

## Pleasure, Gratification, Strengths & Optimism

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The pursuit of happiness is indispensable to achieve a pleasant, engaged and meaningful life. The sustained feeling of wellbeing within oneself is fundamental to our ability to be with the others and to contribute to the society to which we belong in a meaningful way (Kahneman, 1999). According to positive psychology, as outlined by Martin Seligman (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), every human being is endowed in varying measure with a number of virtues and strengths. The six time-honored and universally endorsed virtues are wisdom/knowledge, courage, love/humanity, justice, temperance, and spirituality/transcendence (Seligman, 2002). They are assumed to be cross-cultural. They represent the more abstract component of Seligman's classification of the human traits that are relevant to positive emotions and to happiness. On the more concrete side, 24 strengths have been identified that transcend specific social, cultural and temporal contexts. Every healthy individual possesses all these strengths and virtues, but what distinguishes each individual is the predominance of some of these as compared to the others (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).

To identify the strengths that best define each person, Seligman and colleagues created two instruments of measure: a questionnaire, whose original version consists of over 200 questions, and a semi-structured interview (Seligman, 1994). The results produced by the application of these instruments can be beneficial in many ways, as for example in gaining a better understanding of oneself (Robbins, Spence, & Clark, 1991), in acquiring a deeper sense of personal accomplishment (Dolbier, Soderstrom, & Steinhardt, 2001), in developing a better ability to choose career or academic pursuits that are more consistent with one's inclinations

(Dolbier et al., 2001), in recognizing and choosing a partner who is more compatible with one's characteristics, and even in the pursuit of a leisure activity that is better adapted to our strengths.

Better self-knowledge leads to the exploration of the hidden self, which has been variously described as our essence (Vaillant, 2003), our core (Bandura, 2001), our id (Freud, 1950), our authentic self (Kohut, 1977). To better know ourselves means to come in deeper contact with our feelings. The old adage "know thyself" has deep historical roots (Henkel, 1971), but remains more than ever valid today. To be in tune with our authentic self, putting aside circumstantial expectations or desires, and forsaking how others would want us to be, permits us to achieve a more authentic expression of our feelings, emotions and cognitions (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004). What emerges is a person capable of genuine and authentic physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual expression, who enjoys greater satisfaction, harmony and well-being, and who is also capable of transmitting these characteristics to others and contributing to their self-knowledge (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2002).

In positive psychology as in intersubjective psychoanalysis, the focus is no longer simply in what is missing but in what is already there, albeit unutilized (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1995). Whereas the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders proposes a list of symptoms against which pathologies are defined (APA, 2000), the classification of virtues and strengths proposed by positive psychology looks at what may create a better life in the present, but also the strength to face future difficulties. The awareness of these positive traits leverages what is positive in each human being and emphasizes the unique resources that everyone possesses (Tugade et al., 2004). This process of introspection and identification of positive traits is similar to what happens in the body with the introduction of homeopathic

vaccines. These substances stimulate the body to react, to mobilize the resources that are already there, thereby strengthening its defenses (Stowell, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 2001).

What practical applications can the concept of learned optimism in particular, and the principles of positive psychology in general, have in our lives? At the intersection of physical and mental health, psychosomatic medical research has shown that a satisfied person who experiences positive emotions is also better able to resist viral and bacterial assaults (Ayd, 1991; Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002; Selye, 1975). It also shown that, in the event of illness, the response to treatment is often improved and the time of recovery can be significantly shorter (Melmed, 2003). In satisfied and healthy individuals who face daily difficulties it is possible to discern greater energy (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenwald, 2000), a better tolerance of stress, an ability to calibrate effort and energy expenditures, a knowledge and respect of one's real capabilities. The quality of sleep has also been shown to be better, with an easier onset and better sleep maintenance (Larson, 2002). In satisfied individuals, cognitive performance can become sharper; the mind is often quicker and may be less prone to fatigue (Tugade, 2002). The positive outcomes that flow from a positive outlook may enable the individual to reach his or her objects in personal life, in school, on the job, and significantly contribute to raise self-esteem and to construct a better self-image (Macleod, 2000; McCabe, Blankstein, & Mills, 1999).

Knowledge and utilization of our strengths can be beneficial not only to the individual, but also to society. For example, the well-adjusted teachers can make her lessons more interesting, thereby promoting learning, retention, and recall, and fostering greater discussion of issues and better cooperation in the classroom (Wolf, 1997; Yakovleva, 1994; Youngstrom, Wolpaw, Kogos, Schoff, Ackerman, & Izard, 2000). In a work setting, the application of positive

psychology can benefit the exercise of leadership, team building, collective self-efficacy, and trust in management (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). These positive developments can render work activities more meaningful, less monotone, more creative and engaging (Gianakos, 2000). They can help in getting employees more involved in the business mission and in fostering a deeper and wider spirit of cooperation and collaboration (Dolbier et al., 2001; Zucconi, Perticaroli, & Chierichetti, 2004). Positive psychology can also be used as an approach to individual or team coaching.

Although universal in nature, positive psychology and especially learned optimism and the identification and use of strengths and virtues, may be particularly useful with older adults, and induce them to be more responsible for themselves (Schulz, 1976), their health (Hack, 1995), and the care of their person (Strough, Cheng, & Swenson, 2002). It can also encourage them to express their more positive emotions (Hornig, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, Cacioppo, MacCallum, Snyder-Smith, Kim, & Malarkey, 2000), to interact better with others, and to escape social isolation.

It is only recently that science has undertaken the study of positive emotions. After centuries dedicated to studying human suffering, researchers have studying and seeking to define the constructs of optimism, happiness and virtue. Numerous new books have been published on this subject, from Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman, 2002) and *Learned Optimism* (2006), to White's *Brief History of Happiness* (2006) and McMahon's *Happiness: A History* (2006), Haidt's *Happiness Hypothesis* (2006), Diener's lucid survey of the construct of subjective well being (2006), Argyle's *Psychology of Happiness* (2001) and Carver's *Optimism* (2002). People who are suffering and need help, as well as those who are not suffering from specific pathologies but who nevertheless wish to improve their lives, are turning to positive

psychology for answers. It appears that happiness is in relatively short supply despite the startling advances in standard of living of the last one hundred years. In fact, since the first studies on happiness appeared in the 1960s, economic growth not only has failed to eliminate psychopathologies, but it may have made them more prevalent (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004).

Positive psychology starts from simple (but far from simplistic) hypotheses, careful self-analysis and sensible prescriptions. It succeeds in defining happiness and outlines feasible ways to reach it (Huppert, Baylis, & Keverne, 2005). The merit of these studies lies in the new respect earned by positive psychology among the scientific community. Fordyce (1983) summarized these techniques as a synthesis of socializing, thinking positively, cultivating intimate relationships and avoiding an excessive preoccupation with “the small stuff.” In ways which may appear as trivial to the uninitiated, grumpy individuals are asked to exchange a couple of words with everyone they meet during the day, from the newspaper vendor to the cashier at the supermarket. Anxious individuals are encouraged to write down their worries; in reading them a week later, they often discover that a lot of these worries were unfounded, and with a little practice they learn that worrying excessively is counterproductive. In other situations the individual’s cognitive processes are examined, especially negative automatic thoughts, to help pessimists realize how much in their life is positive and good (Veenhoven, 1989).

The results of this approach are encouraging. They are confirmed by studies that show that optimism and positive relationships not only bring happiness, but also better health (Dolbier et al., 2001; Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998). The National Child Development study (Ferri, 1993) and other similar studies have shown that children benefit from growing up with happy parents and that married people are decidedly happier than single people (Terman, Bittenweiser, Johnson, & Wilson, 1983). Other research confirms that happiness and extrovert

behavior go hand in hand (Booth-Kewley & Vickers, 1994). The next step may be a methodical attempt to transform the pessimists into optimists, following Seligman's method (Seligman, 1994) and the theories of subjective well-being (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Positive psychology assumes that optimism and happiness be learned. Even melancholy and introverted people can derive pleasure from a hobby, from a friendship and from intimate relationships, and thus may simply need to be reminded by someone of the many pleasant things to which they can dedicate time and energy, and retrained to think and act positively on a more consistent basis.

On the other hand we also know from works by Maslow (1987) and others than once our basic needs are satisfied, a further increase of material wealth does not increase happiness in equal proportion. We also know that, although important, health is not everything. Happy events, such as winning the lottery, or tragedies, such as a serious illness, can influence a person's happiness. It appears that this influence however is only momentary. With the passing of time the individual's emotional state often returns to its previous condition. Studies conducted on individuals with disabilities show that what makes a difference is not the seriousness of their handicap, but their attitude and their ability to transform limitations into opportunities (Karatas & Duyan, 2004; Veenhoven, 1991, 1989). Even a very serious pathology, if met with a constructive attitude, does not appear to preclude happiness. Thus, positive psychology can be of great help to people who are affected by chronic disease or permanent disabilities (Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004).

What could be the prescription for happiness? According to Seligman (2006), three forms of happiness can be identified. One is that which includes the positive emotions that create the pleasant life. A second is that which enable use to make full use of our strengths and virtues and

life a fully engaged life. This type of happiness includes the satisfaction of having faced and successfully resolved a difficult problem, and the excitement that comes from new challenges. The third form of happiness encompasses those traits, feelings, behaviors and intentions that are higher and larger than the individual self, and which contribute to the creation of a meaningful life. In modern society, the pursuit of happiness in all its forms is becoming more complicated than ever before: there are pleasures that once tasted lose their appeal; others that we are never tired of experiencing, even though they may be harmful to us; and yet others, such as our favorite foods, that we must take in moderation lest we lose interest in them through the process of habituation (Argyle, 2001).

The ultimate happiness may be discernible in the rewarding condition of “flow” so brilliantly described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), one of the early contributors to the field of positive psychology. Flow is the time when time seems to stop, when we find ourselves “in the zone,” and nothing interferes with our concentration on the activity at hand. This state can derive from mental, emotional, spiritual and physical activity. Flow is a universal experience shared by Tibetan monks and soccer athletes, by fiction writers and cello players, by stamp collectors and brain surgeons. Flow may be the ultimate state of happiness that transcends consciousness.

Human beings appear to be programmed to wish for things that ultimately lose their appeal, such as wealth and power. It is as if a subtle biological mechanism keeps men and women from being completely satisfied. Our brains do not appear capable of maintaining a state of permanent happiness, and this may not be completely negative as it propels individuals and the whole of human forward in constant search for the better, the higher, and the sublime.

The limbic system is a complex brain structure involved in motivation and emotional response. The limbic system receives and labels sensory perceptions that arrive from the outside

and stimulates a response that is perceived as being the most appropriated (Kalat, 2004). Recent studies show a greater activation of the brain's left hemisphere, and in particular of the amygdala and parts of the prefrontal lobe, in the expression of happiness and in the production of a positive response to emotions (Canli, 1999; Hamann, Ely, Hoffman, & Kilts, 2002; Wiedemann, Pauli, Dengler, Lutzenberger, Birbaumer, & Buchkremer, 1999). Davidson (1984; Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000) shows that sociable and extraverted children have greater activity in the left hemisphere than their counterparts, and that meditation extraordinarily increases the level of activity in this area of the brain.

Low levels of serotonin, an indoleamine neurotransmitter which stabilizes mood and regulates REM sleep with acetylcholine (Kalat, 2004), are associated with disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Dopamine is a catecholamine neurotransmitter and hormone released in specific areas of the brain such as the nucleus accumbens and the corpus striatum (Kalat, 2004). Dopamine is released when we experience or anticipate a pleasant event, producing the gratification that stimulates the undertaking or repeating of certain behaviors such as eating, having sex or abusing alcohol.

Oxytocin, a peptide hormone released in the pituitary extension of the hypothalamus, has been defined as the hormone of the love because it is present during sexual activity. It appears to play a role in the establishment of affective ties between parent and child (Torner & Neumann, 2002), but also in the sexual and emotional relationship between two partners (Dopp, Miller, Myers, & Fahey, 2000; Kalat, 2004; Miller, Dopp, Myers, Stevens, & Fahey, 1999). Recent studies show that individuals who say that they are in love have higher levels of oxytocin in the blood (Riley & Riley, 2000). Endorphins are endogenous opioid peptides, that is, substances similar to opium that are produced by the human body (HMW, 2006). They generate a feeling of

pleasure and reduce sensitivity to pain (Basbaum & Fields, 1984; Maes, Claes, Vandewoude, & Schotte, 1992). Endorphins also appear to be present when the individual experiences the feeling of well-being that derives from intense physical activity, although some researchers attribute this phenomenon to the action of dopamine (Hibbeln, Linnoila, Umhau, Rawlings, George, & Salem, 1998). Endorphin production can be stimulated by sunlight (Gambichler, 2002), meditation (Krasner, 2004; Sabaawi, 2004) or laughing (Bennett, Zeller, Rosenberg, & McCann, 2003; Martin, 2001) and other endogenous stimulation. Tellegen & colleagues (1988) have shown that monozygotic twins have the same attitude toward happiness, even if they grow up separately. And recent studies show that individuals who have a shorter and therefore less efficient version of the gene 5HTT (which regulates the transport of serotonin), have a statistically significant higher incidence of neuroses, depression and unhappiness (Kremen, 2005; Moffitt, 2005; Potash, 2006; Rees, Norton, Jones, McCandless, Scourfield, Holmans, Moorhead, Feldman, Sadler, Cole, Redman, Farmer, McGuffin, Owen, & Craddock, 1997).

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