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Dear Reader,

In this issue we are introducing Positive Psychology, a relatively new domain of behavioral sciences that focuses on individual well-being. For some reason, we know far more about what causes pain and stress than what causes harmony. Maybe it's time to address this oversight.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

*"I am a kind of paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy."*

*J. D. Salinger  
(American novelist, 1919-)*

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# LIM NEWS



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## Positive Psychology: Can It Help?

By Isabel Rimanoczy

Have you noticed the time we spend trying to figure out life? How much effort we make addressing the behaviors of others; how we overcome obstacles; how we survive pain; how we attempt to overcome sadness and depression; how to handle frustration, and anger; how to deal with our fears.

Psychologists have begun to explore why we tend to focus more on problems rather than on positive feelings such as happiness. Why do we pay less attention to how we achieve happiness? These and related questions form the focus of what Positive Psychology seeks to address.

### **Things have not always been this way.**

There seems to be a correlation between stability and the focus on happiness. Prosperous and peaceful cultures, like Athens during the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., seemed to focus on philosophical topics and the pursuit of happiness, creativity and virtue. When a culture faces poverty, shortages of goods, military threats or other sources of instability, the attention flows to defense and damage control, indicates Seligman, the President of the American Psychological Association, who has made the exploration of happiness the landmark of his presidency.

Before World War II, Seligman notes, behavioral science in the US had three clear missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing talent. But after the war two economic events changed the landscape. One was the foundation of the Veteran's Administration in 1946, which drew thousands of psychologists to make a living treating mental illness. The other was the creation of the National Institute of Health in 1947, which paradoxically was based on the disease model, and offered grants if the research was about pathologies.

The results were soon seen: In the ensuing fifty years the behavioral sciences became concerned with healing; over fourteen disorders were defined and can now be cured or treated (Seligman, 1994). We now have a taxonomy that describes "such fuzzy concepts as schizophrenia, anger, and depression." There has been an explosion in research on suffering and behavioral disorders such as violence, abuse, intoxication, suicide, murder, exploring the impact of parental abandonment, physical and sexual abuse, and stress. The goal has been to treat damage in habits and health. But without noticing it, we developed a culture dominated by "victimology", where individuals are seen as victims of external stimuli, to which they are conditioned to respond.

At the same time, technological progress allowed neuroscience to develop new understanding of neurochemistry and pharmacology of behavioral diseases. We are able to trace the genetic contributions to depression, schizophrenia and aggression. What has gone unobserved and unfunded is the neurochemistry of positive traits, courage, good cheer, or flexible thinking.<sup>[1]</sup>

### **Why do we focus on problems?**

Behavioral researcher David Buss<sup>[2]</sup> offers an evolutionary explanation. We carry the genetic preparation from the past generations, and "our current environment is so different from the ancestral environment to which our body and mind has been adapted" that we shouldn't be surprised to experience misfit in our modern context. That misfit generates stress, sense of inappropriateness, frustration, identity problems, aggression in human interactions and blame. Negative experiences and emotions speak louder and appear more urgent. They focus on immediate problems and dangers and create reactions such as alertness and vigilance, and response through changed behaviors.

On the other hand, when we are well adapted to a situation and our environment, no sudden changes are required and we go gently with the flow. We respond effortlessly and we experience harmony. There is no tension pushing us to change, to react; we are in a more relaxed state of mind. From an evolutionary perspective, this relaxed state does not demand our attention. From this point of view the focus on the negative may reflect the higher survival value of negative versus positive emotions, indicates Seligman. But this may not be the full picture.

### **There is more to life than just problems**

Emotional states are clearly correlated with one's health. Just as stress and negative emotions can cause mental and physical illness, the opposite also seems to be true. Because of the focus on pathology, much more is known about how negative emotions promote illness, than about how positive emotions can promote health. However, researcher Peter Salovey<sup>[3]</sup> and his co-authors suggest that, since positive and negative emotions are "generally inversely correlated, substituting the former for the latter can have preventive and therapeutic effects." Their research covered the direct effects of emotions on physiology and on the immune system. Positive thinking has appeared to be a key factor in health and healing processes.<sup>[4]</sup>

The great attention placed on repairing physical harm and damage to the brain has meant less focus on understanding prevention. Prevention researchers describe the role of individual strengths as buffers against mental illness. Contentment with one's own past, hope and optimism towards the future, ethics, honesty, perseverance and courage to face the present are some of the characteristics of happier individuals. Positive psychology aims at exploring how positive qualities can be developed and fostered. For the individual, this refers to aspects such as the capacity for love, vocation, interpersonal skills, forgiveness, originality, and creativity. Psychiatrist George Vaillant<sup>[5]</sup> adds resources such as humor, anticipation and sublimation. For communities or groups, the focus would be on developing active citizenship, responsibility, altruism, tolerance and work ethics.

In the organizational setting, David Cooperrider's model of Appreciative Inquiry<sup>[6]</sup> takes a similar stance. Instead of concentrating on reducing problems and obstacles, he suggests we actively search for the positives, the strengths and the successful experiences. It is in these positive experiences that the resources lie to address any challenges, and AI aims at amplifying the strengths. This approach can be found also in Buddhist discipline, which uses meditation and chanting as an instrument to create intentionality.

### **I am my boss**

In the last thirty years increasingly attention has been given to well being, self-determination and happiness, with an explosion of self-help books. Amazon.com offers over 198,000 titles on the keyword "happiness". Contemporary psychological theories no longer consider the individual as a passive reactor to stimuli. On the contrary, individuals are seen as active decision makers<sup>[7]</sup>, who with each step influence their own fate – whether by actively engaging in, or by electing not to engage in, an activity.

Self-determination began to be defined in the mid sixties by Maslow and Rogers. Human needs for inclusion and belonging, autonomy and competence are seen as important contributors to happiness<sup>[8]</sup>.

However, the emphasis on autonomy has also been associated with dissatisfaction, depression<sup>[9]</sup> and isolation. Cultural constraints through shared norms and values seem to be necessary for leading a satisfying life.

### **The optimist**

Behavioral researchers have described a close correlation between what we think and how we feel about our lives<sup>[10]</sup>. These findings reflect the positions of Greek philosophers Democritus and Epictetus who stated that it is not what happens to us that determines how happy we are, but how we interpret what happens. Since psychoanalysis and other self-awareness therapies, the joke has become popular that after undergoing therapy an individual doesn't change his habit, but changes how he feels about it.

Optimism has been described as a cognitive resource of individuals who persevere in maintaining a positive attitude and who report more successful experiences and better health<sup>[11]</sup>. Social and cultural context seems to have an influence, some communities being more prone to have an optimistic attitude than others. An example of this is a famous response of former President of the French Republic, Charles De Gaulle, to a journalist's inquiry:

"Mr. President, are you a happy man?"

"What sort of a fool do you take me for?"

We still don't know how functional optimism can be, and when too much of it can translate into denial, unrealistic perceptions or superficial thinking.

### **In the quest of happiness**

When it comes to identifying what makes people happy, the research instruments play a major role in the results. In a questionnaire respondents may cite more traditionally expected replies, such as "my kids, my family", while instruments that require indicating the most satisfactory moments of the day don't bring up that response at all<sup>[12]</sup>. Some research has found an association between religious faith/spirituality and happiness.<sup>[13]</sup>

Seligman indicates that living a meaningful life, i.e. applying the personal strengths to common good or altruistic causes, is one of the key factors for happiness<sup>[14]</sup>. The other factors he mentions are pleasure and engagement (the depth of involvement with one's family, work, romance and hobbies). Of the three factors, pleasure (satisfaction of material and physical needs) is the least consequential. "This is newsworthy because so many Americans build their lives around pursuing pleasure. It turns out that engagement and meaning are much more important," the author observes.


Other authors<sup>[15]</sup> arrive at similar conclusions: economic growth and income are less stable motivators after a minimum threshold of affluence is passed, than close personal relationships.

The importance of social contact is highlighted by behavioral researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: "Almost every person feels happier when they're with other people. It's paradoxical because many of

us think we can hardly wait to get home and be alone with nothing to do, but that's a worst-case scenario. If you're alone with nothing to do, the quality of your experience really plummets."<sup>[16]</sup>

### It is your choice

If we look at the informal conversations with friends or colleagues, or even at the economic and social sciences discourse, we will see the prevailing perspective of a self-interest driven, territorial aggressive, zero-sum, power dominated and conflict centered society, that finds endless external reasons to blame and to justify reactions. But as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi remind us, this is an incomplete view. "In human behavior, what is most intriguing is not the average, but the improbable. Very few people kept their decency during the onslaught of war; yet it was these few who held the key to what humans could be like at their best" relates Csikszentmihalyi thinking of his lessons learned in Europe from World War II.

So the question is What makes life worth living? The adrenaline of uncertainty, the excitement of anxiety, fear, threats and the unexpected may be an emotional addiction. Movies and reality offer us plenty of that. Now at the end of the day, whom would you rather be with? A stressed out or a happy person? And I'm talking about being with yourself. 

*Source: Extracts and adapted from Seligman, M. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. Positive Psychology: An Introduction. In American Psychologist, January 2000*

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