



# WHITE PAPER

## The Science & Practice of Positive Psychology

### PROMOTING HUMAN HAPPINESS, PERFORMANCE AND WELLBEING

By Sue Langley and Sophie Francis

The scientific study of optimal performance and wellbeing is contributing new insights and strategies to help individuals, organisations and communities thrive and excel.

A breakout field, positive psychology has spread rapidly across social and human sciences over the past decade or so, offering a fresh lens to address some of today's most pressing issues. By challenging traditional psychology, which has focused largely on the negative, positive psychology aims to cultivate flourishing by moving people toward the positive.

Far from the popular promotion of happyology, positive psychology is a rich study of what makes life worth living in all its complexity,

encompassing topics such as strengths, virtues, resilience, coping, creativity and excellence.

This white paper distils key aspects of the science, practice and impact of positive psychology on people's happiness, performance and wellbeing.

You will learn:

- A brief history and current issues facing the movement;
- Key principles and theories underpinning positive psychology;
- A snapshot of outcomes individuals, organisations and communities can achieve by applying positive psychology;
- Five critical ingredients that contribute to individual, group and collective wellbeing;
- Positive practices designed to boost happiness and wellbeing.



"[Positive Psychology is] the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels." <sup>1</sup>

*Martin Seligman & Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*

"Emerging research makes the link between a thriving workforce and better business performance absolutely clear. Happiness can have an impact at both the company and the country level." <sup>2</sup>

*Harvard Business Review*

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## THE SCIENCE & PRACTICE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

#### A flourishing field

Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal functioning, performance and wellbeing. It aims to understand what is good in people and life, in order to help people live happy, productive, healthy and fulfilling lives. In doing so, it explores the positive experiences, characteristics and practices that enable individuals, institutions and communities to flourish and excel.

Positive psychology has changed the course of mainstream psychology. Spearheaded by Martin Seligman in 1998, this flourishing field has spread rapidly across social and human sciences and now spans many branches, expanding on philosophies and practices from Aristotle to Maslow.

A positive psychology lens is now applied to diverse fields such as education, public health, healthcare, human and social services, parenting, economics, politics, leadership, management and organisational behaviour.

#### A brief history

Positive Psychology was promoted by Martin Seligman, who aimed to shift the focus in psychology from what is wrong with people (a deficit or pathology-based model) to what is right and can be better (an abundance model).

"The aim of positive psychology is to catalyse a change in psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities." <sup>3</sup>

*Martin Seligman*

In an historic address to the American Psychological Association and subsequent paper, he and colleague Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called for a science that would improve quality of life and explore strengths and virtues and what makes life worth living for all humans.<sup>4</sup> They observed that while much was known about the nature of ill health and the affect of negative stressors, and some about the factors that help people survive through adversity, little was known about how normal people flourish in more benign circumstances.

"Psychology...is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within ourselves," they proclaimed.

In truth, the mission of psychology before World War II was more holistic: "curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent".

In the post-war years treating mental illness had become more critical. Yet the roots of positive psychology can be traced to ancient Greek, Chinese and Buddhist literature through concepts such as virtue ethics and the pursuit of a good and compassionate life. In recent years, utilitarianism and humanistic psychology were among key movements that also elevated happiness and mental health as a meaningful goal and field of study.

What Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi and those who took up the remit of positive psychology aimed to do was reset the balance.

The past decade or so of empirical research and practice has established a vibrant field and tipped the scales closer,<sup>5</sup> with some critics saying that negative experiences are often ignored in the move toward the positive.

Today scholars are calling for a more balanced approach, a second wave that builds on an abundance focus by integrating study of the positive with the negative to encompass human experience in all its complexity.<sup>6</sup>

### HISTORICAL TIME-LINE

#### Key milestones in positive psychology

384-322 BC

**Aristotle**

Pursuit of eudaimonia (happiness) or the good life conceived as the highest good.

300BC

341-270 BC

**Epicurius**

Opened a Happiness School. Advocated pursuit of simple pleasures.

1800

1780-1800s

**Utilitarianism**

Jeremy Bentham & John Stuart Mill  
Attempt to measure happiness. Suggest government policy should create the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

1900

1906

**William James**

Address to the APA asks how human energy can be put to optimal use.

1950

1950s

**Humanistic Psychology**

Carl Rogers  
Eric From  
Abraham Maslow  
Mental health, positive attributes & self-actualisation (human potential). Maslow coins term positive psychology.

2000

1994

**Happiness Measure**

Ed Diener  
First index of subjective wellbeing.



2011-2016

**Second Wave**

Itai Ivtzan at al.  
Robert Biswas-Diener & Todd Kashdan  
Paul Wong  
Positive psychology 2.0. Embracing the dark side.



2004

**Character Strengths & Virtues**

Chris Peterson & Martin Seligman  
A positive counterbalance to the classification of mental illness, the DSM.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY PRINCIPLES THAT INFORM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

### Abundance

Positive Psychology applies an abundance lens to help people, organisations and communities flourish and excel—focus on what is working well and how it can work even better.<sup>7</sup>

It views people as creative and self-determined with access to inner resources, able to actively create the outcomes to which they and others aspire, rather than as passive victims of external forces.

Thus it seeks to answer questions such as: “What makes some people succeed?” “Which activities broaden and build people’s resources” and “How can we create environments where people perform at their best?”

It shares much with the abundance and solution-focussed field of coaching psychology, which has grown alongside positive psychology to facilitate positive outcomes and performance.

### Virtues and strengths

Concepts of strengths and virtues have infused human history across many cultures. They shape our character, our identity and our capacity to flourish. Aristotle extolled us to strive to “live in accordance with the best thing in us” if we want to attain a good life.<sup>8</sup> In other words, to amplify and refine our virtues and strengths.

The strengths approach at the heart of positive psychology shifts the focus from fixing weakness to identifying and building on what people do well and enhancing their potential to develop.

It assumes strengths are part of human nature; everyone has them and deserves respect for them. It also suggests we can only address

our weaknesses when we also make the most of our strengths.<sup>9</sup>

Positive psychology itself can be seen as taking a virtuous or ethical stance by advocating that the desire and capacity to improve is latent within people and human systems and should be further activated.

### Positive deviance

Striving to be exceptional, daring to go against the grain, and looking for solutions that may not be accessible from a problem or deficit focus are all part of positive deviance—a key concept in positive psychology.<sup>10</sup>

Why is positive deviance so necessary or advantageous?

Our brains tend to have a bias toward the negative. There are more negative emotions that positive; their intensity is often stronger and we respond more powerfully and automatically to negative events.<sup>11</sup>

Neuroscientists call this the ‘walk towards, run away’ theory. We want to act first and fast to minimise perceived threat, yet we approach situations and people that will reward us more leisurely.

In many cases our negative focus is an evolutionary hangover that leaves us with an opportunity cost and keeps us from devoting energy, time and effort that may be better spent building resources and moving toward greater wellbeing and success.

A key goal of positive psychology is to help reset our bias from negative to positive and spark flourishing by amplifying the impact of positive emotions, experiences, influences and practices.



### Flourishing v. languishing

Positive and negative are commonly seen as polar opposites. Yet this notion can create an artificial dichotomy when it comes to understanding flourishing—a state characterised by generativity, growth and resilience.

Corey Keyes, studying the relationship between mental health and mental illness, concluded that the absence of mental illness does not equate to the presence of mental health.<sup>12</sup> Treating or preventing mental illness will not by itself result in greater mental health as the two exist on different spectrums.

The opposite of flourishing is in fact “languishing”—a state where positive emotions appear too low to stimulate flourishing, and emotional distress, social impairment or lack of fulfillment are present. Both need to be understood and addressed holistically.

### Happiness and wellbeing

Positive psychology has traditionally conceived of happiness as comprising two forms of wellbeing:

- **Subjective wellbeing (SWB)** — hedonic experience, satisfaction with life, matched with a high level of positive emotions and low level of negative emotions
- **Psychological wellbeing (PWB)** — eudaimonic experience, the more enduring sense of fulfillment we get from personal relationships, living a meaningful life and developing as a person.

These are measured by different instruments, although recent scholars have questioned whether these concepts are truly distinct.<sup>13</sup>

“We are about to change...our vision of the human condition from one of dismal pessimism to a vision that foregrounds what is good...and provides ideas and processes that will nurture, cultivate, and increase what is good.... And this change is likely to pay dividends...”<sup>14</sup>

*Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*

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## THE SCIENCE & PRACTICE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND CRITIQUES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

#### Happyology

Positive psychology does not advocate being happy all the time, despite portrayals of the field as “happyology” by critics and the media.

Expectations to put on a smiling face and be happy 24/7 can put pressure on people to achieve the impossible, leading to a sense of failure and an increase in stress and negative mood when this is not achieved.

Nonetheless, some critics, both outside and inside the field, believe many practitioners and advocates promote a “tyranny of positivity”<sup>15</sup> that leaves little room for nuance or complexity.

When applied with balance and rigour, positive psychology does not prescribe a specific level of happiness. What it does do is provide meaningful insight, analysis and strategies to help people benefit from positive emotions and build wellbeing and effectiveness over all.

#### Positive thinking

Positive psychology is often confused with positive thinking.

While positive thinking is linked to an optimistic outlook and explanatory style, one area that positive psychology studies, it is more commonly associated with the self-help movement.

Positive psychology is an evidence-based science.

#### Ignores the negative

Positive psychology has been criticised for ignoring the “dark side” of human experience and the reality that bad things happen, feeding into our discomfort with, and avoidance of, negative emotions. This has been true to some degree.

Part of the positivity bias may have to do with the way we tend to label and judge emotions.

Emotions themselves are neither good nor bad; behaviours that may result from emotions may be viewed as good or bad depending on the situation.

Emotions contain data about ourselves, other people and the world around us. Whether scientifically classified “positive” (eg happiness) or “negative” (eg fear, anger, sadness), each give us early data points that help us think and act more intelligently. Both positive and negative emotions have a purpose and can be beneficial.

Positive psychology is starting to integrate the complex interactions between positive and negative to optimise positive outcomes.

#### Panacea

Positive psychology does not claim to be a panacea or offer one-size-fits-all solutions.

While the field has made headway to identify the building blocks of happiness, how people assemble them in their own life, company, community or culture is personal and unique.

What is enjoyable, motivating and meaningful to one person differs from another.

Positive psychology provides a smorgasbord of options based on current evidence.

It is the small things people do every day that make a difference and each positive action or choice has an impact that can spread happiness within social networks.

#### Individualistic

The pursuit of happiness and personal betterment has been called individualistic, even selfish.

While individual wellbeing has been a major focus of positive psychology, it has not been at the expense of relational or collective wellbeing. The quality of our relationships, and a commitment to social good, form the foundations for our flourishing as social and emotional beings.

#### Culturally narrow

Some critics claim that positive psychology has been designed for affluent white people and the evidence-base is culturally narrow.

This is true to some extent as positive psychology has been researched and taught in top universities, originating in the US. As with almost all psychological disciplines, empirical studies often draw on undergraduate students.

Positive psychologists acknowledge these limitations and a potential bias toward western socio-economic and value systems in some measures and approaches.

The past few years has seen a rise in studies of diverse cultures, populations, contexts and ages.

#### Emerging science

Positive psychology is a relatively young field. A plethora of popular books and tools have contributed to rapid growth, with practice in some areas outpacing research.

Some critics point out that the empirical base is still emerging. As such, many studies are self-selecting, self-reporting and have relatively small sample sizes. Difficulties with replication have also been found with some intervention studies.<sup>16</sup>

During the past decade, the majority of criticism has been addressed to varying degrees by leading experts, which has helped positive psychology develop and mature, and debate about how to improve continues.<sup>17</sup>

As positive psychology is still an emerging and fruitful area of study, there remain many research needs and potentials to explore.

For example, while happiness and wellbeing have been shown to lead to a wide range of positive outcomes for individuals and organisations,<sup>18</sup> less is known about how factors associated with happiness work together in different contexts.

These insights can help researchers and practitioners design effective interventions and get the most from positive psychology.

## WHAT OUTCOMES CAN PEOPLE ACHIEVE BY APPLYING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

### Individual outcomes

Happiness predicts success in nearly every life domain, from health and longevity to workplace and academic performance, creativity and relationships.

This is the finding of a landmark meta-study by leading positive psychologists Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King and Ed Diener, who brought together over 200 studies conducted on 275,000 people worldwide.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the research they highlighted shows that happier people are:

- Healthier
- Live longer
- Less accident prone
- More successful
- More productive
- More creative
- Faster thinking
- Harder working
- Higher earning
- More caring and altruistic
- More socially engaged
- Likely to consider themselves lucky.

One seminal study evaluated the entrance letters of young girls entering a monastery for signs of an optimistic outlook. The nun's living conditions were all the same including diet, tasks, lifestyle and environment. They were followed over their lifespan and the more optimistic girls lived on average more than 12 years longer than their more pessimistic counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

Another study showed that individuals who expressed positive emotions were more likely to work hard, collaborate with teammates and get promoted, resulting in higher salaries, bigger and more frequent bonuses.<sup>21</sup>

### Business and social impact

A positive workplace culture can go a long way toward helping people feel happy, engaged and committed at work.

Employee satisfaction, engagement and wellbeing are all factors that drive business outcomes and performance. When people feel happy, valued, satisfied and purposeful at work they typically do far better than those who do not, leading to a more positive, thriving and sustainable business culture.

Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, makes a compelling case that the greatest competitive advantage in today's economy is a happy and engaged workforce. Some business outcomes he cites are increase in sales by 37%, productivity by 31%, and accuracy on tasks by 19%.<sup>23</sup>

Organisational scholars Sigil Barsade and Donald Gibson found that positive emotions are critical to business outcomes, impacting job performance, decision making, creativity, turnover, prosocial behaviour, teamwork and leadership.<sup>24</sup>

Sonja Lyubomirsky and colleagues affirm that an individual's tendency to experience positive emotions and moods is associated with increases in numerous work performance measures, including more positive supervisory evaluations, enhanced negotiating ability, and performing discretionary acts for the benefit of the organisation.<sup>25</sup>

Leaders who display a positive rather than a negative mood can also significantly influence group members at both the individual and collective level, enhancing coordination and effort.<sup>26</sup>



The concept of “mirror flourishing” is a useful frame for applying positive psychology at work.<sup>27</sup>

It's a win for the individuals whose positive attributes, emotions and strengths are amplified and leveraged—and a win for their organisation, managers and teams as well as the wider society.

David Cooperrider, addressing audiences at the Fourth World Congress on Positive Psychology in 2015, proposed that the most pressing quest faced both by positive psychology and organisations in the 21st century is the quest for sustainability and a flourishing Earth.

A key question to ask organisations is one of mutual or shared benefit: How might the quest for sustainable value bring out the best on the “outside”—by helping to fulfill social responsibility and advance a better society—and also bring out the best on the “inside”—in the flourishing of people, their relationships, health and wellbeing, motivation and performance, and capacity for growth, resilience, and positive change?<sup>28</sup>

“When organisations and their leaders focus on enhancing the best of what their people have to offer, they enable them to achieve the goals for which they strive, at the same time building the resilience they will need to cope with the changes and challenges of the modern world.”<sup>29</sup>

*Alex Linley*

“Workplace wellbeing is not all about trying to get more out of people in terms of hours or effort....it is about pursuing wellbeing at work as an ethical endeavour in its own right.”

*Sarah Lewis*

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## THE SCIENCE & PRACTICE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO FLOURISHING AND WELLBEING?

#### Positive foundation

Positive psychology researchers and practitioners have explored a gamut of topics at an individual, group and social level.

These include: positive subjective experience; positive traits and resource states (eg strengths, creativity, wisdom, values, optimism, resilience, self-determination, self-efficacy and coping); positive therapy, coaching, education and leadership; psychological and social capital.

Two broader empirical research streams, positive organisational behaviour and positive organisational scholarship have also explored factors and strategies that contribute to positive outcomes.

While key positive psychology constructs such as life satisfaction/happiness, motivation/achievement, optimism and organisational citizenship/fairness, have attracted a majority of research,<sup>30</sup> many scholars have focused on maximising the benefits of five underlying factors: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, relationships and accomplishment (often known as PERMA).<sup>31</sup>

These positive factors, while not the only beneficial ingredients underpinning positive psychology, can be seen as building blocks or drivers that maximise wellbeing and gear people and human systems toward flourishing.

They can be applied to build happiness into people's daily lives, friendships, families, workplaces and communities to make an incremental yet significant difference over time.

#### Positive factors

##### Positive Emotions

Amplifying positive emotions and minimising the impact of negative emotions. Fostering a positive emotional climate.

##### Positive Engagement

Engaging in activities and environments that energise and enhance satisfaction, fulfillment and connectedness. This encompasses emotional, social, work and civic engagement.

##### Positive Meaning

Reinforcing positive meaning where people feel like they are engaging in purposeful work and a worthwhile life that brings value to themselves and others.

##### Positive Relationships

Building positive relationships that are a source of support, energy and enrichment to the individual, those around them and the wider society.

##### Positive Goals

Pursuing positive, self-concordant goals and striving to master and accomplish them.



Positive Psychology model adapted from Martin Seligman<sup>32</sup>

#### Positive equation

Positive psychology suggests a simple yet fundamental equation:

Positive emotion + engagement + meaning + relationships + accomplishment = life/job satisfaction and effectiveness.

"Positivity transforms us for the better. By opening our hearts and minds positive emotions allow us to discover and build new skills, new ties, new knowledge and new ways of being."<sup>33</sup>

Barbara Fredrickson

## MAXIMISING POSITIVE FACTORS TO INCREASE FLOURISHING AND WELLBEING

### Positive emotions

Frequent positive emotions are one of the hallmarks of happiness and wellbeing. When we feel good, we are more able to perform at our best. We think more flexibly and creatively. We are more willing to try new strategies, reach out to others, and spread positivity to others.

According to Barbara Fredrickson, who developed the Broaden and Build Theory, positive emotions expand people's repertoire for effective thinking and action, helping us build intellectual, physical, psychological and social resources.<sup>34</sup> These resources outlast transient emotional states, increasing our resilience and propelling us in 'upward spirals' toward optimal performance, growth and wellbeing.

Persistent negative emotions have the opposite affect, spiralling us into 'downward cycles' that can be self-perpetuating.<sup>35</sup>

Such is the power of positive emotions according to Fredrickson's and her colleagues' research that they can literally reset negativity, helping our brain refuel and regain the resilience and open-mindedness to function at it's best.

"Positivity puts the brakes on negativity. In a heartbeat negativity can spike your blood pressure, positivity can calm it. Positivity works like a rest button."<sup>36</sup>

*Barbara Fredrickson*

"The quality of your life is directly related to the quality of your emotions."<sup>37</sup>

*Sue Langley*

Positive emotions can also make us more likely to adopt wellness behaviours. When we enjoy doing something we are more likely to think about and feel motivated to do it again.<sup>38</sup>

The quality of the emotions a person is experiencing in the moment can decisively influence outcomes.

A positive emotional climate is the optimal environment for people to do their best work. Emotions can spread across organisations and social networks, enabling people to contribute positively to collective wellbeing and effectiveness.<sup>39</sup>

To maximise the power of positive emotions and leverage positive affect, focus on increasing the duration and intensity of positive emotions and decreasing the duration and intensity of negative emotions. Interventions proven effective in boosting positive emotions include savouring, gratitude, optimism and humour.

This does not mean that negative emotions should be eschewed; rather they can be useful and learned from. For example, studies show that neutral or mildly negative moods can be more effective for systematic analysis, make people less prone to errors

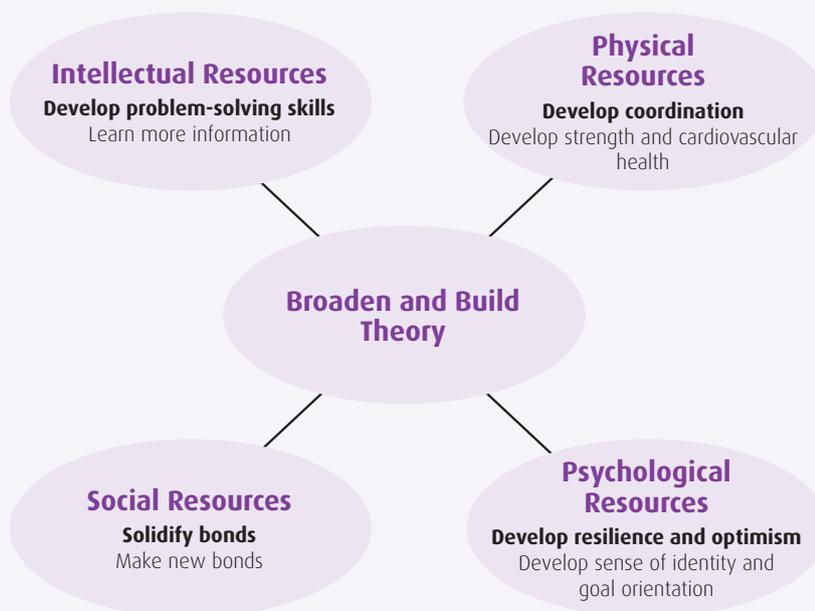
in judgement and more accurate when recalling events.<sup>40</sup>

While interest and joy can encourage us to be open to others, anger can indicate when something or someone is getting in the way of what we want. This can provoke us to design effective strategies to deal with challenging situations and take us closer to wellbeing.

Teaching emotional intelligence can give people the foundations to understand and make the best use of emotions, both positive and negative, in themselves and others so they can create more positive outcomes and environments.

### BROADEN AND BUILD THEORY

Broaden and Build Theory proposes that positive emotions help strengthen our intellectual, physical, psychological and social resources, all of which enhance our overall functioning and wellbeing.



*Adapted from Barbara Fredrickson*<sup>41</sup>

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## THE SCIENCE & PRACTICE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### MAXIMISING POSITIVE FACTORS TO INCREASE FLOURISHING AND WELLBEING

#### Engagement

Engagement can be described as the positive connection one has to an activity or environment. This encompasses emotional, social, work and civic engagement.

Studies link higher levels of engagement with performance, vitality, satisfaction and wellbeing.<sup>42</sup> The more engaged we are, the more likely we are to perform better, or reap greater rewards for our efforts.

Two clear routes to feeling more engaged at work and in life are strengths and flow.

Alex Linley defines a strength as: "a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance."<sup>43</sup>

In other words, strengths enable people to be their best self.

Research shows that when people use their strengths they feel happier and more confident, are less stressed, more resilient, and more engaged in work and life.<sup>44</sup>

There are many ways to discover and develop strengths, from spotting strengths to formal strengths assessment and coaching.

Values-in-Action Survey (VIA) created by Peterson and Seligman measures character strengths in adults and children. Clifton StrengthsFinder is a popular tool based on Gallup research.

R2 Strengths Profiler designed by Linley and his team synthesises the latest research. By adding the dimension of energy and context, individuals and teams can build a dynamic understanding of where strengths are being used and how best they can be capitalised.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains that a flow state is achieved "when the challenge of an activity is perfectly matched to the ability of the participant".<sup>45</sup>

Flow can happen any time someone's skills are so involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so that the state itself becomes a magnet for stretching and learning new skills.

"Simply put, strengths energise people enabling them to be at their best."<sup>46</sup>

*Alex Linley*

#### Meaning

The drive to find a purpose and live a meaningful life is part of human nature and an important factor in our psychological wellbeing and growth. People with higher levels of wellbeing find a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Whether it is linked to family or religion, the work people do or what they contribute to others, meaning tends to involve living in line with personal values and pursuing worthwhile goals.

Paul Wong, a noted positive psychologist and President of the Meaning-Centered Counselling Institute, advocates cultivating a balanced life because meaning comes from several sources, such as achievement, relationships, family, altruism, social justice and spirituality.<sup>47</sup>

Michael Steger suggests a conceptual framework of meaning in life comprising of two pillars: comprehension (ability to find patterns, consistency and significance) and purpose.<sup>48</sup>

One way to build meaning into the lives of individuals, organisations and communities is through clearly articulated purpose, vision and values.

High levels of engagement and loyalty can be harnessed when a team's mission aims to achieve social betterment, and long-term impact and personal values are aligned to those of the organisation.



"For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. Therefore, what matters, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."<sup>49</sup>

*Victor Frankl*

## MAXIMISING POSITIVE FACTORS TO INCREASE FLOURISHING AND WELLBEING

### Relationships

Human beings are social animals and the relationships we cultivate can have a profound effect on our wellbeing.

Good relationships are the building blocks on which flourishing futures are built from our earliest moments. Positive connection continues throughout life to be a major factor in our ability to thrive and grow—as individuals, in our families, our workplaces and our communities.

If we can increase the positive influence of our relationships, we can increase the positive emotions we experience, regulate our emotions more effectively and become more resilient.

One way to do this is to increase the ratio of positive to negative interactions.

While researchers differ on the math, a Positivity Ratio of 3:1 may be considered a wellbeing tipping point.<sup>50</sup>

Positive communication occurs when affirmative and supportive language is the norm, instead of negative and critical.<sup>51</sup>

Positive relationships, founded on these practices, produce higher levels of trust and openness. They stimulate creativity and new ideas, foster healthy team functioning, and enhance mutual benefit.<sup>52</sup>

Without trust and appreciation for others, there is less collaboration and safety. People spend more time protecting themselves and their interests—time that is better spent helping the group attain collective goals.

Our brains are geared to make positive connections with people, particularly those we perceive as similar. With similarity comes the ability to better infer what someone may be thinking or feeling.<sup>53</sup>

If a person can find something in common with a new team member for example, they are more likely to empathise and connect with them, which in turn ensures they converse and build a relationship, leading to more cooperation and teamwork.

Certain individuals within organisations and social networks can act as ‘positive energisers’ who create and support vitality and energy in others.<sup>54</sup>

People who are optimistic, trustworthy, unselfish and uplifting to others boost the level of positive emotions available, improving relationships and extending positive influence.

Demonstrating kindness, compassion and forgiveness are some of the ways people can cultivate positive relationship-building skills in themselves and others and tap into our altruistic tendencies and potentials.

“Compassion is one of the very few things we can practice that will bring immediate and long-term happiness to our lives.”

*Dalai Lama*

“The key is to keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best.”

*Epictetus*

### Goals

People are naturally geared to search for something to aim for and to move toward a purpose.

As teleological beings, goals are important to us and contribute to our sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy. We feel motivated when our goals are congruent with our values and interests.

The more we understand our own drivers for positive emotion, positive engagement, positive meaning and positive relationships, the better motivated we are to achieving our own level of success.

Robert Biswas-Diener proposed a three-factor framework for conceptualising goals that raise people’s levels of happiness and wellbeing, based on their orientation, content and motivation.<sup>55</sup>

1. Positively oriented goals—known as “approach goals”—have a greater impact than negatively oriented, or “away goals”.
2. Goals about intimacy, generativity and spirituality are better than those about power and position.
3. Goals that are intrinsically motivated are inherently more satisfying and fulfilling than those that are extrinsically motivated.

Kennnon Sheldon found that people tend to move toward self-concordant, intrinsically motivated and beneficial goals over time.<sup>56</sup>

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is another key concept informing goal motivation and wellbeing.<sup>57</sup>

Developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, SDT is among the most studied psychological theories. It shows that people feel motivated and thrive in environments when three psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The more people can be supported to make autonomous choices and select goals that are aligned with their personal interests, values and needs, the more their confidence and competence will grow.

“Pursuing goals isn’t just second nature, it is vital to our functioning. In the absence of goals we tend to flounder.”<sup>58</sup>

*Robert Biswas-Diener*



# WHITE PAPER

## THE SCIENCE & PRACTICE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

### HOW MUCH CAN WE INFLUENCE HAPPINESS LEVELS?

#### The Happiness Pie

So how much potential do we have to improve our happiness and wellbeing if we set our minds to it? Research by Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues and their concept of a Happiness Pie gives us a clue.<sup>59</sup>

They discovered that about 50% of the differences between people's happiness levels can be explained by genetically determined set points. Just like genes for intelligence and cholesterol, the set point you inherit has a big influence on how happy you will be.

A further 10% is linked to your circumstances. Whether you are rich or poor, married or divorced, healthy or unhealthy, environmental factors account for an additional portion of your happiness overall.

The remaining 40% is influenced by intentional activities. Some of these activities can also improve your circumstances.

This means we can increase or decrease almost half of our happiness level through our choices and attitude.

#### Intentional activities

Based on over 17 years of research these are some of the activities that very happy people engage in:

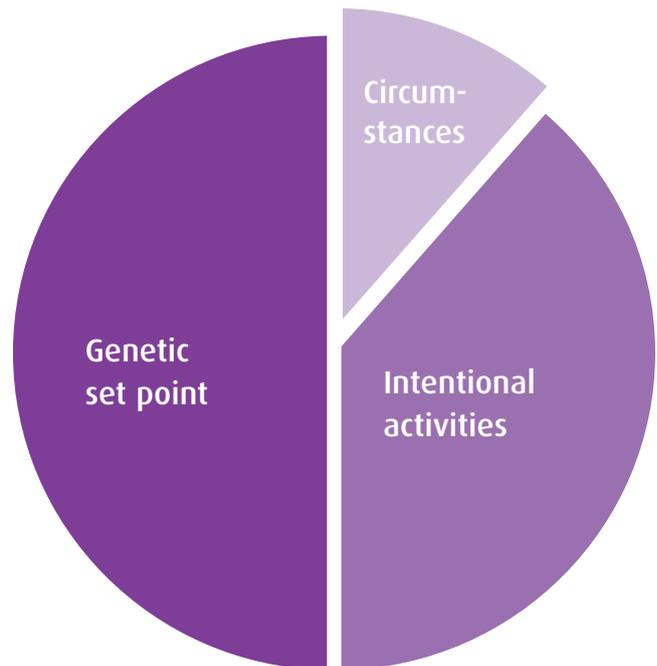
- Practice optimism when imagining their future
- Engage in regular physical exercise
- Commit to life-long goals and ambitions
- Express gratitude
- Offer help to people
- Savour life's pleasures
- Spend ample time with friends and family.

#### GETTING STARTED

One of the best ways to put positive psychology into practice and start living a more satisfying, fulfilling life, is to look for ways to increase the duration and intensity of our 'ups' and reduce the duration and intensity of our 'downs'.

This white paper is designed to give you a framework and ideas to help you do just that and to inspire positive practices you can test, adopt and share with people in any area of work or life.

Each person has the potential to learn a Growth Mindset, the capacity to see themselves and others as a work in progress.



Adapted from Lyubomirsky<sup>60</sup>

Carol Dweck distinguished people who believe their basic qualities can be cultivated and developed across their lifespan through dedicated effort (Growth Mindset), from those who believe their most basic qualities such as intelligence, talents or personality is fixed and can't evolve or change (Fixed Mindset).<sup>61</sup>

The more we practice a growth mindset and recognise our unique power to make conscious positive choices, the more difference we can make to our own and other people's wellbeing.

The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes of mind.

*William James*

A joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe.

*Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*

Probably the biggest insight...is that happiness is not just a place, but also a process. Happiness is an ongoing process of fresh challenges, and...it takes the right attitudes and activities to continue to be happy.

*Ed Diener*



## MORE POSITIVE INTERVENTIONS

### Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the art of asking the right questions to inspire people to shape a positive future.

Developed by David Cooperrider, AI can be seen as a form of action-research designed to activate and facilitate positive change, innovation and growth in organisations and groups.<sup>62</sup> It can also be applied in coaching.

Founded on the principle that inquiry promotes change and the words we use shape our world, the AI process follows the 4D model:

**Discovery:** Mobilising the whole system by engaging all stakeholders in identifying the best of what has been or what is.

**Dream:** Creating a vision that relates to higher purpose with questions such as, “what is the world calling us to become?”

**Design:** Articulating a strategy or organisational design that enables people to feel they can draw on a positive core to realise the dream.

**Destiny:** Strengthening the affirmative capability of individuals and the whole system to build hope and sustain momentum.

### Gratitude

Gratitude is the quality of being thankful, the readiness to show appreciation and return kindness. It makes us aware of the good things that happen and connects us to a sense of life’s wonder.

Researchers also associate gratitude with psychological growth and a coping style known as positive interpretation. When we appreciate something it increases in value and we are more able to realise it’s full worth. Ken Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky found that when people with high levels of appreciation experience significant life changes they are more likely to value the experience and feel glad it happened.<sup>63</sup>

All this shows why gratitude is one of the most powerful antidotes to negative emotion and depression.

Gratitude practices have been studied extensively and include writing a regular gratitude journal and recounting the three best things that happen to you each day.

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves single pointedly resting our awareness in one place for an extended period without being distracted.

Ellen Langer, an early positive psychology researcher, defines mindfulness somewhat differently as “the process of actively noticing new things.” She believes it is the opposite of mindlessness, drawing us into the present. “It’s the essence of engagement. And it’s energy-begetting, not energy-consuming.”<sup>64</sup>

Mindfulness can be practiced in short daily activities or through more disciplined exercises such as yoga and meditation.

## CONCLUSION

The science and practice of positive psychology offers powerful insights and proven strategies to help individuals, organisations and communities thrive and excel.

This vibrant field is evolving, yet for those who want to make the most of it, the message is clear: Focus on what is working well and how it can work even better.

Do this without being blind to weaknesses, the realities of negative experience and the full spectrum of human emotions.

Find ways to activate the potential for health, happiness and excellence within all people by guiding them to take positive actions and supporting them to succeed.

Help people build strengths and resources so they can succeed during challenging as well as benevolent times. Be a positive energiser so that others may benefit from your positivity.

Create environments where positive emotions predominate and creativity, learning and growth is cultivated daily.

Reset the bias we often hold toward the negative and spark upward spirals by amplifying positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

Set positive goals to keep learning and experimenting with positive psychology to make small, yet significant differences every day.

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“Positive psychology has been able to give the scientific community, society and individuals a new perspective on existing ideas as well as providing empirical evidence to support the phenomenon of human flourishing.”<sup>65</sup>

*Kate Hefferon  
& Illona Boniwell*



# WHITE PAPER

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**Sue Langley** is a speaker, master trainer, global business consultant and leading advisor on the practical workplace applications of neuroscience, emotional intelligence and positive psychology.

Sue's gift is synthesising science into simple, practical tools anyone can use. She has taught thousands of business leaders, HR professionals and consultants how to be more intelligent about emotions and harness the brain's potential.

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