

Positive Psychology in a Nutshell

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN A NUTSHELL

A balanced introduction to the science of optimal functioning

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PWBC, London

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WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

As a founder of the European Network of Positive Psychology and a researcher, I am frequently asked to present an introductory lecture or a workshop on positive psychology. I have given talks to undergraduate and postgraduate students, managers, health professionals, educators and the general public. My talk usually generates a lot of excitement and interest. ‘How can I learn a little bit more about it?’ participants always ask. At this point, I usually pick up a 829-page *Handbook of Positive Psychology* and show it to the audience. It is generally met with silence, broken by an occasional giggle. Then I pick up a 770-page *Positive Psychology in Practice* – probably the best major volume on positive psychology to date. It improves the situation but only slightly. Finally, I introduce a 388-page *Positive Psychology* by Alan Carr, and about a third of my audience exhale with relief. For the other two-thirds this textbook, aimed at undergraduate psychology students, is still an unlikely read in our age of information overload.

This was the rationale behind the book you are holding now – to provide a concise (in under 150 pages) but comprehensive introduction to positive psychology for an intelligent reader, who is not necessarily a psychologist. Although it has ‘tips and tools’, this is not a self-help book, but an attempt to offer a balanced account of what positive psychology is and what it is not, what its strengths and what its weaknesses are. It discusses many successes and discoveries, but also controversies within the field.

Much of what is inside the covers comes from reading books, scientific papers, going to conferences, talking to leading scholars and carrying out research. The book also draws on discussions with friends and colleagues, and questions raised by the audience. I hope this attempt to marry research findings with conceptual thinking and common sense produces a light but integrated perspective on positive psychology.

Ilona

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- American Psychological Association and Rick Snyder for Adult Dispositional Hope Scale taken from Snyder, C.R., Harris, C., Anderson, J.R., Helleran, S.A., Inrving, L.M., Sigmon, S.T., Yoshinobu, L., Gibb, J., Langelle, C. and Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: development and validation of an individual differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 570-585.
- Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc for Satisfaction With Life Scale taken from Diener, E., Emmons, R.A., Larson, R.J. and Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49 (1), 71-75.

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NOTES

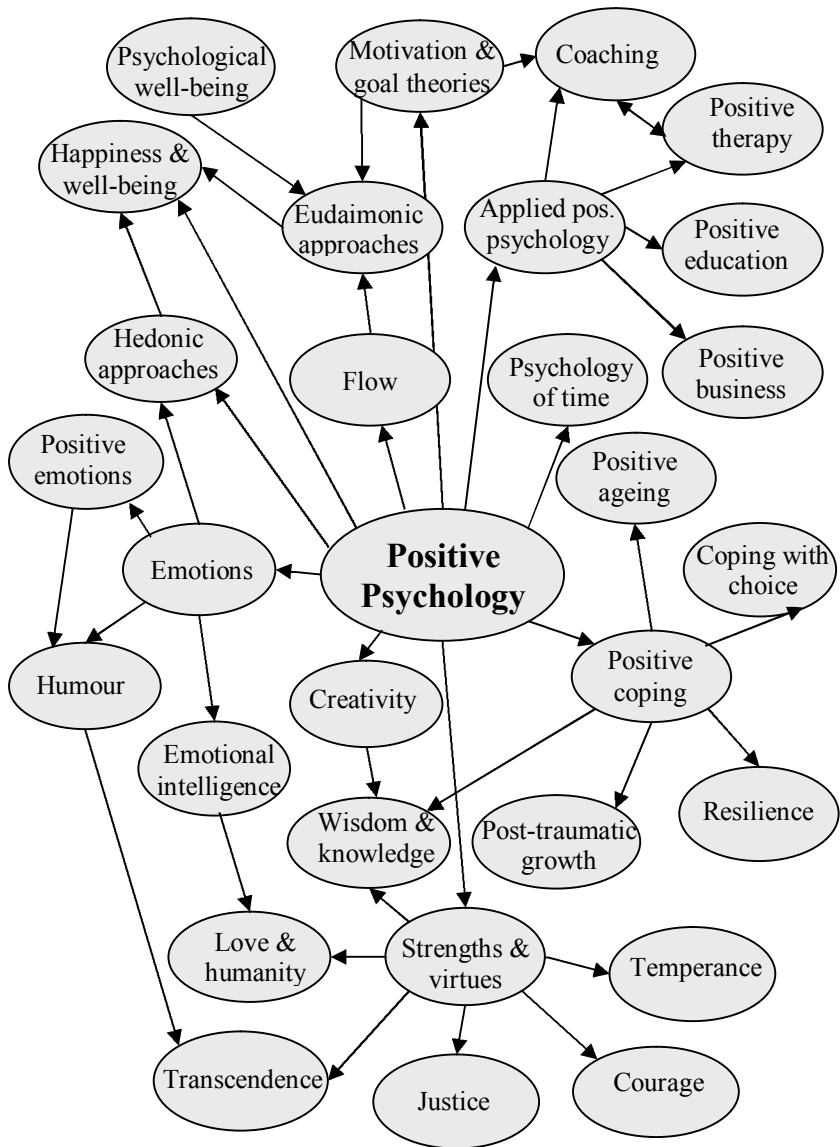
As a final note before we begin: although in many places I use an expression ‘he or she’ when referring to a person/individual, in other parts of the book personal pronouns that indicate gender are used randomly. This is not reflective of any bias, but is done for purely practical reasons.

1. WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

You have probably heard of the term ‘positive psychology’ on TV, radio or even in fashion magazines. But what is it really? What does it stand for? Positive psychology is a science of positive aspects of human life, such as happiness, well-being and flourishing. It can be summarised in the words of its founder, Martin Seligman, as the ‘scientific study of optimal human functioning [that] aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive’¹.

Psychology has more often than not emphasised the shortcomings of individuals as compared with their potentials. This particular approach focuses on the potentials. It is not targeted at fixing problems, but is focused on researching things that make life worth living instead. In short, positive psychology is concerned not with how to transform, for example, -8 to -2 but with how to bring $+2$ to $+8$.

This orientation in psychology was established about seven years ago and it is a rapidly developing field. Its aspiration is to bring solid empirical research into areas such as well-being, flow, personal strengths, wisdom, creativity, psychological health and characteristics of positive groups and institutions. The map on the next page shows the topics of interest for positive psychologists. This map is not, by any means, exhaustive, but it provides a good overview of the field and the book you are about to read.



Mind map of positive psychology

Three levels of positive psychology

The science of positive psychology operates on three different levels – the subjective level, the individual level and the group level.

The subjective level includes the study of positive experiences such as joy, well-being, satisfaction, contentment, happiness, optimism and flow. This level is about feeling good, rather than doing good or being a good person.

At the next level, the aim is to identify the constituents of the ‘good life’ and the personal qualities that are necessary for being a ‘good person’, through studying human strengths and virtues, future-mindedness, capacity for love, courage, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, wisdom, interpersonal skills and giftedness.

Finally, at the group or community level, the emphasis is on civic virtues, social responsibilities, nurturance, altruism, civility, tolerance, work ethics, positive institutions and other factors that contribute to the development of citizenship and communities.

This book will mainly concentrate on the first two levels, but the chapter 13 (‘Putting it into practice’) will touch upon the third one.

Why do we have positive psychology?

According to positive psychologists, for most of its life mainstream psychology (sometimes also referred to as ‘psychology as usual’) has been concerned with the negative aspects of human life. There have been pockets of interest in topics such as creativity, optimism and wisdom, but these have not been united by any grand theory or a broad, overarching framework. This rather negative state of affairs was not the original intention of the first psychologists, but came about through a historical accident. Prior to the Second World War, psychology had three tasks, which were to: cure mental illness, improve normal lives and identify and nurture high talent. However, after the war the last two tasks somehow got lost, leaving the field to concentrate predominantly on the first one².

How did that happen? Given that psychology as a science depends heavily on the funding of governmental bodies, it is not hard to guess what happened to the resources after World War II.

Understandably, facing a human crisis on such an enormous scale, all available resources were poured into learning about and the treatment of psychological illness and psychopathology.

This is how psychology as a field learnt to operate within a *disease model*. This model has proven very useful. Seligman highlights the victories of the disease model, which are, for example, that 14 previously incurable mental illnesses (such as depression, personality disorder, or anxiety attacks) can now be successfully treated. However, the costs of adopting this disease model included the negative view of psychologists as ‘victimologists’ and ‘pathologisers’, the failure to address the improvement of normal lives and the identification and nurturance of high talent. Just to illustrate, if you were to say to your friends that you were going to see a psychologist, what is the most likely response that you would get? ‘What’s wrong with you?’ How likely are you to hear something along the lines of: ‘Great! Are you planning to concentrate on self-improvement?’

Many psychologists admit that we have little knowledge of what makes life worth living or of how normal people flourish under usual, rather than extreme, conditions. In fact, we often have little more to say about the good life than self-help gurus. But shouldn’t we know better? The Western world has long overgrown the rationale for an exclusively disease model of psychology. Perhaps now is the time to readdress the balance by using psychology resources to learn about normal and flourishing lives, rather than lives that are in need of help. Perhaps now is the time to gather knowledge about strengths and talents, high achievement (in every sense of this word), the best ways and means of self-improvement, fulfilling work and relationships, and a great art of ordinary living carried out in every corner of the planet. This is the rationale behind the creation of positive psychology.

However, positive psychology is still nothing else but psychology, adopting the same scientific method. It simply studies different (and often far more interesting) topics and asks slightly different questions, such as ‘what works?’ rather than ‘what doesn’t?’ or ‘what is right with this person?’ rather than ‘what is wrong?’

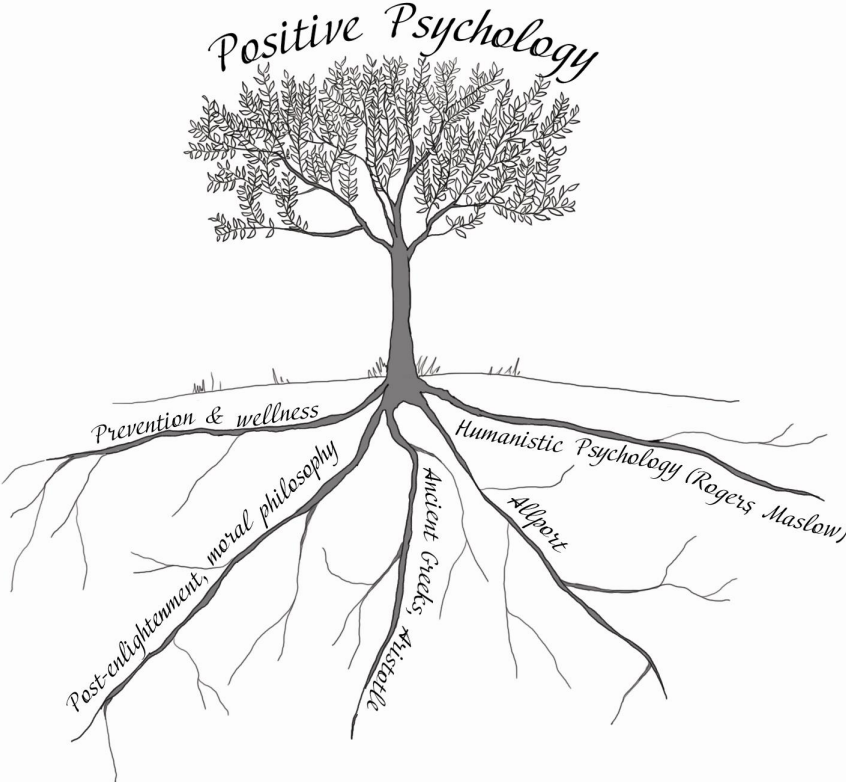
Aren't we rediscovering the wheel? Historical roots of positive psychology.

Positive psychology places a lot of emphasis on being a new and forward thinking discipline. Whilst the second claim might be true, the idea as such is hardly new. The roots of positive psychology can be traced to the thoughts of ancient Greek philosophers. Aristotle believed that there was a unique *daimon*, or spirit within each individual, that guides us to pursue things that are right for us. Acting in accordance with this daimon leads one to happiness. The question of happiness has since been picked up by hundreds, if not thousands, of prominent thinkers, and gave rise to many theories, including Hedonism, with its emphasis on pleasure and Utilitarianism, seeking the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

In the 20th century, many prominent psychologists focused on what later became the subject matter of positive psychology. Amongst them were Carl Jung with his individuation, or 'becoming all that one can be' concept³, Maria Jahoda, concerned with defining positive mental health⁴ and Gordon Allport, interested in individual maturity⁵. Since then, the matters of flourishing and well-being were raised in the work on prevention⁶ and wellness enhancement⁷. The most notable of positive psychology's predecessors, however, was the humanistic psychology movement, which originated in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 60s and 70s. This movement placed central emphasis on the growth and authentic self of an individual. Humanistic psychologists were critical of pathology oriented approaches to a human being. The most famous ones were Carl Rogers, who introduced the concept of the fully functioning person, and Abraham Maslow, who emphasised self-actualisation. In fact it was Maslow who was the very first to use the term positive psychology.

Humanistic psychologists, however, did not only reject the dominant negative paradigm of psychology, they also believed that so-called 'scientific method' (good for studying molecules and atoms) helps little in understanding the human being in its complexity and called for more qualitative rather than quantitative (statistical, number crunching) research. This is where positive psychology disagrees with its major predecessor. Positive

psychology believes that humanistic psychology, because of its scepticism of an empirical method, is not very grounded scientifically. Contrary to the humanists, whilst rejecting the mainstream psychology preoccupation with negative topics, positive psychology embraces the dominant scientific paradigm. Positive psychology thus distinguishes itself from humanistic psychology on the basis of methods⁸, whereas the substance and the topics studied are remarkably similar. Rightly or wrongly, positive psychology tends to present itself as a new movement, often attempting to distance itself from its origins.



The roots of positive psychology

2. YOUR EMOTIONS AND YOU

The term ‘emotion’ is notoriously difficult to define. As Fehr and Russell put it: ‘everyone knows what emotion is until asked to give a definition’⁹. Yet we all use this term and seem to easily understand to what, in our experience, it relates. Psychologists often employ the notion of affect* as an umbrella term for various positive and negative emotions, feelings and moods we frequently experience and easily recognise. In this chapter, I’ll consider two ‘affective’ topics, popular within positive psychology – positive emotions and emotional intelligence.

The value of positive emotions

For years, psychology turned its attention to the study of negative emotions or negative affect, including: depression, sadness, anger, stress and anxiety. Not surprisingly, psychologists found them interesting because they may often lead to, or signal the presence of, psychological disorders. However, positive emotions are no less fascinating, if only because of many common sense misconceptions that exist about positive affect. We tend to think, for example, that positive affect typically, by its very nature, distorts or disrupts orderly, effective thinking, that positive emotions are somehow ‘simple’ or that, because these emotions are short-lived, they cannot have a long-term impact. Research has shown the above not to be the case but it took it a while to get there¹⁰. It is only relatively recently that psychologists realised that positive emotions can be seen as valuable in their own right, and started studying them.

The person behind that realisation was Barbara Fredrickson, who devoted most of her academic career to trying to understand the benefits of the positive emotions. The functions of negative emotions have been clear for a while. Negative emotions, like anxiety or anger, are associated with tendencies to act in specific ways, which are adaptive in evolutionary terms, i.e. the fight and flight response.

* Some researchers make a distinction between emotions and affect, treating affect as broader and longer lasting, but in this book I will be using these notions interchangeably.

Thus, fear contributes to a tendency to escape and anger to a tendency to attack. If our ancestors were not equipped with such effective emotional tools, our own existence could have been doubtful. Moreover, negative emotions seem to narrow our action repertoires (or actual behaviours) – when running from danger we are unlikely to appreciate a beautiful sunset. This function of negative emotions can help minimise distractions in an acute situation. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are not associated with specific actions. So what good are they, apart from the fact that they merely feel good? What is the point in feeling happy or joyful, affectionate or ecstatic?

The ‘broaden-and-build’ theory of positive emotions, developed by Barbara Fredrickson, shows that positive affective experiences contribute and have a long-lasting effect on our personal growth and development¹¹. And this is how they do it:

(a) Positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoires

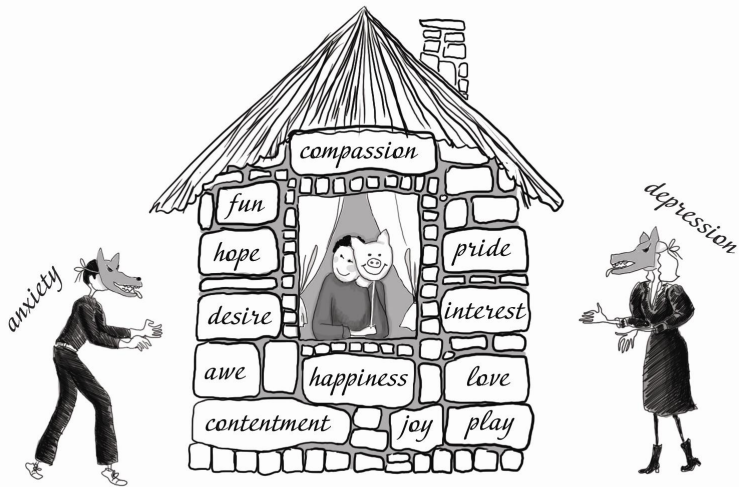
First of all, positive emotions broaden our attention and thinking, which means that we have more positive and a greater variety of thoughts. When we are experiencing positive emotions, like joy or interest, we are more likely to be creative, to see more opportunities, to be open to relationships with others, to play, to be more flexible and open-minded.

(b) Positive emotions undo negative emotions

It’s hard to experience both positive and negative emotions simultaneously, thus a deliberate experience of positive emotions at times when negative emotions are dominant can serve to undo their lingering effects. Mild joy and contentment can eliminate the stress experienced at a physiological level.

(c) Positive emotions enhance resilience

Enjoyment, happy playfulness, contentment, satisfaction, warm friendship, love, and affection all enhance resilience and the ability to cope, while negative emotions, in contrast, decrease them. Positive emotions can enhance problem-focused coping, positive reappraisal, or infusing negative events with positive meaning, all of which facilitate fast bouncing back after an unpleasant event.



Resilience hypothesis

(d) Positive emotions build psychological repertoire

Far from having only a momentary effect, positive emotions help to build important physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources that are enduring, even though the emotions themselves are temporary. For example, the positive emotions associated with play can build physical abilities and self-mastery, enjoyable times with friends – increase social skills.

(e) Positive emotions can trigger an upward developmental spiral

More than that, just as negative emotions can lead one into downward spirals of depression, positive emotions can trigger upward developmental spirals towards improved emotional well-being and transform people into better versions of themselves.

The broaden-and-build theory urges us to consider positive emotions not as an end in themselves but as a means of leading a better life*.

Tips & Tools

How can we increase positive emotions?

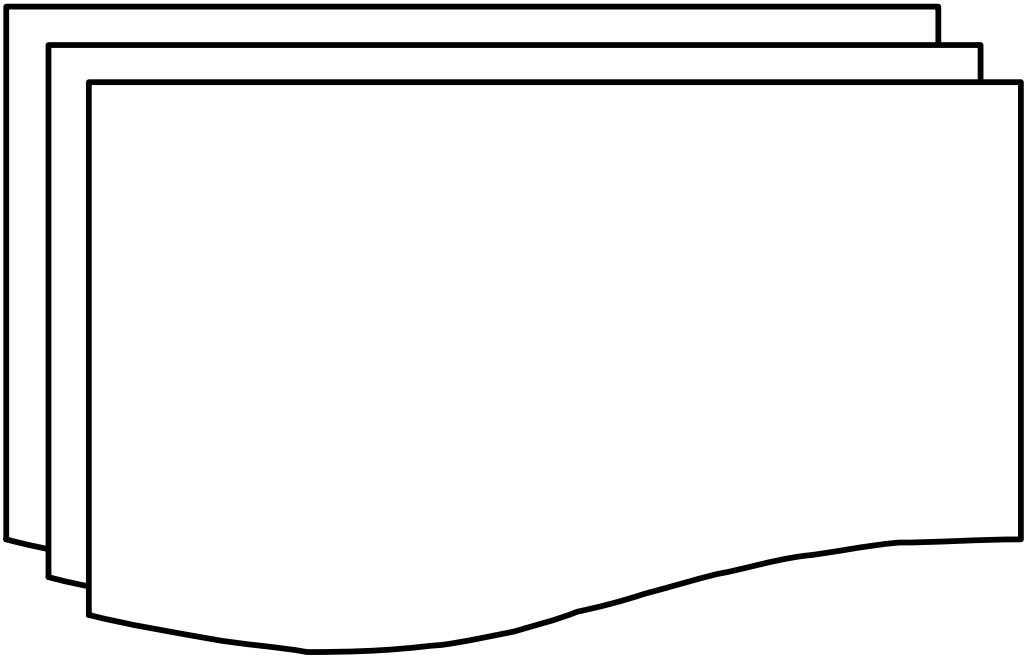
The emotion of contentment can be enhanced by engaging in relaxation practices, such as progressive muscle relaxation, yoga and imagery exercises[†]. Meditation exercises help achieve a state of mindfulness, which brings many other benefits¹¹.

A lot of interesting research highlights the benefits of positive emotions. In one study with people who had lost their partners, researchers found that laughter and Duchenne smiling predicts the duration of grief. A Duchenne smile is a genuine smile characterised by the corners of the mouth turning up and the crinkling of the skin around the corners of the eyes. People who laughed and smiled genuinely were more likely to be engaged in life and dating again two and a half years later, compared to those who felt angry¹³.

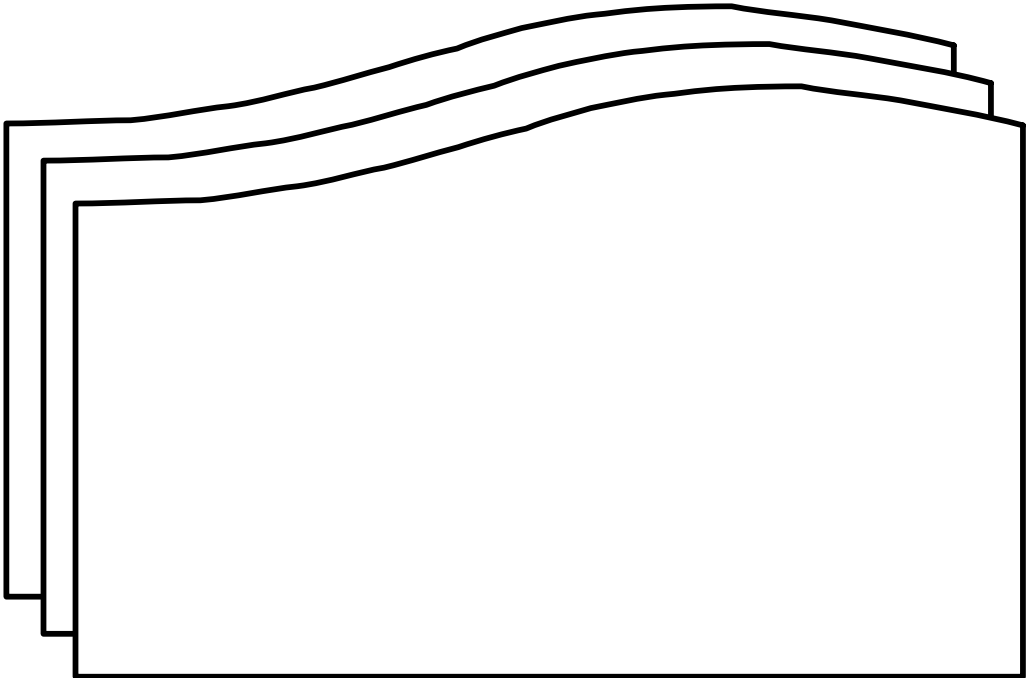
A famous Yearbook Study traced the lives of women who were attending an all-women's college in 1965. The faces of the women in their college photographs were coded for smiling behaviour and results showed that Duchenne smiles related to less negativity, greater competence, more positive ratings from others and greater well-being in their later lives¹⁴. Another study demonstrated that physicians experiencing positive emotions seemed to make more accurate diagnoses¹⁵.

* Positive emotions are distinguished from temporary pleasant sensations such as eating chocolate ice cream, drinking beer, doing drugs, or getting a massage. These sensations are not the same as positive emotions as they do not lead to the accumulation of durable personal resources.

[†] For a comprehensive list of relaxation and meditation-related exercises see Popovic, N. (2005). *Personal Synthesis*. London: PWBC.



SOME PAGES ARE HERE OMITTED



NOTES

- ¹ Seligman, M.E.P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive Psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.
- ² *Ibid*
- ³ Jung, C.G. (1933). *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- ⁴ Jahoda, M. (1958). *Current concepts of positive mental health*. New York: Basic Books.
- ⁵ Allport, G.W. (1955). *Becoming*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- ⁶ See for example, Cowen, E.I., Gardner, E.A., & Zax, M. (Eds.), (1967). *Emergent Approaches to Mental Health problems: An overview and directions for future work*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- ⁷ Cowen, E. I. (1994). The enhancement of psychological wellness: Challenges and opportunities. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 22, 149-179.
- ⁸ Peterson, C. & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
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- ¹⁰ Isen, A.M. (2002). Positive affect as a source of human strength. In L.G. Aspinwall & U.M. Staudinger (Eds.), *A Psychology of Human Strengths*, Washington: American Psychological Association.
- ¹¹ Fredrickson, B.L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56, 218-226.
- ¹² *Ibid*
- ¹³ Keltner, D. & Bonanno, G.A. (1997). A study of laughter and dissociation: The distinct correlates of laughter and smiling during bereavement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 687-702.
- ¹⁴ Harker, L. & Keltner, D. (2001). Expressions of positive emotion in women's college yearbook pictures and their relationship to personality and life outcomes across adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 112-124.
- ¹⁵ Isen, A., Rozentzweig, A.S. & Young, M.J. (1991). The influence of positive affect on clinical problem solving. *Medical Decision Making*, 11, 221-227.