

**Positive Psychology:** The scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their life experiences. Studies positive individual traits, referred to as strengths. Examples: perseverance, forgiveness, humour, spirituality, gratitude. The aim of Positive Psychology is not to replace traditional psychology but to compliment it.

Martin Seligman's presidential address of the American Psychological Association (1998) – introduced the term positive psychology. It focusses on “what is right” along with “what is wrong” - that is, treatment of disorders along with fulfilling human potential. This movement came to be known as the positive psychology movement. The change in perspective came to be known as the change from the deficit based model/medical model/pathological model to the strengths based model.

**The Deficit/Disease Model :** Focus on weaknesses

- ~ Overcoming deficiencies
- ~ Avoiding pain
- ~ Running from unhappiness
- ~ “Stress- free” as ideal

**Strengths Model:** Focus on strengths

- ~ Building competencies
- ~ Seeking happiness
- ~ Pursuing happiness
- ~ Eustress as ideal

### 1. Is positive psychology an abandoning or rejection of the rest of psychology?

In a word, no. Since World War II, psychology has focused its efforts on psychological problems and how to remedy them. These efforts have reaped large dividends. Great strides have been made in understanding and treating psychological disorders. Effective treatments now exist for more than a dozen disorders that were once seen as intractable (Barrett & Ollendick, 2004; Evans et al., 2005; Hibbs & Jensen, 1996; Kazdin & Weisz, 2003; Nathan & Gorman, 1998, 2002; Seligman, 1994).

One consequence of this focus on psychological problems, however, is that psychology has little to say about what makes life most worth living. Statistics- For every article published on happiness in mid 2000's, there are 21 articles on depression. In the mid-90's, the ratio was approx. 1: 100. Positive psychology proposes to correct this imbalance by focusing on strengths as well as weaknesses, on building the best things in life as well as repairing the worst. It asserts that human goodness and excellence is just as authentic as distress and disorder, that life entails more than the undoing of problems.

Psychology's concern with remedying human problems is understandable and should certainly not be abandoned. Human suffering demands scientifically informed solutions. Suffering and well-being, however, are both part of the human condition, and psychologists should be concerned with both.

**Is the science of positive psychology descriptive or prescriptive? In other words, are we trying to tell people how they should live?**

Positive psychology is descriptive, not prescriptive, at least in Seligman's view, although others disagree. We are not telling people which choices they should make; we are merely informing them

about what is known about the consequences of their choices. The good life for one person is not necessarily the good life for another. Objective, empirical research on the conditions that lead to different outcomes, however, can help people make more informed choices, but we take no theoretical stand on the desirability of the different choices.

**As long as there is suffering in the world, how can we justify devoting time and resources to positive psychology? Isn't human suffering more important than well-being?**

Research has shown that one way to help suffering people is to focus on the building of strengths. Major strides in prevention have come largely by building strengths. Prevention researchers have discovered that there are strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future mindedness, optimism, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight, to name several. Prevention can be far more effective than cure - witness how immunizations have largely eliminated polio and other diseases. Further, people care about more than just the relief of their suffering. These people also care about living a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Positive psychology interventions can both increase happiness and alleviate symptoms of depression (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Fredrickson (2001) found that positive emotion can "undo" negative emotion and be the building blocks of resilience that combat physical illness. Lyubomirsky's (2001) research on the conditions that enhance happiness has relevance for the practice of clinical psychology and the relief of mental disorders. Strengths function as a buffer against adversity and against psychological disorders, and they may be the key to resilience (Masten, 2001). The responsibility of a psychologist is not merely to heal damage and treat disorder, but also to guide people toward a life that can be fulfilling and meaningful.

**Is positive psychology the same as positive thinking?**

Positive psychology is different from positive thinking in three significant ways. First, positive psychology is grounded in empirical and replicable scientific study. Second, positive thinking urges positivity on us for all times and places, but positive psychology does not. Positive psychology recognizes that in spite of the advantages of positive thinking, there are times when realistic thinking is appropriate. Studies find that optimism is associated with better health, performance, longevity, and social success (Seligman, 1991; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005), but there is evidence that in some situations negative thinking leads to more accuracy and being accurate can have important consequences (Alloy, Abramson, & Chiara, 2000). Optimistic thinking can be associated with an underestimation of risks (Peterson & Vaidya, 2003). For example, we do not necessarily want a pilot or air traffic controller to be an optimist when deciding whether to take off during a storm.

The third distinction between positive thinking and positive psychology is that many scholars of positive psychology have spent decades working on the "negative" side of things – depression, anxiety, trauma, etc. We do not view positive psychology as a replacement for traditional psychology, but merely as a supplement to the hard-won gains of traditional psychology.

**Barrier in the study of happiness: "Ice age" brain:**

*Martin Seligman (2005)* says- "Because our brain evolved during a time of ice, flood, and famine we have a catastrophic brain...looking for what's wrong. The problem is, that – this approach worked in that era. It favored people then, but it doesn't work in the modern world".

We think too much about what goes wrong and not enough about what goes right in our lives. Of course, sometimes it makes sense to analyze bad events so that we can learn from them and avoid them in the future. Those of our ancestors who spent a lot of time basking in the sunshine of good events, when they should have been preparing for disaster, did not survive the Ice Age. However, people tend to spend more time thinking about what is bad in life than is helpful. We have focused so

much on **negatives** i.e. failures, deficits, weakness and danger. This is due to the **“built-in negativity bias”**. Worse, this focus on negative events sets us up for **anxiety and depression**. One way to keep this from happening is to get **better at thinking** about and **savoring** what went **well**. For sound evolutionary reasons, most of us are not nearly as good at dwelling on good events as we are at analyzing bad events. This catastrophic bent of the human mind is called the **“Ice-age barrier”** by Seligman (2011). So to overcome our brains' natural catastrophic bent, we need to work on and practice this skill of thinking about **what went right**.

## **Happiness and Well-being Theories**

### **Hedonism Theory**

“Our life's goal should be to **minimize pain and maximize pleasure**” - **Epicurus**, Greek philosopher

- **Well-being** refers to feelings of pleasure and **happiness** (Ryan and Deci, 2001)
- Pleasure versus Pain: According to ancient **philosophers**, behaviour which **results in pleasure** is **right**, and whatever **increases pain** is **wrong**
- Philosophical approaches: Qualitative (John Stuart Mill) & Quantitative (Jeremy Bentham)
- **Quantitative approach** – **Jeremy Bentham**
  - **Value of pleasure = intensity x duration**
  - Bentham's *happiness calculator* with

economists Lionel Robbins and John Hicks

in the 1930's was met with criticism

- **Qualitative approach** – **John** Stuart Mill
- **Simpler beings** (Mill often cites the examples of pigs) have easier access to the simpler pleasures; not concerned with other aspects of life so they can simply derive happiness from these **simple pleasures**
- **Higher level** creatures (humans) spend more thought on **complex matters** (money, education, success) and **invest less in simple pleasures**

### **Eudaimonic Well-being Theory: Pleasure + Meaningfulness**

- Well-being is **more than just happiness** (Ryan and Deci, 2001)
- 1. **Developing the best** in oneself and
- 2. Belonging to and **serving institutions** larger than oneself
- Associated with a life in which the person **fulfills their true potential**
- Such a life could include many **positive emotional experiences**; **no single feeling** can be considered as a representation of Eudaimonia

### **Authentic Happiness Theory (Seligman, 2002):**

### 1. **The Pleasant Life:** Positive emotions about the past, present, and future

Has small contribution to happiness. Most widely accepted definition of happiness. Gaining pleasures through pursuit of **increasing positive emotions / pleasures irrespective of consequences**. Consists of having as many moments of happiness as possible as well as, ways to amplify the pleasures. It can consist of emotions that are directed towards:

The **Past**: satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride and serenity.

The **Present**: joy, ecstasy, calm zest, ebullience, pleasure and flow.

The **Future**: optimism, hope, faith, and trust

Pleasures are temporary because:

- **Fleeting emotions**: Emotions fluctuate within a genetically-determined range
- **Tolerance and habituation**: After a few trials, tolerance develops for example with drugs or sweets. More amount of the same activity/product is needed to receive the same level of pleasure.
- Consequences may lead to **unhappiness in the long run** in some cases. For example, prolonged use of drugs leads to loss of weight, brain damage, disturbed sleep, acts of violence, cancer, etc.

**The following study is an example of how positive emotion can affect long-term happiness.**

-One study that illustrates how positive emotion can affect longevity and long-term happiness. A study of happiness and longevity was done using 180 **nuns living together** in Milwaukee as subjects. The nuns were good subjects because they lived **routine and sheltered lives**. Many of the things that might confound the study were eliminated because they ate the **same diet**, lived in the **same place**, were in the same socioeconomic class etc. However, with all of these things being constant among the nuns there was wide variation in how healthy the sisters were and how long they lived. One sister lived to be 98 and was never sick. Another sister had a stroke at age 59 and died shortly thereafter. Both ate the same diet, had the same medical care, had the same lifestyle etc. What was the difference? Researchers went back and read the essays each of the sisters wrote when they took their vows to become nuns. They found a strong and surprising difference between the essays of the two nuns described above. One sister used the words **“very happy”** and **“eager joy”** among other positive terms in her essay. The other sister in her essay expressed no positive emotion. When the researchers started to read all the essays and quantify the amount of positive feeling it was discovered that 90% of the most cheerful quarter was still alive at age 85, while only 34% of the least cheerful quarter was alive at that age. 54% of the most cheerful quarter was alive at age 94, as opposed to 11% of the least cheerful quarter.

#### **Satisfaction about the past:**

- All feeling about the past is driven by thinking and interpretation. Seligman believes that **events of childhood are overemphasized**, as is a person's past history in general. He thinks that major **childhood trauma does have some impact on adult personality** but only a barely detectable one. There is no justification according to Seligman for blaming adult woes on what happened to you as a child. He also believes that many people who are **embittered by their past and are passive about their futures** are that way because they think their personal **history imprisons** them. They feel like victims.
- Cognitive therapy emerged out of the frustration some practitioners felt with the psychodynamic approach to therapy. That approach required people to **focus on their pasts**

rather than getting people to think differently about the present and future. It was also thought that expressing emotions such as anger kept people from developing symptoms. Seligman believes the opposite. That dwelling on anger produces more symptoms. Emotions left to themselves will dissipate. But if they're dwelt upon the emotions multiply and imprison people in a vicious cycle of dealing with past wrongs. The insufficient appreciation and savoring of good events in the past and the overemphasis on bad ones undermines serenity, contentment and satisfaction.

**2. The Engaged Life:** A life of involvement, using your strengths in the pursuit of what one enjoys

Involves applying one's talents in doing interesting work. It has large contributions to happiness. Engages one's strengths in activities that one finds challenging and rewarding. There are no shortcuts; like there are to pleasures. It leads to experience of gratification through activities we like doing- reading, rock climbing, swimming.

It requires effort and investment of time. Sometime a state of flow experienced while pursuing activities that absolutely absorb us such that we lose a sense of time and space. Such as playing cricket for a cricketer, painting for a painter, facilitating learning for a professor, etc.

3. **The Meaningful Life:** It refers to leading a life of significance, using our positive strengths in pursuit of belonging to and serving causes higher than oneself.

It can be attained by finding a cause greater than oneself and attaching this to your strength to it. The Secret to Happiness is to "Find something more important than yourself and dedicate your life to it" according to Daniel Dennett. "People who want to live a more fulfilling life should quit reading self-help books and start helping others" according to Biswas-Diener, and Dean (2007).

It consists of using one's strengths in the service of something that one believes is larger than oneself. Some examples are- Social connection, service to others. It leads to Very large contributions to happiness.

### Simple Pleasures versus Complex ones

Seligman says most individuals, are "more likely to go for the pleasure of watching a football game than for the gratification of tackling Sandberg's biography of Lincoln"

Why?

There is an over reliance on short cuts to happiness- television, drugs, shopping, spectator sports and the list goes on. There are also those who believe that our culture espouses a victim mentality, individualism and unwarranted focus on self-esteem. Our lives are full of easy pleasures that don't call on our strengths or present challenges.

One of the major symptoms of depression is self-absorption. Depressed people are focused on how they feel much of the time. And Seligman believes that our culture is obsessed with self-focus.

One of the hallmarks of gratification (related to engaged life) is an absence of feeling- a loss of self-consciousness and self-focus. When one is experiencing flow, depression decreases. So Seligman asserts that an antidote to depression is to strive for more gratification and tone down the pursuit of pleasures.



The most recent theory called the **PERMA model of flourishing** was proposed by Seligman (2011). He added two elements, i.e., relationships and accomplishment, to his earlier theory of Authentic Happiness (Seligman, 2002) that consisted of pleasant life (positive emotion), good life (engagement) and meaningful life (serving something greater than the self). These five components can be viewed as **pillars** that build into well-being, which Seligman (2011) refers to as the **ultimate goal** of positive psychology. Furthermore, flourishing is identified as the gold standard of measuring well-being. Initially, in 2002, Seligman believed that the topic of positive psychology was to study happiness which could be measured by **life satisfaction**. The change from the “authentic happiness” theory, a theory of happiness to the PERMA model, a theory of well-being was deemed necessary as it was realized that simply the original three elements were not an exhaustive list of elements that people seek for their own sake. Moreover, criticisms directed towards the initial theory still claimed that happiness was still just connected to a **“cheerful mood”** and **“life-satisfaction”** was of a transient nature changing from one time to another frequently. Thus well-being was considered to be a more stable construct to be studied. All the elements in the PERMA model have three commonalities. This includes – **contributes to well-being**, is **pursued for its own sake** and is defined and measured **independently** of the other elements. The five elements are described below:

1. **Positive emotions:** Any positive emotions that we feel such as peace, **rapture, ecstasy**, gratitude, satisfaction, pleasure, warmth, inspiration, hope, curiosity, or **love falls** into this category – and the message is that it's really important to **enjoy yourself in the here and now**, just as long as the other elements of PERMA are in place. **Savoring the current moment** is important to experience positive emotions from them. It is **subjective** in nature.
2. **Engagement:** This state can be considered as being almost **opposite to positive emotions** and is experienced while carrying out activities that people enjoy and are good at. When we are truly in a **state of engagement**, we experience a **state of flow**. It is experienced when individuals merge with the object to the extent that they **lose a sense of time and space**. Thought and **feeling are absent**. There is complete absorption in the task at hand. But this state is experienced as being **fun** only after the **completion** of the task, when individuals look back and **retrospect**. This too is a **subjective** experience. Attaining a state of **flow at work**, makes work more **enjoyable** (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011; Siu, Bakker, & Jiang, 2014). The state of complete absorption in a task **increases effectiveness** (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Demerouti et al. 2012; Bakker et al. 2014). It helps us **have control over our experiences**. And **autonomy** is an important part of our well-being as well. (Ryan, & Deci, 2000). Fulfills our basic need for **mastery or competence** (Ryan, & Deci, 2000) and helps us to build **confidence**, not only making us more skilled but also making us not think of **ourselves** (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)
3. **Positive Relationships:** Fleeting social relationships with strangers as well as longstanding ones with peers, siblings, parents, extended family, and friends are all sources of **positive emotions and support**. It is important for people to build **strong lasting relationships**. These allow for building **support systems** that help us in our lives. Most of the positive emotions are seen to be generally experienced around other people such as **laughter and love**. This is being lost in the age of Facebook, Instagram. Gable et al. (2004) found that **sharing of positive events and emotions** with people close to us **increases** daily **positive emotions** and well-being, which is further enhanced if we perceive others to be **equally interested** in what we share with them.
4. **Meaning:** It is defined as “belonging to and **serving something** that you believe is **greater than yourself**” (p. 17, “Flourish” by Martin Seligman). It can be both **subjective and objective**. The **subjective** component could include an all-night conversation session, **donating** money to charity, **helping** a friend; the “aha” of learning and discovery is pleasant to some while finding meaning internally in our thoughts and reflections gives others meaning. On the other hand, the **objective** component may dismiss all the above observations at a later time **depending upon certain premises**.

5. **Accomplishments:** Many of us strive to better ourselves in some way, whether we're seeking to master a skill, achieve a goal, or win a competition. In our achievement-driven culture, we can easily run ourselves ragged and miss acknowledging and enjoying the interim steps of the journey in pursuit of the next goal. Accomplishment comes from acknowledging the small incremental steps. Well-being is enhanced by taking forward steps and is less about the goal itself. Accomplishment or achievement is pursued for its own sake even when it has no positive emotion attached to it, no meaning and nothing in the way of positive relationships. There are two kinds of achievers:

**Donors:** who give back to the society. E.g. Bill Gates, Warren Buffett. They created meaning later in their lives after early lives of winning only for winning's sake.

**Accumulators:** Their lives are built around winning and believe that the person with the most "toys" or material wealth is the winner. When they lose it is devastating, and they do not give away their possessions except in the service of winning more possessions. It is undeniable that these accumulators and the companies they build provide means for many other people to gain employment, build lives and have families. But this is only a side effect of an accumulator's motive to win.

Earlier, Fredrickson (1998) proposed a theory of positive emotions, the **Broaden and Build Theory**, which has been subsequently revised, placed under the perspective of positive psychology and supported by more empirical evidence (2001, 2004). Pointing out that positive emotions cannot be forced to fit into the existing general models for emotions, Fredrickson (1998) argued that all emotions may not lead to specific set of actions being performed, and all action tendencies do not necessarily have to be physical in nature. Majorly, the theory proposes that positive emotions "broaden" an individual's momentary thought – action repertoire. In other words, when an individual experiences a subset of positive emotions, the pool of behaviours that can be drawn out and performed is increased. Thus positive emotions may promote discovery of novel and creative actions, cognitions and social bonds. This is the broaden hypothesis. Secondly, these behavioural and cognitive tendencies in turn build a wide range of the person's resources which can be drawn upon later for coping and ultimately evolutionary survival. This is instrumental in optimizing health and well-being. This is also known as the build hypothesis.

These distinct subset of emotions include joy, interest, contentment, love (Fredrickson, 1998) and pride (Fredrickson, 2001). For example, when "joy" is experienced, it makes the individual playful which can be experienced physically, intellectually and artistically thus promoting creativity and the skills learnt can be used later. When interest is ignited, it urges the individual to explore, which may or may not be tangible thus adding to the gamut of experiences and information that add to the self. Related to intrinsic motivation, evolutionarily it is important for continuous learning and self-development. Contentment on the other hand leads to more cognitive activity than physical and creates an urge to savor thus enhancing the experience and creating a new sense of self and the world. For example, it is a feeling which is usually experienced after experiencing the state of "flow" (Fredrickson, 1998). Likewise, love which subsumes multiple other positive emotions such as joy, interest and contentment and is felt under various circumstances whether relationships or as passion for activities, encourages exploration, savoring and playfulness while strengthening social ties thus building social resources that can be tapped into later. The emotion of pride felt after personal accomplishments urges individuals to share this information with others, and set greater goals for future thus enabling both cognitive and physical action.

### **The Sustainable Happiness Model (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004)**

**The Set Point-** The point or range at which one's happiness level is generally "set" or fixed

Research suggests that this is **genetically** determined (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996)

**Contributes to 50%** of our happiness or well-being

**Intentional Activity-** Actions or exercises that a person **chooses** to **engage in like** positive psychology interventions. Contributes to **40% of our happiness** or well-being

**Circumstances-** **Contributes to 10%** of our happiness or well-being. Factors constituting:

**Demographics** (e.g., gender, ethnicity)

**Personal Experiences** (e.g., traumas and triumphs)

**Life Status Variables** (e.g., relationships/social life, education level, health, and income)

### **The neurochemical basis of happiness**

- **Dopamine:** Related to **goals, desires, and needs, feeling of pleasure after achievement**; low levels linked to **procrastination, low enthusiasm**; lab rats low in dopamine may **lack energy to eat even** leading to death by starvation – Can be improved by **celebrating smaller goals** and **interim milestones**. **Break big goals** down into little pieces. Rather than only allowing your brain to celebrate when you've hit the big finish line, you can create a series of little finish-lines for frequent dopamine release. And it's crucial to actually celebrate—for example going to your favorite restaurant whenever you meet a small goal.
- **Serotonin:** Released when **positive emotions** are experienced; low levels may result in **depression**; most antidepressants focus on increasing production of serotonin. **Loneliness** and depression are present when serotonin is absent. It's why people fall into **gangs and criminal activity** – Can be improved by getting more **sunlight** that is not harmful (**early morning or during sun set**); and **expressing gratitude** or thankfulness for things that we already have in our lives
- **Oxytocin:** **Intimacy, trust, social interaction, relationships**; oxytocin **blocks alcohol** from reaching brain receptors in lab rats- Can be improved by having more **strong relationships** with other people, and celebrating these relationships by **presenting gifts**. Often referred to as “the cuddle hormone,” a simple way to keep oxytocin flowing is to **give someone a hug**. **Inter-personal touch** not only raises oxytocin, but reduces **cardiovascular stress** and **improves the immune system**.
- **Endorphins:** Helps to deal with **pain and stress**; is the body's reaction to any stressful situation to save us from pain. Low levels result in **anxiety, depression**- Can be improved through – **laughter**. It is one of the easiest ways to induce endorphin release. Even the anticipation and expectation of laughter e.g. **attending a comedy show**, increases levels of endorphins. Taking your **sense of humor to work**, forwarding that **funny email**, and finding several things to laugh at during the day is a great way to keep your endorphins flowing. The second way is by **physical exercise**.

### **Conclusion**

- Many theories on well-being
- Complex phenomenon; random factors and subjective experiences makes it difficult to describe, predict, and assess it
- Attempts to understand well-being from different perspectives
- Recent researches also focus on how to increase happiness