

## WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

Positive psychology is best described as the “scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between” (Peterson, 2006, p.4). It covers:

a) positive subjective experiences (happiness, pleasure, gratification, fulfilment);

b) positive individual traits (strengths of character, talents, interests, values);

and c) positive institutions (families, schools, businesses, communities, societies).

The underlying theory is that positive institutions facilitate the development and display of positive traits which in turn facilitate positive subjective experiences (Peterson, 2006).

The field was named in 1998 by Martin Seligman in his role as president of the American Psychological Society in response to the overwhelmingly disease or deficit-based model of psychology that had emerged following the First and Second World Wars. He, and several other leading psychologists, felt that the emphasis should be refocused to ensure that goodness and excellence received as much attention as human flaws and inadequacies.

Although the field is very new as a scientific line of inquiry in psychology, its history is definitely not. It stretches back to the Athenian philosophers in the West and Confucius in the East who explored questions such as: What is the good life? Is virtue its own reward? What does it mean to be happy? Is it possible to pursue happiness directly, or is fulfilment a by-product of other pursuits? What roles are played by other people and society as a whole (Peterson, 2006). Most religions have also put forward their own set of virtues or “character trait valued as being good” (Wikipedia, 2007) based on a set of values and beliefs important to the religion.



Although few if any virtues are truly universally valued, Seligman and Peterson developed a list considered important by an overwhelming majority of cultures. The researchers discovered a total of twenty-four virtues that they claim are universal or nearly so, divided into six basic types:

- **Wisdom and Knowledge:** creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective
- **Courage:** bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality
- **Humanity:** love, kindness, social intelligence
- **Justice:** citizenship, fairness, leadership
- **Temperance:** forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation
- **Transcendence:** appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

The field has also been strongly influenced by humanistic psychology and existentialism. Overlaps include:

- i. The significance of the individual and his/her unique way of seeing the world
- ii. The capacity for change and self-actualisation inherent in the individual
- iii. The significance of conscious experience
- iv. The self-regulatory nature of human activity

However, differences between the fields also exist. For example, humanists typically assume people are inherently good while positive psychology accepts both the good and bad about life as genuine. Secondly, humanists often distance themselves from the scientific method, whilst positive psychologists embrace it (Peterson, 2006).

Positive psychology was also cited in management literature long before the field of positive psychology emerged. For example, Peter Drucker, often referred to as the “father of management”, stated in the late 1960’s that “the effective executive makes strengths productive. He knows that one cannot build on weaknesses. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths – the strengths of associates, the strengths of the superior and one’s own strengths. These strengths are the true opportunities” (Drucker, 1967).



However, at this time, scientific management and Fordism were still the prevailing management paradigms therefore Drucker's groundbreaking assertion largely fell on deaf ears.

## CORE CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is about reliability, genuineness and trustworthiness; you are not trying to be something you are not. For the individual, it should result in increased feelings of gratification and wellbeing as a result of being able to exercise talents and strengths. When thoughts, feelings and behaviours are out of alignment, cognitive dissonance results and discomfort occurs, which pushes us back towards equilibrium.

### SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the capabilities to execute the actions needed to deliver results. It is important here to understand the distinction between self esteem and self efficacy. Self esteem relates to a person's sense of self-worth, whereas self efficacy relates to a person's perception of their ability to reach a goal.

People will be more inclined to take on a task if they believe they can succeed. People with high self efficacy in a task are more likely to expend more effort, and persist longer, than those with low efficacy. People with a high self efficacy are generally of the opinion that they are in control of their own lives; that their own actions and decisions shape their lives. On the other hand, people with low self efficacy see their lives as somewhat out of their hands.

### RESILIENCE

Describes the positive capacity of people to deal with stress and adverse events. It is also used to indicate a characteristic of resistance to future negative events.

Resilience is a dynamic quality, not a permanent capacity. In other words, resilient individuals demonstrate dynamic self-renewal, whereas less resilient individuals find themselves worn down and negatively impacted by life stressors.



## FLOW

Flow is a mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what they are doing, characterized by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity.

Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the “flow” concept, has identified the following specific components of an experience of flow:

- i. Clear goals (expectations and standards are clear and goals align well with one’s skills sets and abilities)
- ii. Concentrating and focusing – a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention
- iii. The merging of actions into awareness
- iv. Distorted sense of time – one’s subjective experience of time is altered
- v. Direct and immediate feedback
- vi. Balance between ability level and challenge (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult)
- vii. A sense of personal control over the activity or situation
- viii. The activity is intrinsically rewarding so there is an effortlessness of action
- ix. The person becomes so absorbed in the activity that their focus of activity is narrowed down to the activity itself. Csikszentmihalyi called this “action awareness merging”.

Not all of the above are required for flow to be experienced.

## SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that, in being made, actually causes itself to become true. This is often also referred to as the “Pygmalion Effect” after the mythological figure found in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Pygmalion is a sculptor who falls in love with a statue he has made. His statue is so realistic that he falls in love with it. He offers the statue presents and eventually prays to Venus. She takes pity on him and brings the statue to life. They marry and have a son.



The effect is so powerful since people do not react only to the situations they are in, but also, and often primarily, to the way they perceive the situations and to the meaning they assign to these situations. Once a person convinces themselves that a situation really has a certain meaning, regardless of whether it actually does, they will take very real actions in consequence.

The opposite of self-fulfilling prophecy is called the “Golem Effect” which occurs when low expectations by a leader or another significant person impair the individual’s performance, i.e., they live down to these low expectations.

## APPRECIATIVE INTELLIGENCE

Appreciative Intelligence or AI is the ability to see the positive inherent potential within the present or the ability to see the “mighty oak in the acorn”. There are three main components:

- i. Reframing, or changing the context or representation of a problem to see it in a more realistic and positive light
- ii. Appreciating the positive
- iii. Seeing how the future unfolds from the present

## POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Human emotions can be divided into two main categories. We can regard them as polarized, as opposite of each other, or we could just say that there is a dividing line where one type of emotions change into the other type of emotions.

We can call the two types of emotions Negative and Positive. That is not so much as value judgment as it is a description of the main action of each group.

Negative emotions such as fear, anger or disgust prepare us mentally and physically to take an immediate action against an object or situation that poses a threat. For example, fear prepares us to run away from a ferocious animal, anger to attack and subdue an enemy and disgust to expel or avoid poisonous and noxious substances. Therefore, negative emotions protect us from life threatening situations but when used excessively and inappropriately, these very life saving emotions can become life threatening. To take just one example, they



can mess up the function of internal organs including the immune function, which can have serious consequences for health.

Positive emotions such as joy, hope, optimism, love, contentment and gratitude help us to grow as a person, energize us for positive action, solve problems, improve the quality of our relationships and increase our sense of emotional well-being. When we engage in positive emotions habitually, over time, they can become life enhancing.

Dr. Barbara Frederikson, author of the "Broaden and Build" theory of positive emotion, suggests that positive emotions are evolutionarily adaptive because they trigger a broadening of our mental state. She says that positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride and love broaden the scope of our thinking and actions. We tend to approach and explore novel objects, people and situations under such emotions.

Barbara Fredrickson and Christine Branigan found that people had more ideas regarding things they would like to do when they were shown positive films that aroused feelings of joy and contentment. People who were shown negative films, which evoked the emotions of anger and fear, had fewer ideas regarding things they would like to do. The study suggests that when people experience joy and mild contentment, they are more likely to think of a wider range of action.

People, who habitually experience positive emotions, become more resilient over time and develop a greater sense of emotional well-being. They are more likely to develop long-term plans and goals.

People who are not optimistic or hopeful about the future aren't likely to work too hard planning for it. They might start worrying too much and not take the desired action. They may stop in their track by asking themselves a question such as this, "What's the point?" If the problem still continues, they may personalize their disappointment and say, "I am a failure." People who find a positive meaning during adversity and keep a positive affect during ordinary events may have a greater ability to cope with adverse circumstances and bounce back quickly from them. Maintaining a positive affect during chronic stress or chronic illness helps us cope with these adversities. In bereavement, people with a positive



emotional bent, adapt quicker to loss, set new life goals, reconnect to the survivors and form new relationships.

In summary, positive emotions create an upward spiral. They help us to see positive meaning in all events and circumstances. When you feel that everything that happens to you has a positive meaning, you generate even more positive emotions. When thinking and attention are broadened by positive emotions, you begin to believe that there is an opportunity behind every adversity.

