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# Authentic Happiness

Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment

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Life Advice / Well-Being / Happiness

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## Take-Aways

- Psychology has focused too much on misery and not enough on being happy.
- Happiness is healthy; happy people live longer and have fewer diseases.
- Helping other people is the single most important element in long-term happiness.
- People largely can control their happiness level. For example, exercise creates happiness.
- People have different endowments of "signature strengths." To achieve happiness, develop and practice your strengths, instead of trying to correct weaknesses.
- Religious traditions agree that certain fundamental virtues are good and healthy, and lead to happiness: wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance and spirituality.
- Money has almost no correlation with happiness, health has little and physical pleasures do not produce lasting happiness.
- Marriage is the external factor most frequently associated with happiness.
- People tend to adjust to most external circumstances, so great news (winning the lottery) or bad news (being paralyzed) has little effect on long-term happiness.
- To make your children happy, raise them to embrace positive emotions.

## Recommendation

getAbstract highly recommends this work by Martin E. P. Seligman, the founder of "positive psychology" and the author of *Learned Optimism*. This book combines the erudition of psychological research with the accessibility of a self-help text. The author explains why happiness matters. He recapitulates and takes issue with the flawed deterministic assumptions that guided much of twentieth century psychology. He is careful to emphasize the importance of your individual control over your feelings and thoughts. The idea that people actually are in control of their fate marks a departure from Freudianism and behaviorism. Seligman argues, instead, for an understanding of character and virtue rooted in early Greek philosophy. However, his book is not merely theoretical or descriptive. He offers guidance on how you can change your way of thinking to change how you feel - and, thereby, get on the road to achieving long-term happiness for yourself and for others, especially your children.

## Summary

### Health and Illness

Twentieth century psychology concentrated on mental disease, and made considerable progress defining a range of illnesses. However, psychology has had very little to say about the good life. Only recently has research shown that it is possible to pursue and increase happiness. Happiness is not an intangible or nebulous concept. Its consequences are measurable. One study of nuns, a very homogenous, controlled population, found that the most cheerful women lived much longer than the less cheerful.

*"The belief that we can rely on shortcuts to happiness, joy, rapture, comfort and ecstasy, rather than be entitled to these feelings by the exercise of personal strengths and virtues, leads to legions of people who in the middle of great wealth are starving spiritually."*

However, happiness is not what many people think it is. For example, it is not the consequence of health and wealth. Instead, happiness comes from exercising six virtues that all major religious and philosophical traditions identify as fundamental to a good life: 1) wisdom - including learning, prudence and creativity; 2) courage - including fortitude, perseverance and confidence; 3) love - including both giving and receiving love; 4) justice - including fairness, citizenship and leadership; 5) temperance - including humility, discretion and self-control and 6) spirituality and transcendence - including gratefulness and a love of beauty.

### The Happiness Equation

People have unique individual virtues and strengths. To some extent, your personality and, thus, your set range of happiness are inherited. In fact, about half of any element of personality depends on genetic heritage. Most people do have a set range of happiness, and despite extremes of good or bad fortune, they tend to return soon to their set range.

*"Not only do happy people endure pain better, and take more health and safety precautions when threatened, but positive emotions undo the negative emotions."*

Consider some of the circumstances that many people think affect happiness:

- **Money** - Wealth matters less than you might expect. People in wealthy countries (particularly democracies that allow a degree of personal freedom) tend to be somewhat more satisfied than people in poor or totalitarian countries, but even extreme poverty has little correlation with unhappiness. Strikingly, people whose main goal is money tend to be very unhappy.
- **Marriage** - Being married correlates strongly with happiness. National Opinion Research Center surveys find that roughly 40% of married people, but only 25% of unmarried people, are "very happy." This correlation may not indicate causality. It's quite possible that happy people are simply more likely to get married.
- **Sociability** - More sociable people tend to be happier. Very happy people spend more time with others. However, causality is again questionable; perhaps, others simply prefer to spend time with happy people.
- **Bad feelings** - Women experience more negative and more positive emotions. Only a very small negative correlation exists between pleasant and unpleasant emotions.
- **Youth** - Young age does not correlate with happiness. In fact, older people are somewhat more satisfied with life than younger people.
- **Health** - Even terminally ill people have roughly the same life satisfaction as healthy people. Severe health problems cause less unhappiness than you might expect. Happiness does seem to drop when people have five or more serious health problems.
- **Education, weather, race and gender** - These factors do not have more than a slight correlation with happiness. Interestingly, African-Americans and Hispanics are less inclined to depression than Caucasians, but they are not happier than Caucasians.
- **Religion** - Religious people are happier and more satisfied than irreligious people. One study found that people from the most conservative religions (Orthodox Judaism, fundamentalist Christianity and Islam) are happier than people from more liberal religions (for example, Reform Judaism and Unitarianism).

*"People who give up easily believe the causes of the bad events...are permanent - the bad events will persist, are always going to be there to affect their lives. People who resist helplessness believe the causes of bad events are temporary."*

To achieve happiness by changing your life circumstances: marry, think positively, make friends, help others, adopt a conservative religion and live in a reasonably prosperous democracy. However, in terms of becoming happy, statistically it does not help to earn more money, improve your health, get more education or move to a better climate.

## Let Bygones Be Gone

People who think about problems from the past find it harder to be happy. The only psychologically healthy approach to past offenses is forgiveness, which is healthy as well as noble. Consider the five-step REACH approach to forgiveness:

1. **Recall** - Remember the offense. Breathe slowly and visualize it.
2. **Empathize** - Try to put yourself in the offenders' shoes and understand their actions.
3. **Altruism** - Remember when you received undeserved forgiveness, and forgive.

4. **Commit** - Make a public commitment to forgiveness.
5. **Hold** - Do not release forgiveness or relapse into vengefulness.

*“Optimistic people...make temporary, specific explanations for bad events, and they make permanent, pervasive explanations for good events.”*

Pessimists tend to think that bad things are permanent and inevitable. Optimists believe the opposite. Optimists may not be right, but they are happier - and it's worth being optimistic if only for the sake of being happy. To build optimism, defeat negative thoughts by:

- **Checking the evidence** - Put the facts on the side of optimism.
- **Consider the alternatives** - Instead of seizing the most negative possible explanation, consider positive alternatives that may be equally plausible.
- **Look closely at implications** - Even if the facts indicate that something bad has happened, the implications may not be so awful. Seek other effects and outcomes.
- **Believe what is useful** - If a conclusion is useless or counterproductive, especially if it is based on judgment or opinion, discard it. Pick a more useful and constructive idea.

## Identify Your Signature Strengths

Talents are innate and automatic. Strengths are the result of effort and practice. A strength is a psychological trait valued in many cultures and embodied in role models. They are supported with such social institutions as rituals, stories and proverbs and are categorized in six basic virtue clusters. Strengths, such as integrity, valor, originality and kindness, are not the same thing as talents, such as perfect pitch, facial beauty or lightning fast sprinting speed." To cultivate happiness, focus on building your strengths instead of shoring up your weaknesses.

*“An inner-city young man, at risk for substance abuse...in his neighborhood, is much less vulnerable if he is future-minded, gets flow out of sports, and has a powerful work ethic.”*

The first virtue cluster is wisdom and knowledge and is made up of six strengths:

1. **Curiosity and interest** - Inquisitive people find the world appealing and novel. They constantly attempt to investigate and discover more about it.
2. **Love of learning** - People who love to gain knowledge and understanding find opportunities everywhere.
3. **Judgment and critical thought** - This strength involves analyzing and weighing information and carefully assessing the evidence.
4. **Ingenuity and common sense** - Ingenious people are creative, practical, unconventional and willing to "think outside the box."
5. **People skills** - Social intelligence calls upon the ability to "read" people and respond to their feelings, moods and dispositions.
6. **Perspective** - Among other things, this involves distinguishing between the important and unimportant.

*“(To dispute) pessimistic thoughts... recognize them and ...treat them as if they were uttered by an external person...whose mission in life was to make you miserable.”*

The second virtue cluster is courage and is made up of three strengths:

1. **Valor** - The brave are physically and morally valiant. Moral and physical courage are not the same, but in both cases people overcome fear and do what is right. Valor is not fearlessness. The valiant feel fear, but in spite of it, they face the danger.
2. **Perseverance** - Those who continue to strive complete what they begin. However, they are realistic and they do not allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good.
3. **Integrity** - True honor involves not only speaking the truth but also living the truth, being genuine and having no affectations.

*“Change your thoughts by rewriting your past: forgiving, forgetting and suppressing bad memories.”*

The third virtue cluster is love and is made up of two strengths:

1. **Kindness** - Caring people are generous and outgoing, eager to find ways to help others. As a matter of fact, helping others is a tremendous overall causative factor in being happy.
2. **Loving and being loved** - It may be easier to love than to be loved. This kind of love is not a romantic feeling, but rather is the capacity for strong, close relationships.

*“Humans are born big-brained and immature, a state that necessitates a vast amount of learning from parents.”*

The fourth virtue cluster is justice and is made up of three strengths:

1. **Citizenship and teamwork** - This strength enables people to be loyal and committed, and to work hard on behalf of others. It involves respect for legitimate authority, but not blind obedience.
2. **Fairness** - This strength involves the just and equitable treatment of others regardless of your personal feelings or prejudices.
3. **Leadership** - The good leader evenhandedly mediates relations between groups, accepts responsibility for mistakes and is a peacemaker who plans for future.

*“To paraphrase Robertson Davis, ‘Weigh up your life once a year. If you find you are getting short weight, change your life. You will usually find that the solution lies in your own hands.’”*

The fifth virtue cluster is temperance and is made up of three strengths:

1. **Self-control** - Restraining your appetites and desires is important. This is not merely a matter of knowing what is right, but of doing it.
2. **Prudence and caution** - Discretion does not mean delaying action until action is impossible, but waiting until all the needed evidence is in before making a decision.

3. **Humility** - Unassuming people think little of themselves and do not feel that they merit special attention.

*“The good life is using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification.”*

The sixth virtue cluster is transcendence and is made up of seven strengths:

1. **Love of beauty** - This strength bespeaks sensitivity to excellence, skill and loveliness in every area of achievement.
2. **Gratitude** - A sense of appreciation is an extension of the love of beauty, an expression of appreciation for the excellence of others.
3. **Hope** - People with positive expectations are optimistic and think of the future, anticipating that good things will occur and planning for them.
4. **Spirituality** - Closely correlated with happiness, spirituality involves understanding where one fits in the universe and acting in accord with that understanding.
5. **Forgiveness** - Pardoning is one of the most important strengths, because without it one dwells in bitter memories of the past. Forgiveness leads to positive emotions rather than negative ones.
6. **Playfulness** - The lighthearted have a sense of humor and events rest easily on their shoulders. They laugh and help others to be cheerful.
7. **Passion** - Ardent people involve themselves entirely in the things they do.

## Raising Children

Cultivating positive emotions is especially important in raising children. Six techniques for building positive emotions in children include:

1. **Sleep with your children** - When kids sleep with their parents they feel more secure.
2. **Play games of synchrony** - Respond to a child's actions by doing the same thing as the child. This almost invariably leads to laughter.
3. **Say yes and no** - Say yes more often than no. Certainly sometimes it is important to say no, but say it as infrequently as possible.
4. **Punish and praise** - Praise should outweigh punishment, but when punishment is necessary it should occur. Children need punishment and discipline.
5. **Minimize sibling rivalry** - This is less of a problem when parents lavish attention and affection on their kids. Minimize rivalry by bringing children together, respecting their strengths and making them to some extent responsible for each other.

*“You are vouchsafed the choice of what course to take in life.”*

**Make the most of bedtime** - This is a special time when you can build a close and positive relationship with a child, by using stories, conversation and the like.

## About the Author

**Martin E.P. Seligman**, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, the director of the Positive Psychology Network, and former president of the American Psychological Association. His 20 books include *Learned Optimism* and *The Optimistic Child*.



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