

“The New Era of Positive Psychology” by Martin Seligman

Martin Seligman talks about psychology -- as a field of study and as it works one-on-one with each patient and each practitioner. As it moves beyond a focus on disease, what can modern psychology help us to become?

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When I was President of the American Psychological Association, they tried to media-train me. And an encounter I had with CNN summarizes what I'm going to be talking about today, which is the eleventh reason to be optimistic. The editor of Discover told us 10 of them; I'm going to give you the eleventh.

So they came to me, CNN, and they said, "Professor Seligman -- would you tell us about the state of psychology today? We'd like to interview you about that." And I said, "Great." And she said, "But this is CNN, so you only get a sound bite." I said, "Well, how many words do I get?" And she said, "Well, one."

(Laughter)

And the cameras rolled, and she said, "Professor Seligman, what is the state of psychology today?" "Good."

(Laughter)

"Cut! Cut. That won't do. We'd really better give you a longer sound bite." "How many words do I get this time?" "Well, you get two."

(Laughter)

"Doctor Seligman, what is the state of psychology today?" "Not good."

(Laughter)

"Look, Doctor Seligman, we can see you're really not comfortable in this medium. We'd better give you a real sound bite. This time you can have three words. Professor Seligman, what is the state of psychology today?" "Not good enough." That's what I'm going to be talking about.

I want to say why psychology was good, why it was not good, and how it may become, in the next 10 years, good enough. And by parallel summary, I want to say the same thing about technology, about entertainment and design, because I think the issues are very similar.

So, why was psychology good? Well, for more than 60 years, psychology worked within the disease model. Ten years ago, when I was on an airplane and I introduced myself to my seatmate, and told them what I did, they'd move away from me, because, quite rightly, they were saying psychology is about finding what's wrong with you. Spot the loony. And now, when I tell people what I do, they move toward me.

What was good about psychology -- about the \$30 billion investment NIMH made, about working in the disease model, about what you mean by psychology -- is that, 60 years ago, none of the disorders were treatable; it was entirely smoke and mirrors. And now, 14 of the disorders are treatable, two of them actually curable.

And the other thing that happened is that a science developed, a science of mental illness. We found out we could take fuzzy concepts like depression, alcoholism, and measure them with rigor; that we could create a classification of the mental illnesses; that we could understand the causality of the mental illnesses. We could look across time at the same people -- people, for example, who were genetically vulnerable to schizophrenia -- and ask what the contribution of mothering, of genetics are, and we could isolate third variables by doing experiments on the mental illnesses.

And best of all, we were able, in the last 50 years, to invent drug treatments and psychological treatments. And then we were able to test them rigorously, in random-assignment, placebo-controlled designs, throw out the things that didn't work, keep the things that actively did.

The conclusion of that is, psychology and psychiatry of the last 60 years can actually claim that we can make miserable people less miserable. And I think that's terrific. I'm proud of it. But what was not good, the consequences of that, were three things.

The first was moral; that psychologists and psychiatrists became victimologists, pathologizers; that our view of human nature was that if you were in trouble, bricks fell on you. And we forgot that people made choices and decisions. We forgot responsibility. That was the first cost.

The second cost was that we forgot about you people. We forgot about improving normal lives. We forgot about a mission to make relatively untroubled people happier, more fulfilled, more productive. And "genius," "high-talent," became a dirty word. No one works on that.

And the third problem about the disease model is, in our rush to do something about people in trouble, in our rush to do something about repairing damage, it never occurred to us to develop interventions to make people happier -- positive interventions.

So that was not good. And so that's what led people like Nancy Etcoff, Dan Gilbert, Mike Csikszentmihalyi and myself to work in something I call, "positive psychology," which has three aims. The first is that psychology should be just as concerned with human strength as it is with weakness. It should be just as concerned with building strength as with repairing damage. It

should be interested in the best things in life. And it should be just as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling, and with genius, with nurturing high talent.

So in the last 10 years and the hope for the future, we've seen the beginnings of a science of positive psychology, a science of what makes life worth living. It turns out that we can measure different forms of happiness. And any of you, for free, can go to that website --

[www.authentic happiness.org]

and take the entire panoply of tests of happiness. You can ask, how do you stack up for positive emotion, for meaning, for flow, against literally tens of thousands of other people? We created the opposite of the diagnostic manual of the insanities: a classification of the strengths and virtues that looks at the sex ratio, how they're defined, how to diagnose them, what builds them and what gets in their way. We found that we could discover the causation of the positive states, the relationship between left hemispheric activity and right hemispheric activity, as a cause of happiness.

I've spent my life working on extremely miserable people, and I've asked the question: How do extremely miserable people differ from the rest of you? And starting about six years ago, we asked about extremely happy people. How do they differ from the rest of us? It turns out there's one way, very surprising -- they're not more religious, they're not in better shape, they don't have more money, they're not better looking, they don't have more good events and fewer bad events. The one way in which they differ: they're extremely social. They don't sit in seminars on Saturday morning.

(Laughter)

They don't spend time alone. Each of them is in a romantic relationship and each has a rich repertoire of friends.

But watch out here -- this is merely correlational data, not causal, and it's about happiness in the first, "Hollywood" sense, I'm going to talk about, happiness of ebullience and giggling and good cheer. And I'm going to suggest to you that's not nearly enough, in just a moment. We found we could begin to look at interventions over the centuries, from the Buddha to Tony Robbins. About 120 interventions have been proposed that allegedly make people happy. And we find that we've been able to manualize many of them, and we actually carry out random-assignment efficacy and effectiveness studies. That is, which ones actually make people lastingly happier? In a couple of minutes, I'll tell you about some of those results.

But the upshot of this is that the mission I want psychology to have, in addition to its mission of curing the mentally ill, and in addition to its mission of making miserable people less miserable, is, can psychology actually make people happier? And to ask that question -- "happy" is not a word I use very much -- we've had to break it down into what I think is askable about "happy." And I believe there are three different -- I call them "different" because different interventions

build them, it's possible to have one rather than the other -- three different happy lives. The first happy life is the pleasant life. This is a life in which you have as much positive emotion as you possibly can, and the skills to amplify it. The second is a life of engagement: a life in your work, your parenting, your love, your leisure; time stops for you. That's what Aristotle was talking about. And third, the meaningful life. I want to say a little bit about each of those lives and what we know about them.

The first life is the pleasant life, and it's simply, as best we can find it, it's having as many of the pleasures as you can, as much positive emotion as you can, and learning the skills -- savoring, mindfulness -- that amplify them, that stretch them over time and space. But the pleasant life has three drawbacks, and it's why positive psychology is not happy-ology, and why it doesn't end here.

The first drawback is, it turns out the pleasant life, your experience of positive emotion, is about 50 percent heritable, and, in fact, not very modifiable. So the different tricks that Matthieu and I and others know about increasing the amount of positive emotion in your life are 15 to 20 percent tricks, getting more of it. Second is that positive emotion habituates. It habituates rapidly, indeed. It's all like French vanilla ice cream: the first taste is 100 percent; by the time you're down to the sixth taste, it's gone. And, as I said, it's not particularly malleable.

And this leads to the second life. I have to tell you about my friend Len, to talk about why positive psychology is more than positive emotion, more than building pleasure. In two of the three great arenas of life, by the time Len was 30, Len was enormously successful. The first arena was work. By the time he was 20, he was an options trader. By the time he was 25, he was a multimillionaire and the head of an options trading company. Second, in play, he's a national champion bridge player. But in the third great arena of life, love, Len is an abysmal failure. And the reason he was, was that Len is a cold fish.

(Laughter)

Len is an introvert. American women said to Len, when he dated them, "You're no fun. You don't have positive emotion. Get lost." And Len was wealthy enough to be able to afford a Park Avenue psychoanalyst, who for five years tried to find the sexual trauma that had somehow locked positive emotion inside of him. But it turned out there wasn't any sexual trauma. It turned out that -- Len grew up in Long Island and he played football and watched football, and played bridge. Len is in the bottom five percent of what we call positive affectivities.

The question is: Is Len unhappy? And I want to say, not. Contrary to what psychology told us about the bottom 50 percent of the human race in positive affectivity, I think Len is one of the happiest people I know. He's not consigned to the hell of unhappiness, and that's because Len, like most of you, is enormously capable of flow. When he walks onto the floor of the American Exchange at 9:30 in the morning, time stops for him. And it stops till the closing bell. When the first card is played till 10 days later, when the tournament is over, time stops for Len.

And this is indeed what Mike Csikszentmihalyi has been talking about, about flow. And it's distinct from pleasure in a very important way: pleasure has raw feel -- you know it's happening; it's thought and feeling. But what Mike told you yesterday -- during flow ... you can't feel anything. You're one with the music. Time stops. You have intense concentration. And this is indeed the characteristic of what we think of as the good life. And we think there's a recipe for it, and it's knowing what your highest strengths are -- again, there's a valid test of what your five highest strengths are -- and then re-crafting your life to use them as much as you possibly can. Re-crafting your work, your love, your play, your friendship, your parenting.

Just one example. One person I worked with was a bagger at Genuardi's. Hated the job. She's working her way through college. Her highest strength was social intelligence. So she re-crafted bagging to make the encounter with her the social highlight of every customer's day. Now, obviously she failed. But what she did was to take her highest strengths, and re-craft work to use them as much as possible. What you get out of that is not smiley-ness. You don't look like Debbie Reynolds. You don't giggle a lot. What you get is more absorption.

So, that's the second path. The first path, positive emotion; the second path is eudaemonian flow; and the third path is meaning. This is the most venerable of the happinesses, traditionally. And meaning, in this view, consists of -- very parallel to eudaemonia -- it consists of knowing what your highest strengths are, and using them to belong to and in the service of something larger than you are.

I mentioned that for all three kinds of lives -- the pleasant life, the good life, the meaningful life -- people are now hard at work on the question: Are there things that lastingly change those lives? And the answer seems to be yes. And I'll just give you some samples of it. It's being done in a rigorous manner. It's being done in the same way that we test drugs to see what really works. So we do random-assignment, placebo-controlled, long-term studies of different interventions. Just to sample the kind of interventions that we find have an effect: when we teach people about the pleasant life, how to have more pleasure in your life, one of your assignments is to take the mindfulness skills, the savoring skills, and you're assigned to design a beautiful day. Next Saturday, set a day aside, design yourself a beautiful day, and use savoring and mindfulness to enhance those pleasures. And we can show in that way that the pleasant life is enhanced.

Gratitude visit. I want you all to do this with me now, if you would. Close your eyes. I'd like you to remember someone who did something enormously important that changed your life in a good direction, and who you never properly thanked. The person has to be alive. Now, OK, you can open your eyes. I hope all of you have such a person. Your assignment, when you're learning the gratitude visit, is to write a 300-word testimonial to that person, call them on the phone in Phoenix, ask if you can visit, don't tell them why. Show up at their door, you read the testimonial -- everyone weeps when this happens. And what happens is, when we test people one week later, a month later, three months later, they're both happier and less depressed.

Another example is a strengths date, in which we get couples to identify their highest strengths on the strengths test, and then to design an evening in which they both use their strengths. We

find this is a strengthener of relationships. And fun versus philanthropy. It's so heartening to be in a group like this, in which so many of you have turned your lives to philanthropy. Well, my undergraduates and the people I work with haven't discovered this, so we actually have people do something altruistic and do something fun, and contrast it. And what you find is when you do something fun, it has a square wave walk set. When you do something philanthropic to help another person, it lasts and it lasts. So those are examples of positive interventions.

So the next to last thing I want to say is: we're interested in how much life satisfaction people have. This is really what you're about. And that's our target variable. And we ask the question as a function of the three different lives, how much life satisfaction do you get? So we ask -- and we've done this in 15 replications, involving thousands of people: To what extent does the pursuit of pleasure, the pursuit of positive emotion, the pleasant life, the pursuit of engagement, time stopping for you, and the pursuit of meaning contribute to life satisfaction?

And our results surprised us; they were backward of what we thought. It turns out the pursuit of pleasure has almost no contribution to life satisfaction. The pursuit of meaning is the strongest. The pursuit of engagement is also very strong. Where pleasure matters is if you have both engagement and you have meaning, then pleasure's the whipped cream and the cherry. Which is to say, the full life -- the sum is greater than the parts, if you've got all three. Conversely, if you have none of the three, the empty life, the sum is less than the parts.

And what we're asking now is: Does the very same relationship -- physical health, morbidity, how long you live and productivity -- follow the same relationship? That is, in a corporation, is productivity a function of positive emotion, engagement and meaning? Is health a function of positive engagement, of pleasure, and of meaning in life? And there is reason to think the answer to both of those may well be yes.

So, Chris said that the last speaker had a chance to try to integrate what he heard, and so this was amazing for me. I've never been in a gathering like this. I've never seen speakers stretch beyond themselves so much, which was one of the remarkable things. But I found that the problems of psychology seemed to be parallel to the problems of technology, entertainment and design in the following way: we all know that technology, entertainment and design have been and can be used for destructive purposes. We also know that technology, entertainment and design can be used to relieve misery. And by the way, the distinction between relieving misery and building happiness is extremely important. I thought, when I first became a therapist 30 years ago, that if I was good enough to make someone not depressed, not anxious, not angry, that I'd make them happy. And I never found that; I found the best you could ever do was to get to zero; that they were empty.

And it turns out the skills of happiness, the skills of the pleasant life, the skills of engagement, the skills of meaning, are different from the skills of relieving misery. And so, the parallel thing holds with technology, entertainment and design, I believe. That is, it is possible for these three drivers of our world to increase happiness, to increase positive emotion. And that's typically how they've been used. But once you fractionate happiness the way I do -- not just positive emotion,

that's not nearly enough -- there's flow in life, and there's meaning in life. As Laura Lee told us, design and, I believe, entertainment and technology, can be used to increase meaning engagement in life as well.

So in conclusion, the eleventh reason for optimism, in addition to the space elevator, is that I think with technology, entertainment and design, we can actually increase the amount of tonnage of human happiness on the planet. And if technology can, in the next decade or two, increase the pleasant life, the good life and the meaningful life, it will be good enough. If entertainment can be diverted to also increase positive emotion, meaning eudaemonia, it will be good enough. And if design can increase positive emotion, eudaemonia, and flow and meaning, what we're all doing together will become good enough.

Thank you.

(Applause)