

Positive Psychology: The Future of Psychology?

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Psychology has made significant strides in improving the lives of people who suffer with serious mental problems, but it has paid little attention to helping relatively healthy people become even healthier and happier. Positive psychology is the branch of psychology that focuses on this latter goal.

Positive psychology is a new field in name only; the concepts and the research at its foundation have been evolving for over eighty years. The phrase was coined by Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman in January 1998, just as he was beginning his term as the president of the American Psychological Association. Some of the oldest studies are the Nun Happiness and Longevity Study, the Harvard Longevity Study, the Mills College Smile Study, and the on-going Mayo Clinic Studies. In 2003 the Templeton Foundation created awards for research into positive psychology, and spurred the interest in the study of happiness, optimism, positive emotions and healthy character traits.

Today the field of positive psychology is exploding. Soon after the November 2003 Authentic Happiness conference in Scotland, the Scottish government decided to make positive psychology an official policy. In the last year or so several significant books have been published, most notably, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, by Christopher Peterson (University of Michigan) and Martin Seligman. The January 17 Time Magazine special issue had 64 pages on the "New Science of Happiness." Starting in the fall this year, Dr. Seligman is heading up a positive psychology masters degree program at the University of Pennsylvania.

The Virtues and Signature Strengths

Why should we care about helping people be happy? To answer this question, Barbara Fredrickson, PhD, (University of Michigan) has proposed the Broadening and Building Theory. The theory states that the purpose of positive emotions is to broaden our permanent intellectual, physical and social resources, thereby building up reserves we can draw upon when a threat or opportunity arises. When we are in a positive mood, others like us better, friendship and romance are more likely to come to pass, and we are open to new ideas and experiences. When we are filled with negative emotions, these things are less likely to occur.

At the foundation of Positive Psychology, and the Broadening and Building Theory, are the Virtues and Signature Strengths. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman spent three years researching which character strengths would be embraced across cultures and throughout time. Some of the criteria they used were that the strengths must: 1) have value for the individual as well as for others, 2) have innate value regardless of tangible outcomes, and 3) be cultivated by society's institutions and associated rituals. Here are the twenty-four strengths, grouped into six categories.

I *Wisdom and knowledge*: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective

II *Courage*: bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality

III *Humanity*: love (loving and allowing oneself to be loved), kindness (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"), social (emotional, and personal) intelligence

IV *Justice*: citizenship (social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork), fairness, leadership

V *Temperance*: forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation

VI *Transcendence*: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope (optimism, future-mindedness), humor and playfulness, spirituality (religiousness, faith, purpose)

The Gratitude Visit

Perhaps the most important trait in positive psychology is the capacity for gratitude. Gratitude is the positive emotion that connects us to the humanity of others, allowing us to feel appreciation for those in our life—parents, friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, pastors, employers, —who have been especially helpful and kind, and to express it to them. In acknowledgement of the importance of gratitude, Dr. Seligman developed a powerful ritual called the Gratitude Visit. Here is an outline of the Gratitude Visit:

- 1) Write a letter describing in concrete terms why you are grateful to a particular person. State specifically what they did for you and exactly how it affected your life. Share what is happening in your life now and how you remember what they did for you.
- 2) Contact this person and set-up a meeting (without sharing specifically why), read your letter to him or her, then give them a special copy of the letter. Then discuss how you both feel about each other, about the gratitude, and about the future.

Gratitude Visit #1

Sherry was a 28 year-old secretary and part-time student. When she was 23, she had moved out of her parents home, leaving behind her turbulent history with them, and attempting to create her own life. During her teen-age years, Sherry had often acted out and gotten into minor trouble, drinking and abusing drugs, becoming pregnant and ultimately having an abortion. Her parents had been there for her throughout these chaotic years. In the five years since, Sherry's life had settled down to a pretty normal one, but her relationship to her parents had gradually deteriorated into minimal, superficial contact. Sherry has been in recovery for over four years.

Sherry agreed that she owed her parents a lot. She decided to use the Gratitude Visit as a way to thank her parents make amends and see if she could reconnect with them. This is her letter.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I don't know where to start. You have been there for me during the roughest times of my life. You cared about me even when I didn't seem to care about myself. I know that it was very difficult and that you spent too many hours upset, frustrated and worried about me.

Remember the time that I didn't come home all night. By 2am you had called my friends' parents, the police and the hospitals. I wandered home around noon and the first thing you asked me was, "Are you okay?" Finding out that other than a hangover, I was okay, you appropriately disciplined me. I, of course, didn't want to understand and further acted out. You continued to love me by setting boundaries, encouraging and supporting me.

Remember Bill, my irresponsible boyfriend, who took me to my senior prom? You tried to get me to see that a future with him would be difficult at best. I knew that, but he was cute, popular and told me things that I wanted to hear. It wasn't until I got pregnant and he stopped talking to me, that I faced the truth. You supported me through this difficult time and my decision to have an abortion, with all of the emotional consequences. You always made me feel like I was a good person who made a mistake.

Thank you for being strong enough to reel me in and take control of my out-of-control life. What I learned was that you loved me too much to let me ruin my life, even if you had to go through it with me.

And then you finally let me go, let me find my own way. After awhile, I did, and I am building my version of the person you taught me to be. I miss having you be in my life in a real way. I hope that this letter will be a start to change that.

You were really good parents and I know that you did that best that you could. Thank you for all of your love and devotion.

Love,

Sherry

Gratitude Visit #2

Jerry was a 51-year-old man who worked as a middle manager for a major corporation. Over the years his career had become more demanding and he had responded by making it his highest priority, while his family became a lesser priority. In the previous couple of years his work and other obligations had grown to the point that his participation with his family was hit and miss; at times he didn't even know what was happening to his wife and children. He became estranged from his 24 and 26-year-old sons and separated from his wife of 28 years. This estrangement was causing Jerry much sadness, loneliness and anxiety about the future.

Jerry became committed to changing his priorities and creating a future that he wanted. He decided to start by writing five Gratitude Letters, one letter each to his wife, two sons, his brother and his mother. He spent several weeks writing the letters and presented them over a period of about six weeks. He asked the first five presentees not to speak about the letter to other presentees until he had presented all of the letters. The following is the letter to his wife:

Dear Mary,

As I sit here writing this letter, I am so aware of how much that you mean to me. You are a wonderful person and for so many years you have been there for me. It has taken this separation for the reality to sink in.

Remember our first Valentine's Day together? I wrote you that poem. Later you told me that that was when you started to fall in love with me. As I look back I wonder why I didn't continue to be romantic and vulnerable.

Thank you for giving birth and being the primary parent to our two wonderful sons. They are sons to be proud of. Remember the time that Jerry, Jr. almost died in that accident? We were both sleepless for days. You were so strong and steady. It seemed that you almost willed him to live. You were and are a great mother.

I am so sorry that I did not spend more time being with you and letting you know me. You have lived your life with dignity, pride, and most of all, a loving heart. You kept asking me to come back to you. I know that my lack of response was painful and that you needed to literally separate for your emotional health.

I am proud of you and that you are my wife. You are a special person. If it is even a possibility that you will let me come back into your life, I will do whatever it takes to make that happen. If for you our

marriage is over, please be happy and well, and live your life to the fullest. And know that you will always be in my heart.

Longingly yours,

Jack

The field of Positive Psychology offers hope for all of us to move from negative to positive emotions, and towards greater happiness. If you or your clients are interested in learning more about the tools and strategies of positive psychology, check the information and links at my web site, www.successworkskoaching.com.

Thomas Rohrer has been in private practice as a psychotherapist and life & performance coach since 1979. He is a graduate of the Authentic Happiness Coaching Program and is certified in sports psychology, EMDR, NLP and hypnotherapy. Tom also offers seminars in positive psychology.