

## Positive Psychology: An Overview.

Leijssen Mia. (Manuscript MOOC, [Mia.leijssen@kuleuven.be](mailto:Mia.leijssen@kuleuven.be) )

Existential well-being has a lot to do with hanging on to hope in times of trouble, feeling the power of human resilience and finding sources of strength to alleviate things despite - or even thanks to - difficult situations. It is possible to **get in touch with your healthy core and your potential for growth** by focusing on a problem. This is something that **Gendlin** expressed in 1978 – a good 20 years before ‘Positive Psychology’ found its feet – as: “Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness”<sup>i</sup>.

There is no need to place positive and negative experience at either end of a spectrum because they interrelate in a dynamic way that determines the course of a human life. Positive psychology is not about ‘denying’ your problems. The power comes from **coping well** with your painful experiences: by parking them, or working through them or shifting attention to the ‘good’ things in your life.

Positive psychology provides an alternative to a deep-rooted tendency to look at yourself and others in a limiting and negative light. It helps you **identify your talents** and bring out the best in yourself. But, oddly enough, that very process can engender resistance. If you have spent a lifetime learning or becoming accustomed to being ‘modest’, you can soon feel guilty of ‘arrogance’ once you start pushing your talents and your positive qualities to the fore.

Positive Psychology ‘officially’ **started** in 2000 with the publication of "Positive Psychology: An Introduction" by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the *American Psychologist* journal<sup>ii</sup>. But this new movement had clear forerunners. For example, as early as 1951 Abraham **Maslow** used the term “Positive Psychology” as the title for a chapter in his book “Motivation and Personality”. In this chapter he put forward his well-known hierarchy of human needs, which begins with food, shelter and social belonging. He argued that psychologists should turn their attention to the things that really make life worthwhile. Maslow was of the opinion that beauty, goodness and truth were the most meaningful<sup>iii</sup> and put these "being values" at the top of his hierarchy.

Values and virtues have traditionally been the preserve of religion and philosophy. Societies that are secular and multicultural need to define themselves in a variety of colors. Positive psychology seeks to recover the practical wisdom of life that has guided spiritual traditions and well developed cultures.

In Ancient Greece, for example, **Aristotle** described the "Practical Ethics" in which he argued for constant critical reflection on the quality of one's personal functioning and the things of value in one's everyday life. The Greek word ‘èthos’ means: personal attitude or character. Practical ethics are all about "the ability to live with yourself" and specifically address taking deliberate care of the psyche. They represent a sort of virtuousness in everyday tasks and concerns. Aristotle bases practical ethics on three concepts: "optimal functioning", "friendliness towards self" and "pursuit of a blossoming life".

*Optimal functioning* is all to do with finding the right attitude. This is an attitude in which you maintain a good balance and do not find yourself carried away by your feelings too readily, or at an inappropriate time or for the wrong reasons. Take the emotion of 'anger', for example. We have real rage at one end of the scale and inability to be angry at the other: somewhere in the middle lies the optimal attitude, which we might understand as 'resolute mild manneredness'. Virtue lies in the middle of the two extremes, in the same way that 'courage' lies between fear and recklessness.

*Friendliness towards self* is the positive attitude you take towards yourself. Having the opposite attitude would mean being in conflict with yourself, in which case you would do things that were not good for your health or mental well-being. Friendliness towards yourself means you do the things that are best for you, enjoy your own company and are at one with yourself. When you have the right type of love for yourself you do the things that are good, because you reflect on the things that are actually important, rather than allowing yourself to be led by narrow self-interest or the expectations of others.

Finally, *a blossoming life* does not imply material wealth - although there is nothing wrong with a little prosperity - nor does it involve the pursuit of pleasure. It is not about status or respect either. It is about being aware of how you live your life. You have to work at being happy and need to have enough time to spare for it. This time is best spent in thought, reflection and consideration. If you can do this in practice you are, according to Aristotle, a happy person.

Modern-day positive psychology uses research as a means of validating long-standing methods of development and healing.

**Seligman**<sup>iv</sup> was one of the first to devote his studies to the qualities that define people's "happiness". His "*Authentic Happiness theory*" identifies three ways to achieve a happy life. The first is that of the "*pleasant*" life, in which you cultivate the things that make your life "pleasant". You foster positive feelings about the present, the past and the future by making room for things like gratitude, satisfaction, forgiveness, optimism, hope. The second way to happiness is to lead a "good" life. This means using your signature strengths to "engage" fully in important areas of life, such as work, relationships, hobbies, etc. This gives you satisfaction and gratification. The third is to pursue a "*meaningful*" life, in which case you invest the best of yourself in the service of something that is much larger than your own self-interest. You can "serve" by doing voluntary work, for example.

In 2011 Seligman<sup>v</sup> presents his "*well-being theory*" in which he refines what Positive Psychology is all about. He explains the four pillars of well-being (meaning and purpose, positive emotions, relationships, and accomplishment), placing emphasis on meaning and purpose as the most important for achieving a life of *fulfillment*. He wonders now what is it that allows you to flourish? "Well-being" takes the stage front and center, and Happiness or Positive Emotion becomes one of the five pillars of Positive Psychology, along with **Engagement**, **Relationships**, **Meaning**, and **Accomplishment** - "PERMA" - the permanent building blocks for a life of profound fulfillment<sup>vi</sup>.

Seligman and his colleagues have developed tests to help you discover your "*signature strengths*". They identify 24 character strengths, which they classify under 6 virtues, i.e. the virtues of wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance and transcendence<sup>vii</sup>. *Virtues* are qualities that crop up time and again in history - no matter when or where - and are esteemed in philosophy and religion. Researchers think that there may be biological grounds for this, which could explain how

evolutionary natural selection takes place on the basis of these "qualities of excellence". *Character strengths* such as being discreet, impartial, inquisitive, helpful, etc. are the psychological qualities through which people apply these virtues. Positive psychology uses research to try to substantiate how and why people use these qualities to improve their own health and welfare and that of others.

"Flow" is a concept coined by **Csikszentmihalyi** <sup>viii</sup> (who kindly explained to us that to correctly pronounce his name, we just need to say "cheek-sent-me-high") <sup>ix</sup>. His life work started out with research on creativity. In his in-depth interviews on creative processes, Csikszentmihalyi noticed that artists often used the word "flow". Since then, research on Flow has been widely flourishing within Positive Psychology. The state of Flow is colloquially known as "being in the Zone", and has several characteristics. When in Flow, people tend to get immersed in the present moment and in the action. People in Flow often report "losing themselves", yet somehow remaining "in control" of what is happening. Typically, people in Flow tend to lose track of time. Flow is also experienced as intrinsically rewarding, and may therefore contribute to our Subjective Well-being.

Let us give some examples. On the one hand, when asked to solve sums like "2+2", mathematicians will probably not reach Flow because their perceived skills are much higher than required by the perceived challenge (leading to e.g. boredom instead). On the other hand, when asked to explain Einstein's Relativity Theory in Latin while juggling, most of us will not reach Flow because our perceived skills are lower than required by the perceived challenge (leading to e.g. anxiety). Yet an experienced mountaineer climbing the Himalayas is quite likely to experience Flow: we can reach Flow when our perceived skills and the perceived challenge somehow correspond. We may experience Flow while e.g. making music, doing sports, playing games, meditating, reading or even participating in a MOOC on Existential Well-being.

Another leading author in positive psychology is **Snyder** <sup>x</sup> who has placed "hope" on the map as an area of research. In 2002 he and several others published the first "*Handbook of Positive Psychology*", the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of which grew enormously in 2011 to reflect the growing interest in talents. Snyder and his colleagues define strength as "a capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes". Talents are "naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied and manifested in life experiences characterized by yearnings, rapid learning, satisfaction, and timelessness."<sup>xi</sup> Talents are the result of a healthy, stimulating development that allows space to discover and hone innate qualities. At best, character strengths follow on from talents, combined with knowledge and skills. It is therefore easy to see how one person may be forced to put a great deal of effort into learning a certain quality, whereas another person almost playfully blossoms in that same quality, because it is part and parcel of the talent that he or she was "gifted".

There can be little wonder that well-being goes hand in hand with discovering your real talents and cultivating them. If, for example, you have an innate sense of justice, there is every chance that you will blossom to the full in a profession that calls for a sense of community and sincerity. It is best to discover those qualities that will require more from you in the way of practice and persistence before you are forced to make room for them in your life. If you are not particularly talented in the area of temperance, for example, illness may force you to apply a great deal of character strength if you have to follow a diet. This implies that well-being is not the same for everyone and we should always

remember that individuals differ greatly and have very different needs. But there is no well-being without *hope*, the driving force behind the belief that you can reach your goals.

More evocative than research findings we have the words of Vaclav Havel (1936-2011): "Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Either we have hope or we don't. It is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prediction or estimation. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons ... Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success. Hope is rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more propitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well. But the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."<sup>xii</sup>

A leading Positive Psychology scholar, researcher and writer is **Barbara Frederickson**<sup>xiii</sup>, whose books include *Positivity* (2009), and *Love 2.0* (2013)<sup>xiv</sup>. Frederickson developed the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions which argues that over time positive emotions help develop cognitive, social and resources that can lead to increased resilience and flourishing. Through her research studies, she found that positive emotions momentarily expand attention and thinking. When people are induced to feel a positive emotion, they seem to have a larger perspective, they can take in more information, see more connections and be more creative. She also found that positive emotions also erase or un-do the effect of negative emotions. The cardiovascular reactivity of negative emotions (such as anger fear and sadness) can be quelled by experiencing a positive emotion, which down regulates negative emotions, including the psychological and physiological effects of these emotions. For example, in an experiment when Frederickson gave participants an acute stressor - they were to give a public speech with no preparation time - they went into a heightened state of arousal with sweaty palms and increased heart rate. After being told that they didn't have to give this talk, they were randomly assigned to watch a video clip that was rated as positive, negative or neutral. Frederickson then observed how long it took each participant to recover from the anxiety about the possible speech. Her results showed that positive emotions led to the quickest return to a resting state - faster than either the neutral or negative emotions. Finally, Frederickson found that our emotions obey a tipping point. With three positive emotions to one negative emotion, our moods can be lifted and we can move from languishing to flourishing. She talked about the ratios needed to shift one's mood - about three to one, and the ratio needed for a team to work well together in a work setting - about five to one. Her research correlates with the findings of Dr. John Gottman<sup>xv</sup>, who found that for a marriage to stay vital, partners need to experience five positive interactions to offset one negative interaction. Barbara Frederickson's prodigious work in the field of Positive Psychology has demonstrated that positivity feels good, sparks our motivation, improves how our minds work, undoes the effects of negative emotions and obeys a tipping point. Positive emotions can actually shift how we experience ourselves and our lives. Her scientific experiments show that positive emotions<sup>xvi</sup> create more flexible, creative thought patterns and more effective behavior than negative emotions, which narrow down our attention and lead to deeply engrained habits.

Another authoritative scientist is **Vaillant**<sup>xvii</sup>, who bases his research on developmental psychology, neurobiology and anthropology, shows that some negative emotions, such as fear and anger, are

crucial to survival. But he views the positive emotions, such as love, compassion, hope, forgiveness, gratitude, respect, joy, etc., as essential to a person's optimal development. Because they help us overcome our ego, Vaillant associates these specific emotions with spirituality. He talks of "spiritual emotions", which he regards as being deeply embedded in human biology through evolution, because they affect brain stem activity. It is worth noting that Vaillant is uneasy with the hype around happiness. He views the pursuit of happiness as shortsighted and argues that we should focus on what *joy* brings us in the longer term. Joy is more substantial and stable than happiness and goes right to the core of our being. Joy is pure energy. "Joy is all about togetherness with others; happiness is to do with reducing your own stress. Happiness allows us to run away from pain, whereas joy allows us to acknowledge that pain exists. Happiness is not a base emotion, because happiness is for the most part cognitive. Joy is, by way of contrast, a primary emotion. Joy is a gut feeling. Joy allows us to laugh from our bellies"<sup>xviii</sup>. Happiness activates the sympathetic nervous system, which is where responses like fight or flight are stimulated. Joy is located in the parasympathetic nervous system, which is where we find the stimuli to rest and digest. Joy is relevant from an evolutionary viewpoint because the biological reward system, for example, makes parents choose to protect their children and fight for their lives. Joy has nothing to do with reducing stress and has everything to do with togetherness. Joy is far beyond the principle of lust. A smoker might take pleasure from smoking a cigarette, but feel joy when he bumps into an old friend. Pleasure generally shows up as activity in a small area of the brain, but joy involves much larger parts of the central nervous system. As opposed to excitement, joy lowers the heartbeat and has a restful effect. Joy goes hand in hand with vitality and cheerfulness. It is also the case that play, which is ingrained in young children and mammals, has a greater association with joy than with pleasure. Normal children's play is a powerful way of exercising and perfecting skills. In adults, play usually takes the form of sports, singing, music, dancing or engaging in joyous activities that encourage togetherness. Vaillant associates joy with pain: "Joy is sorrow inside-out"<sup>xix</sup>. At a funeral, friends and relatives can come together in joy to celebrate the deceased and honor them with joyous memories. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a fine example of inspiring music about togetherness, in which the composer, despite his deafness and many sufferings, gives joy the upper hand.

To illustrate the approach taken in positive psychology we go to the counselling practice of Hildegarde<sup>xx</sup>. She works with victims of cluster munitions. As she talks with an East European bomb blast survivor the question arises: "What is your strength?" The counsellor notes how quickly this survivor goes on to talk about her strengths. She calls herself a "fighter" and says that her surgeon thought so too, because "he ignored normal procedure and did everything he could to save her leg". She thinks of herself as the luckiest woman in the world, because she lives in a country where that was possible. Though she knew that she would never fully recover, she did her best, day in day out, not to feel sorry for herself, and tried to achieve a little more each day. Her courage made her persist. She saw many dead and wounded people, but she survived. Though few people at the age of twenty have experienced what she has been through, i.e. learning to use a wheelchair, she didn't think of herself as less fortunate for it. She tried to see the positive side. Not only that, but she said, "It will take more than a cluster bomb to rob me of my happiness. I chose to laugh. I don't need a reason for my existence. I am the reason." It releases her from fretting about the point of life and asking herself why this misfortune fell upon her. "I didn't waste time asking: 'why me?' It happened and I had to learn to live with it. It is a form of realism." Her eternal thanks to her

surgeon are based on a range of spiritual emotions. She sees the sense of obligation that arises from the virtue of justice as a strength, which allows her to overcome her pain in a meaningful way. As she speaks the young woman explains inner resources, external support, character traits, talents and abilities. It struck the counsellor how related the survivor was during the talk. Her eyes began to sparkle and there was vitality in her body language.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gendlin, E.T. (1978) *Focusing*. New York: Everest house. p. 75

<sup>ii</sup> Seligman, Martin E.P.; Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (2000). "Positive Psychology: An Introduction". *American Psychologist* 55 (1): 5-14.

<sup>iii</sup> Long before this Thomas Aquinas described "the good, the true, the beautiful" as roads that lead to a meeting with God.

<sup>iv</sup> Seligman, M.E.P. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>v</sup> Seligman, M.E.P. (2011) *Flourish : a visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York : Free Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Rebecca Oxford revised in our course on existential well-being counseling the five elements of Seligman's PERMA. Positive Emotions (P in PERMA) include "pleasure, ecstasy, comfort, warmth, and the like" (Seligman, 2011, p. 17). Seligman (2011) endorses Frederickson's (2001, 2003, 2004) "broaden-and-build" theory of positive emotion by saying "the positive emotions broaden and build abiding psychological resources that we can call on later in life" (p. 66), while negative emotions narrow and reduce the individual's response options to survival behaviors (Frederickson, 2001, 2003, 2004). Engagement (E in PERMA) involves flow (Csikszentmihalyi), which is based on intrinsic motivation. Meaning (M in PERMA) is found in being involved with something greater than oneself. Relationships (R in PERMA) can be very roughly tracked back to Seligman's theory of authentic happiness in terms of the Meaningful Life, or the life of affiliation with something larger than oneself. It involves, at the very least, kindness toward others (Seligman, 2011, p. 21) and positive relationships (p. 20). Accomplishment (A in PERMA) is often pursued for its own sake, even when it brings no positive emotion, no meaning, and nothing in the way of positive relationships" (Seligman, 2011, p. 18). Seligman gives as an example the game of duplicate bridge, arguing that "winning for winning's sake" does not involve positive emotion, meaning, or positive relationships. He also says that this is the "pure" state of accomplishment and that less "pure" forms involve positive emotion, meaning, and positive relationships.

<sup>vii</sup> The list of 24 VIA Character Strengths <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/> on which Seligman bases his concept of signature strengths, uses somewhat different wording. The six virtues and their associated strengths are: (a) wisdom and knowledge – creativity, curiosity, judgment (critical thinking), love of learning, and perspective (wisdom); (b) courage – bravery (valor), perseverance, honesty (authenticity), and zest, all of which are much like many existentialists and Brown would advocate; (c) humanity – love, kindness, and social intelligence (emotional and interpersonal intelligence), much like Buber might advocate; (d) justice – teamwork, fairness, and leadership; (e) temperance – forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation; and (f) transcendence – appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe and wonder, much like feelings during Maslow's peak experiences), gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality.

A slightly more scientific version of the same ideas in the manual: Peterson, C. & M.E.P. Seligman (2004). *Character strengths and virtues. A handbook and classification*. Oxford: University Press. From this pages 29-30 Classification of 24 character strengths under 6 virtues. And pages 16-28 Character strengths tested against 10 criteria.

<sup>viii</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1998). *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life*. Basic Books.

<sup>ix</sup> I thank my colleague Hein Zegers for his writing of this paragraph about Flow.

<sup>x</sup> Snyder, C.R., S.J. Lopez & J.T. Pedrotti, (2011). *Positive Psychology. The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths*. Second edition. Sage Publications .

<sup>xi</sup> Snyder, Lopez and Pedrotti (2011), p. 67.

<sup>xii</sup> <http://blog.gaiam.com/quotes/authors/vaclav-havel/67076>

<sup>xiii</sup> I thank my colleague Joan Klagsbrun for her writing of this paragraph about Barbara Frederickson.

<sup>xiv</sup> Frederickson, B.L. (2009) *Positivity*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.

Frederickson, B.L. (2013). *Love 2.0: How Our Supreme Emotion Affects Everything We Feel, Think, Do, and Become*. New York: Hudson Street Press.

<sup>xv</sup> Gottman, J. & Silver, J. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

---

Gotten, J. (1999). *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

<sup>xvi</sup> Barbara Fredrickson (2011) *Positive Emotions Transform Us*. (7:36) Positive emotions make us more resilient to setbacks, improve our relationships, and may even change our biological makeup.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKggZhYwoys>

<sup>xvii</sup> Vaillant, G.E. (2002). *Aging well*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Vaillant (2008). *Spirituele evolutie*. [Spiritual evolution] Amsterdam: Paradigma. [Paradigm]

<sup>xviii</sup> Vaillant (2008). p.189

<sup>xix</sup> Vaillant (2008) p. 202)

<sup>xx</sup> Hildegard Vansintjan is an Advocacy Officer at Handicap International, an international non-governmental organization, and a researcher for the Handicap International and the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor. The account given here is based on excerpts from her final project for the existential well-being counseling course. KU Leuven, edition 2011-2012.