

positive psychology the scientific study of human flourishing, with the goals of discovering and promoting strengths and virtues that help individuals and communities to thrive.

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 sub-field includes studies of **subjective well-being**—our feelings of happiness (sometimes defined as a high ratio of positive to negative feelings) or sense of satisfaction with life. For example, researchers are exploring:

- *positive emotions* by assessing exercises and interventions aimed at increasing happiness (Schueller, 2010; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).
- *positive health* by studying how positive emotions enhance and sustain physical well-being (Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2011).
- *positive neuroscience* by examining the biological foundations of positive emotions, resilience, and social behavior (www.posneuroscience.org).
- *positive education* by evaluating educational efforts to increase students’ engagement, resilience, character strengths, optimism, and sense of meaning (Seligman et al., 2009).

Martin E. P. Seligman “The main purpose of a positive psychology is to measure, understand, and then build the human strengths and the civic virtues.”



Courtesy of Martin Seligman

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 during its first century, when attention was directed toward understanding and alleviating negative states—abuse and anxiety, depression and disease, prejudice and poverty. Indeed, articles on selected negative emotions since 1887 have outnumbered those on positive emotions by 17 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, the movement has gained strength, with supporters in 77 countries from Croatia to China (IPPA, 2009, 2010; Seligman, 2004, 2011). Their research on human flourishing has given us insights into many aspects of our well-being, including studies of the predictors of happiness.

Will psychology have a more positive mission in this century? Without slighting the need to repair damage and cure disease, positive psychology's proponents hope so. With *American Psychologist* and *British Psychologist* special issues devoted to positive psychology; with many new books; with networked scientists working in worldwide research groups; and with prizes, research awards, summer institutes, and a graduate program promoting positive psychology scholarship, these psychologists have reason to be positive. Cultivating a more positive psychology mission may help Seligman achieve his most ambitious goal: By the year 2051, 51 percent of the world will be "flourishing." "It's in our hands not only to witness this," he says, "but to take part in making this happen" (Seligman, 2011).