

What is Authentic Happiness?

Preface:

Psychology has made great strides with mental illness, and what makes a person unhappy. Past scientific evidence shows that we have a fixed range of happiness. New research however demonstrates that it can be lastingly increased. Many believe that happiness is inauthentic. Seligman refers to this view of human nature as the rotten-to-the-core dogma. Positive Psychology has three pillars: the study of positive emotion, positive traits and positive institutions.

Chapter 1: Positive Feeling and Positive Character

Two interesting studies were conducted. One was involving nuns that wrote biographical sketches upon taking their vows. Those that expressed more cheerfulness on average lived longer. The other study involved college yearbook photos of women. Those with a genuine smile were more likely to marry, stay married and be happier than their fake smile counterparts. Author Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D. focuses on three questions in the first half of the book. 1. Why has evolution endowed us with positive feeling? What are the functions and consequences of these emotions, beyond making us feel good? 2. Who has positive emotion in abundance and who does not? What enables these emotions, and what disables them? 3. How can you build more and lasting positive emotion into your life? Positive feelings are not what people want. They want to be entitled to those feelings. Those that use shortcuts to good feelings end up with feelings of emptiness. The positive feeling that is a result of the use of strengths and virtues and not short cuts is authentic. The feeling one gets after a kind act towards another far outshines that of a shortcut. Positive Psychology chose twenty-four strengths using three criteria; valued in almost every culture, valued in their own right, and they must be malleable. There are six core virtues: * Wisdom and knowledge

- * Courage
- * Love and humanity
- * Justice
- * Temperance
- * Spirituality and transcendence

Some strengths are tonic and some are phasic. Tonic strengths are displayed almost daily while phasic ones are demonstrated when faced with a challenge. Strengths that are deeply characteristic to a person are referred to as signature strengths. The second part of the book focuses on how to identify signature strengths. Chapter Two: How Psychology Lost Its Way and I Found Mine

Seligman while traveling on vacation with his family anxiously awaits the news of whether or not he was elected as the president of the American Psychological Association (APA). He looks back on the transformations in the science of psychology as well as his career in the field. At the end of the World War II psychology is a small profession of academics trying to find the basic process of learning and motivation. Soon after the war, they began to treat troubled veterans and after years of dispensing therapy, they become synonymous with treating mental illness. He spends more than thirty years studying learned helplessness in animals then humans. Ten years into the study, he discovers that some never give up when given insolvable problems while others are helpless to begin with. He

receives the announcement that he has won the election for presidency of the APA by a landslide. He needed to come up with a mission for his tenure. His theme would be prevention. Psychology has focused on treatment. He proposed that intervening when someone is still well could greatly diminish the need for treatment in the future. While spending time with his young daughter, he had an epiphany. He realized that raising her was not about correcting her shortcomings but nurturing her strengths. Could there be a psychological science about this? He had found his mission. Chapter Three: Why Bother to Be Happy?

During evolution, complicated animals acquired an emotional life. Why would this occur? Comparing negative and positive emotions is the first clue to figuring this out. Negative emotions are the first line of defense against external threats. These are win-lose situations. The thought is that ancestors that had strong negative emotions when threatened survived and past on those genes. Positive emotions have not been as easily explained. There is a personality trait called positive affectivity that is heritable. There is a theory that says we are born with a certain amount of positive affectivity and not much we can do to increase it. Barbara Fredrickson, an associate professor at the University of Michigan was awarded for her theory of the function of positive emotions. Positive emotions go beyond making us feel good. Those induced with positive emotions perform better than those that do not have positive emotions. Happy people view their skills as more than they actually are and remember more good events than actually occurred. Depressed people are accurate about both. Thoughts are that a positive mood puts us into a different way of thinking than does a negative mood. Happy people tend to live longer healthier lives compared to negative people. Happy people are more satisfied with their jobs, more productive, and earn higher incomes. They also deal better with adversity. Happy people have rich fulfilling social lives. Positive feelings invoke win-win situations.

Chapter Four: Can You Make Yourself Lastingly Happier?

The happiness formula is an equation used to represent the makings of enduring happiness. $H=S+C+V$: H is your enduring happiness, S is your set range, C is the circumstances of your life, and V represents factors under your voluntary control. Enduring happiness is quite different from momentary happiness. Momentary happiness can happen while watching a movie or eating candy. Enduring happiness is the summation of the formula. It was once believed that with enough effort every emotional state and personality trait could be improved. Discoveries in the 1980's showed that roughly fifty percent of a personality trait is heritable. This however does not mean that a trait is unchangeable. Some traits do not change much like body weight. Fearfulness on the other hand for example is very changeable. Happiness tends to be like a thermostat. Many wonder if we have a set inherited range for happiness. When exceptional good fortune comes our way the happiness increases dramatically. After a period, however our levels return to previous levels. It also works the other way as well. If faced with misfortune our set level will bring us back up to our set range. We also tend to adapt to good things by taking them for granted. This results in the need to achieve even more to keep the same level of happiness. This is known as the "hedonic treadmill". These three things known in the equation as the S variables tend to keep the happiness level low. The other two variables C and V however raise the happiness level. Circumstances do change happiness however; they are often expensive and impractical. Money is something that can change happiness. It is not the amount of money one has, but how important money is to you. The more important money is to you the less likely you are to achieve those goals and the less happy you will be. Married people tend to be happier

than unmarried people are. The reasoning for this is not yet determined. Very happy people lead rich and fulfilling social lives. Much like the factor of marriage this is hard to determine if happy people are more social or that being more social causes happiness. Negative emotion does not have a profound effect on happiness. Conversely, a very happy person is not immune to negative emotions. Life satisfaction increases slightly, pleasant affect decreases slightly and unpleasant affect is unchanged with age. What does change is the intensity of emotions. The spikes in happiness and dramatic drops into despair become less common with age. Health is related to happiness. Objective health is not the issue though. It is one's subjective view of how healthy they are that is the key. People with severe long lasting illness do have a decline in life satisfaction and happiness but not as much as one might think. Religion can be linked to happiness. Religious people tend to be happier than nonreligious people. Faith and hope for the future effectively fights despair and increases happiness. External circumstances only account for between eight and fifteen percent of the happiness variance. Along with the set range, these do not count for much of the happiness equation. The variables that are under a person's voluntary control can increase happiness. Chapter Five: Satisfaction About the Past

The past present and future can invoke positive emotion. These three senses of emotion are different and not tightly linked. You can feel positive about one while feeling negative about another and neutral about the third. How we feel about our past greatly influences our level of happiness. Learning about each of the three different kinds of happiness can move the emotions in a positive direction by changing how we feel about our past experience our present and think about our future. A low level of appreciation for positive events in our past and an overemphasis of the bad events can be detrimental to our level of happiness. There are two ways to increase our levels of contentment about the past. Gratitude amplifies the good events and forgiveness helps diminish the effects of the bad events. Gratitude increases the effects of good events from the past. This in turn increases a person's level of happiness. Showing gratitude towards another person can also increase that person's level of happiness. At times, this can also help overshadow less joyful events of the past. Forgiveness is a way to help alleviate the negative emotions of the past, which can block positive emotions. It can also even change a bad memory into a good one that will increase the level of positive emotion even greater. Chapter Six: Optimism About the Future

Positive emotions about the future include optimism and hope. These can better resist depression when a bad event happens, better work performance and better health. Permanence for optimism is temporary for a bad event and permanent for a good event. Pervasiveness works in much the same way. People who have specific explanations for their failures show a sign of optimism. During good events, they have universal explanations as to why the good even took place. People who are optimistic are hopeful. There is a well-documented method for increasing optimism, recognize and then dispute pessimistic thoughts. There are four ways to make your dispute convincing. Show that the negative belief is factually incorrect. Show a less negative alternative to the pessimistic view. Show that the implications of a bad event do not mean that the worst outcome will occur. Show how the situation can be changed for the better in the future. Chapter Seven: Happiness In The Present

Happiness in the present is different from that of the past and future. It involves pleasures and gratifications. Pleasures involve little thinking and have sensory and emotional components. Gratification does not necessarily involve feeling but lasts longer than pleasures involve a lot of

interpretation and thinking. They are also based on our strengths and virtues. Bodily pleasures need little interpretation. They are not easy to build your life around due to their momentary duration and become habitual requiring larger doses to create the same sensation. Higher pleasures are much like bodily pleasures in that they invoke “raw feelings”, are momentary and habitual. They are however more complex. Three ways can be used to enhance these pleasures. Finding optimal spacing between pleasures will keep the habitual nature of the pleasures at a minimum. Savoring the pleasures will allow even greater pleasure and will allow for better memories of the event in the future. Mindfulness occurs more readily in a slow state of mind rather than in one that is racing through life. This can allow greater recall of pleasures. Gratification is a result of activities that invoke are signature strengths. It is the absorption, pause of consciousness, and flow the gratifications bring about that cause us to like the activities, not the pleasure. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle could easily distinguish between pleasures and gratification. It can be a great buffer against depression as well.