Psychologists began to look at what really makes a difference between a life of “getting through” and a life that is flourishing. Positive Psychology was born.

Psychology originated in the late 1600’s; an offshoot of the discipline of Philosophy. But today, in most conversations and most universities, Psychology is considered synonymous with the study of mental illness. For decades the study of mental illness has been the essence of the field of Psychology, and to rid an individual of a psychological disorder was considered its goal.

In the late 1990’s Psychologists began noticing that even in people with NO mental illness, some people were thriving, while others were just getting through. They began to look at the lives of those who were thriving, and noted that it wasn’t necessarily attached to education, wealth or career. In fact, not even physical health was a guarantee of “thriving”.

In 2012, Dr. Keyes looked at 5,689 students in 13 colleges and determined whether their mental outlooks were Flourishing, Moderate, or Languishing. He then assessed whether or not they had evidence of depression, generalized anxiety, or panic disorder.

The final step in the study was to compare students in each of the three categories in two areas: suicidal risk, and academic impairment. The difference was clear. Even in the presence of mental illness, those students who were flourishing had substantially less incidence of either suicidal risk or academic impairment.

Findings (paraphrased):
- Many students do experience depression and anxiety.
- Depressed, anxious students are at a greater risk of suicidal behavior and academic impairment.
- Flourishing students are at the lowest risk of suicidal behavior and academic impairment among all students, regardless of mental health status.


“Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.”
—Theodore Roosevelt
Positive Emotions

There is a lot more to positive emotions than a fleeting moment of feeling “up”. Positive emotions can be as diverse as: kindness, awe, courage, gentleness, enthusiasm, generosity, comfort, encouragement, fun, warmth, harmony, gladness, wisdom, justice, patience, giddiness, flirtatiousness, euphoria, (add your own personal favorite.)

What can you do to engender positive emotions in yourself and others?

Engagement

Getting “lost” in something.

Also called “flow”, engagement is when you get lost in a pursuit. Think of a jazz musician. Engagement is being “all in” — participating with your entire being. It is using all of your talent and energy. So much so that you “forget” about time, or to stop and eat, or that you were supposed to be somewhere else at a certain time.

Engagement is very good for your brain. Finding challenging problems or tasks and staying with them until you solve them is an excellent mental workout!

Relationships

Joy is often best when shared.

The happiest moments of our life are typically social moments; moments shared with at least one other person. Happiness is often formed and expressed in the presence of others — in community. Studies show that the happiest, and most flourishing of centenarians are still deeply involved in community and/or family. They still actively share and learn; give and receive. Life is not meant to be a solitary journey.
Why do you get up every morning?

Dan Buettner interviewed dozens of centenarians for his book, “The Blue Zones”. He found that in every culture, the oldest of the old possesses a sense of meaning. They have a reason to get out of bed each and every morning. For some it is family, honored roles in the community, or tasks of leadership or service. This unique identity imbues their lives with purpose. They know they are needed. This sense of meaning keeps them going.

Accomplishment

Accomplishment is the built in reward for setting goals, developing skills, practicing hard, and not giving up! It is the opposite of quitting, losing, or forfeiting. Some accomplishments are very public — like winning a championship match. Others are more personal — like standing by someone with a terminal illness. What are you pursuing?

You can’t lead somebody to a place you’ve never been.

- What might be a clue that a student is too far into the negative end of a positive/negative emotion continuum? What could you offer this student?
- What are clues that a student is not engaging in their schoolwork — or anything else for that matter? What might you do?
- Recall a situation where a student did not have the support they needed to get through a specific challenge? How did you handle it?
- When does the subject of “meaning” come up in the advising relationship? What are the comments of students who seem to lack meaning? Where could you refer these students?
- Name some typical accomplishments for college students? What help could you give the student who is not experiencing any of the typical accomplishments of college?

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What went well? And why?

Every night for the next week, set aside ten minutes before you go to sleep. Write down three things that went well that day and why they went well. You may use a journal or your computer to write about the events, but it is important that you have a physical record of what you wrote. The three things need not be earthshaking in importance, but they can be important. (Example: “I had a really good run.”; or “The scan was negative.”)

Next to each positive event, answer the question “Why did this happen?” (Example: “I asked Bill to run with me, which really motivated me.” Or, “The meds are working!”)

Writing about why the positive events in your life happened may seem awkward at first, but please stick with it for one week. It will get easier. The odds are that you will be less depressed, happier, and addicted to this exercise six months from now.

*Adapted from What Went Well Exercise in Flourish by Martin E.P. Seligman, pp 33-34.

The Kindness Exercise

Find one wholly unexpected kind thing to do tomorrow and just do it. Notice what happens to your mood.

*Adapted from The Kindness Exercise in Flourish by Martin E.P. Seligman, pg. 21.

The Letter or Visit of Gratitude

Recall someone still alive who years ago did or said something that changed your life for the better. Make it someone who you never properly thanked, and who lives close enough to you that you could make a trip to their home or office.

Write a letter of gratitude to this individual. The letter should be concrete and about three hundred words: be specific about what she did for you and how it affected your life. Let her know what you are doing now, and mention how you often remember what she did. Make it genuine.

If the person lives in close proximity to you, call the person and tell her you’d like to visit her, but be vague about the purpose of the meeting; this exercise is much more fun when it is a surprise. When you meet, take your time reading your letter. Notice her reactions as well as yours. If she interrupts you as you read, say that you really want her to listen until you are done. After you have read the letter (every word), discuss the content and your feelings for each other.

*Adapted from The Gratitude Visit Exercise in Flourish by Martin E.P. Seligman, pp 30-31.

Resources and References


*Adapted from What Went Well Exercise in Flourish by Martin E.P. Seligman, pp 33-34.

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