Positive Psychology

William James was writing about the importance of happiness (“the secret motive for all [we do]”) as early as 1902. By the 1960s, the humanistic psychologists were interested in advancing human fulfillment. In the twenty-first century, under the leadership of American Psychological Association past-president Martin Seligman, positive psychology is using scientific methods to study human flourishing. This young subfield includes studies of **subjective well-being**—our feelings of happiness (sometimes defined as a high ratio of positive to negative feelings) or our sense of satisfaction with life.

Taken together, satisfaction with the past, happiness with the present, and optimism about the future define the positive psychology movement’s first pillar: **positive well-being**. Seligman views happiness as a by-product of a pleasant, engaged, and meaningful life.

Positive psychology is about building not just a pleasant life, says Seligman, but also a good life that engages one’s skills, and a meaningful life that points beyond oneself. Thus, the second pillar, **positive character**, focuses on exploring and enhancing creativity, courage, compassion, integrity, self-control, leadership, wisdom, and spirituality.

The third pillar, **positive groups, communities, and cultures**, seeks to foster a positive social ecology. This includes healthy families, communal neighborhoods, effective schools, socially responsible media, and civil dialogue.

“Positive psychology,” Seligman and colleagues have said (2005), “is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions.” Its focus differs from psychology’s traditional interests in understanding and alleviating negative states—abuse and anxiety, depression and disease, prejudice and poverty. Indeed, psychology articles published since 1887 on depression have outnumbered those related to happiness by 15 to 1.

In ages past, times of relative peace and prosperity have enabled cultures to turn their attention from repairing weakness and damage to promoting what Seligman (2002) has called “the highest qualities of life.” Prosperous fifth-century Athens nurtured philosophy and democracy. Flourishing fifteenth-century Florence nurtured great art. Victorian England, flush with the bounty of the British Empire, nurtured honor, discipline, and duty. In this millennium, Seligman believes, thriving Western cultures have a parallel opportunity to create, as a “humane, scientific monument,” a more positive psychology, concerned not only with weakness and damage but also with strength and virtue. Thanks to his leadership, and to more than $200 million in funding, the movement has gained strength, with supporters in 77 countries (IPPA, 2017; Seligman, 2016).