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# Positive Psychology: An introduction

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## What is positive psychology?

Positive psychology is an umbrella term for the scientific study of wellbeing and optimal human functioning. Established in 1999 as a means of bringing attention to an area of science and practice that had been largely ignored in modern psychology. The focus had instead been on psychopathology or what is wrong with people and how to fix or to prevent illness and suffering. While that in itself is a worthwhile scientific endeavor, it does not capture the complete human experience. The absence of illness does not equate to the presence of wellness. Understanding what wellness or happiness entails, the benefits it brings and how to nurture or teach it, is the focus of positive psychology.

“Positive psychology is based on the idea that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within them selves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.” IPPA

## What do positive psychologists study?

Positive psychologists draw together old and new science to better understand the things that make life worth living, enhance wellbeing or happiness and allow us to live the best possible life. To do this they research and ask questions like these:

- What is wellbeing and what are the benefits of wellbeing?
- What is the role of emotions such as joy and contentment?
- What gives people meaning or purpose in life?
- How do we help people realise their potential?
- Why do some people and communities flourish and others do not?

## Positive psychology is not...

- **Advocating a ‘Pollyanna’ approach.** It recognises that understanding negative emotions, mental illness and dysfunction is essential to help build better lives. Positive psychology exists to help complete the picture - how to survive and thrive in life.
- **New.** It draws on past and current research, theory and practice such as the work of Aristotle, Maslow, Jahoda as well as the contemporary work of Seligman, Linley, Lyubomirsky, Keyes, and Gable, etc.

## Books

Positive Psychology, by Kate Hefferon & Ilona Boniwell.

The How of Happiness, by Sonia Lyubomirsky.

The Happiness Trap, by Russ Harris.

## Websites

[www.ippanetwork.org/](http://www.ippanetwork.org/)

[www.actionforhappiness.org/](http://www.actionforhappiness.org/)

<http://positivepsychologynews.com/>

[www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/](http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/)

## Mobile Apps

Live Happy

Gratitude Journal, Happy Tapper

Buddhify

## Personal, work & social benefits of wellbeing

This is a selection of some of the research findings related to higher levels of wellbeing at work, in relationships and life generally.

- Greater self-esteem, optimism, motivation, hope and sense of personal competence.
- Ability to cope and remain positive during difficult times and an increased likelihood of receiving emotional and practical support.
- Less inclined to feel jealous, less likely to experience conflict and more likely to effectively resolve conflict.
- More accepting and less critical of others, and are judged as more physically attractive, intelligent, competent, friendly, and warm than their less happy counterparts.
- Increased pro-social and altruistic behavior (e.g., acts of kindness, volunteer their time), more interpersonal skills, greater satisfaction with the quality of personal relationships, and more reliable and supportive friends.
- More likely to graduate from university, have higher rates of job attainment, more positive supervisor evaluations, and better performance and productivity than their unhappy co-workers.
- Less likely to demonstrate counter-productive workplace behaviour or experience job burnout.
- Happier people earn higher incomes than unhappy people.
- More creativity, self-confidence, and are better performers on complex mental tasks and decision-making.

## Physical health benefits of wellbeing

The importance of the mind-body connection is demonstrated by the following research findings in relation to higher levels of wellbeing:

- Increased longevity and lower incidence of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and sleeping difficulties.
- Lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and less self-reported physical symptoms and pain.
- Longer survival times following an illness, and quickened physical recovery and return to normal activities following surgery.
- Increased likelihood of engaging in health promoting activities (e.g. exercising). Decreased likelihood of engaging in unhealthy behaviours (e.g., smoking, excessive drinking).

## Online Videos

TED Talks, Dan Gilbert ask why are we happy?

TED Talks, Shawn Gilbert: The happy secret to better work.

TED Talks, Martin Seligman on positive psychology.

TED Talks, Dan Beuttner: How to live to be 100+.

## Questions

- ? What does wellbeing mean to you?
- ? What % of the population are flourishing or languishing?
- ? What is hedonic adaption?
- ? What is negativity bias?
- ? Can we learn how to be happier?

“Action may not bring happiness but there is no happiness without action.”

Benjamin Disraeli

## Action

1. Write your own definition of what wellbeing or happiness means to you.
2. Start to identify and record the actions that create long term happiness in your life and create your own wellbeing workout or happiness action plan