change. When we negate ourselves, our energy gets consumed so there is no spark to evolve forward. What are your "signature strengths"?

Our signature strengths are activities we enjoy and have a fulfilling level of proficiency so that the activity is intrinsically rewarding. We don't care about making money from it or being recognized by others for our expertise. Some examples are wood carving, painting, writing, knitting and canoeing. The list is endless.

When our goal is optimal functioning we will gravitate toward greater happiness, joy, contentment and overall life satisfaction. Other positive states associated with optimizing ourselves are: creativity, gratitude, optimism, wisdom, courage, love, awe and wonder. In other words, we are flourishing rather than vegetating. Regardless of our age, we are growing, changing, embracing life to its fullest.

If you are now finding yourself being a bit skeptical and perhaps saying to yourself, "This is all hogwash and pie in the sky garbage," I must hasten to reassure you that the information contained herein is not from self-help books or individual anecdotes but from rigorous, peer reviewed published research. Of course, also tune into your self-talk. Moving into negativity can be very subtle and not readily discerned.

A rich source of empirically validated measures of Positive Psychology is located at www.authentichappiness.org. There are scales to measure Overall Happiness, Optimism About the Future, Forgiveness, Character Strengths, Work-

Live Satisfaction, Meaningfulness and many more. This website is authored by Martin Seligman, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the founding father of Positive Psychology. His latest book is Flourish which focuses on the relevance of using Positive Psychology in a wide variety of institutions and settings.

Happiness = Subjective Well-Being

What is happiness? We know it is one of the major components of living in positivity. We also know that a pivotal aspect is that each of us must rely upon ourselves to determine what happiness is for us. We are to trust ourselves and not some external authority figure like our parents, friends, self-proclaimed experts, philosophers or others. We are our own best experts. The question to ask ourselves is, "Is my life going well according to the standards that I choose to employ?" A small example: some of us are happy in urban settings with lots of people contact and some prefer rural environments with minimal human interaction.

Here are three aspects of happiness to use in assessing yourself:

- How is my mood right now or moment to moment? Do I laugh easily? Do I have high positive affect and low negative affect? Am I being honest with myself? It is helpful to know that research in behavioral genetics has determined that about 50% of our mood is genetically determined. I've always envied those folks who are chronically joyful! Specific life circumstances such as financial situations, marital fulfillment, etc., account for 10%. Research reveals we are responsible for 40% of our happiness with the daily choices we make. Abraham Lincoln said, "Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."
- The second arena consists of a more objective assessment of your overall life satisfaction. It is a global cognitive evaluation of your life. Have I achieved what I set out to achieve? Are my relationships fulfilling? Am I at peace with myself? Your specific questions will be more valid than mine.
- Another way to assess your happiness is to compartmentalize it into major arenas of your life such as work, health, family, financial, social, spiritual etc. You could be pleased with your family life but displeased with your work life.

Another way to measure happiness is the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)

For each of the following statements and/or questions, please circle the point on the scale that you feel is most appropriate in describing you.

1. In general, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not a very						A very
Happy person						happy person

