

SELF-HELP

Spring into happiness

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I recently read a psychology journal article that piqued my interest but also brought tears of regret to my eyes. The article discussed Positive Psychology, a new movement in psychology created by researcher, professor, and author Martin Seligman, Ph.D. Instead of



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focusing on problems or character flaws, this form of psychology is designed to create or enhance an individual's happiness. Seligman proposes that happiness is comprised of positive emotion (the pleasant life), engagement in life (the engaged life), and meaning (the meaningful life). Spring is the season of renewal of life, and I thought our lives could be

enriched by more happiness in the spirit of this spring's renewal.

Positive emotions include satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride, serenity, hope and optimism, faith, trust, and confidence, according to Seligman. I suspect love would be included as a positive emotion, although it is not included in Seligman's list. Other positive psychology researchers have found that positive emotions and a broad thought-action repertoire amplify each other, leading to an upward spiral of well-being.

In an engaged life, a person pursues involvement and absorption in work, intimate relations, and leisure. When highly engaged in an activity, an individual hardly notices the passage of time; attention is completely focused on the activity, and the sense of self blends into the activity.

The pursuit of meaning involves using one's strengths and talents to belong to and serve something bigger

than the self, such as religion, politics or family. Serving a valued institution produces a sense of satisfaction and the belief that one has lived well.

Seligman and his colleagues have developed a set of exercises to increase happiness (see www.reflectivehappiness.com). The three exercises that have been found to increase happiness the most are the gratitude visit, the three blessings, and using your strengths. The gratitude visit involves writing a letter to someone whom you have never properly thanked and reading the letter to that person by phone or in person. The three blessings involves writing down three good things that happened that day and why you think they happened. Using your strengths involves identifying your top 5 strengths and finding ways to use them more in your daily life. An interesting derivative of the strengths exercise is to develop a family tree of strengths, identifying commonalities and poten-

tial sources of strengths among family members.

As I reflected on these ideas, I thought about how much I took for granted in my life and how infrequently I had taken the time to express my appreciation to the many wonderful people who have given me so much. I drafted a gratitude letter to my elderly father, suffering from dementia, who may not understand what I have written. Nevertheless, I plan to read it to him at my next visit. I envisioned a creative family activity of drawing a family tree of strengths, along with my sibling's family. I felt blessed by having a loving family around me, my health, and the opportunity to live in a lovely home in this beautiful community. And a great sense of peace and contentment enveloped me. Perhaps these ideas and exercises will help you feel happier and renewed as well.

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