

WHAT IT IS

The term positive psychology was coined by Martin Seligman in 1998. Psychology is normally focused on the problems, symptoms, and weaknesses of clients. Treatment is centered on identifying symptoms and looking for ways to improve behavior and reduce pain. In contrast, positive psychology is the study of what goes right in life, from birth to death, and at all stops in between. It is the study of strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It emphasizes that what is good in life is just as genuine as what is bad. Positive psychology takes the focus away from suffering, weaknesses, problems, and pathology and instead focuses on what helps a person go from average to extraordinary.

The core lessons from positive psychology start with the things that do not lead to lasting happiness:

1. Wealth is only weakly related to happiness both within and across nations, particularly when income is above the poverty level.
2. Activities that make people happy in small doses – such as shopping, good food, and making money– do not lead to fulfillment in the long term, indicating that these have quickly diminishing returns.

What does work to achieve this type of elevation are these concepts:

1. People who express gratitude on a regular basis have better physical health, optimism, progress toward goals, and well-being, and help others more.
2. People who witness others perform good deeds experience an emotion called ‘elevation’ that motivates them to perform their own good deeds.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Students who are interested in moving beyond their average experiences and simply living a life free of psychological symptoms. It also is useful for those who get stuck on the cycle of trying to improve symptoms for psychological problems but find themselves wanting to be able to do something more in their lives and achieve a higher level of satisfaction and happiness.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What are some of the things that give you joy and happiness in your everyday life? How long do these bursts of happiness last?
2. Think back in your life to some examples that have given you a sense of happiness that lasts over a longer period. Are there commonalities? What about the experience made the happiness last?

TEACHING INSIGHTS

- A quote on positive psychology “The law of flotation was not discovered by contemplating the sinking of things, but by contemplating the floating of things which floated naturally, and then intelligently asking why they did so” (Thomas Troward).
- UPenn’s [Authentic Happiness](#) website and survey can be useful to assess happiness as a concept.
- The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman has a [Ted Talk](#) available that is a great way to better understand these concepts.