



Positive Psychology

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A brief history of the positive psychology movement is presented, and key themes within positive psychology are identified. Three important positive psychology topics are gratitude, forgiveness, and humility. Ten key findings within the field of positive psychology are put forth, and the most important empirical findings regarding gratitude, forgiveness, and humility are discussed. Assessment techniques for these three strengths are described, and interventions for increasing gratitude, developing forgiveness, and becoming more humble are briefly considered.

Learning Objectives

- Describe what positive psychology is, who started it, and why it came into existence.
- Identify some of the most important findings from the science of positive psychology with respect to forgiveness, gratitude, and humility.
- Explore how positive psychology might make a difference in how you think about your own life, the nature of human nature, and what is really important to you.

Introduction

Positive psychology is a popular movement that began in the late 1990's. It is the branch of psychology that has as its primary focus on the strengths, virtues, and talents that contribute to successful functioning and enable individuals and communities to flourish. Core topics

include happiness, resiliency, well-being, and states of flow and engagement. It was spearheaded by a former president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman.



Martin Seligman, who is credited with starting the positive psychology movement, attributes the inspiration to his prior work on learned helplessness. New research prompted him to instead focus on the good in people's lives. [Image: Lotte Meijer, CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

Throughout most of its history, psychology was concerned with identifying and remedying human ills. It has largely focused on decreasing maladaptive emotions and behaviors, while generally ignoring positive and optimal functioning. In contrast, the goal of positive psychology is to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living. Unlike the positive thinking or new thought movements that are associated with people like Norman Vincent Peale or Rhonda Byrne (*The Secret*), positive psychology pursues scientifically informed perspectives on what makes life worth living. It is empirically based. It focuses on measuring aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing. The science of happiness is covered in other modules within this section of this book. Therefore, aside from

key findings summarized in Table 1, the emphasis in this module will be on other topics within positive psychology.

Moving from an exclusive focus on distress, disorder, and dysfunction, positive psychology shifts the scientific lens to a concentration on well-being, health, and optimal functioning. Positive psychology provides a different vantage point through which to understand human experience. Recent developments have produced a common framework and that locates the study of positive states, strengths and virtues in relation to each other and links them to important life outcomes. Recent developments suggest that problems in psychological functioning may be more profitably dealt with as the absence, excess, or opposite of these strengths rather than traditional diagnostic categories of mental illness. The principal claim of positive psychology is that the study of health, fulfillment and well-being is as deserving of study as illness, dysfunction, and distress, has resonated well with both the academic community and the general public.

As a relatively new field of research, positive psychology lacked a common vocabulary for discussing measurable positive traits before 2004. Traditional psychology benefited from the creation of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which provided researchers and clinicians with the same set of language from which they could talk about the negative. As a first step in remedying this disparity between traditional and positive psychology, Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman set out to identify, organize and measure character. The Values in Action (VIA) classification of strengths was an important initial step toward specifying important positive traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peterson and Seligman examined ancient cultures (including their religions, politics, education and philosophies) for information about how people in the past construed human virtue. The researchers looked for virtues that were present across cultures and time. Six core virtues emerged from their analysis: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence and wisdom. The VIA is the positive psychology counterpart to the DSM used in traditional psychology and psychiatry. Unlike the DSM, which scientifically categorizes human deficits and disorders, the VIA classifies positive human strengths. This approach vastly departs from the medical model of traditional psychology, which focuses on fixing deficits. In contrast, positive psychologists emphasize that people should focus and build upon on what they are doing well.

The VIA is a tool by which people can identify their own character strengths and learn how to capitalize on them. It consists of 240 questions that ask respondents to report the degree to which statements reflecting each of the strengths apply to themselves. For example, the character strength of hope is measured with items that include "I know that I will succeed with the goals I set for myself." The strength of gratitude is measured with such items as "At least once a day, I stop and count my blessings."

Within the United States, the most commonly endorsed strengths are kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude and judgment (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006). Worldwide, the following strengths were most associated with positive life satisfaction: hope, zest, gratitude and love. The researchers called these strengths of the heart. Moreover, strengths associated with knowledge, such as love of learning and curiosity, were least correlated with life satisfaction (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2005).

Three Key Strengths

Forgiveness, gratitude, and humility are three key strengths that have been the focus of sustained research programs within positive psychology. What have we learned about each of these and why do these matter for human flourishing?

Ten Key Findings from the Science of Positive Psychology	
1	Most people are happy
2	Happiness is a cause of good things in life and not simply a result of success or good outcomes. Happy people make good things happen.
3	Political conservatives are happier than political liberals.
4	Most people are resilient. They bounce back from adversity, large and small.
5	Happiness, strengths of character, and good social relationships are buffers against the damaging effects of disappointments and setbacks.
6	Religious faith matters. People for whom religion is important are happier and cope better with stress compared to non-believers.
7	Money makes an ever-diminishing contribution to well-being, but money can buy happiness if it is spent on other people.
8	As a route to a satisfying life, eudaimonia (a life of meaning) trumps hedonism (a life of pleasure).
9	Good days have common features: feeling autonomous, competent, and connected to others.
10	The good life can be taught.

Table 1: Ten Key Findings from the Science of Positive Psychology

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is essential to harmonious long-term relationships between individuals, whether between spouses or nations, dyads or collectives. At the level of the individual, forgiveness of self can help one achieve an inner peace as well as peace with others and with God. Wrongdoing against others can result in guilt, and self-loathing. Resentment can give way to hate and intolerance. Both perpetrator and victim suffer. Conversely, forgiveness can be an avenue to healing. It is the basic building block of loving relationships with others. When one person or nation does something to hurt another, the relationship between the two can be irrevocably damaged. Because the potential for conflict is seemingly built into human nature, the prospects for long-term peace may seem faint. Forgiveness offers another way. If the victim can forgive the perpetrator, the relationship may be restored and possibly even saved from termination. The essence of forgiveness is that it creates a possibility for a

relationship to recover from the damage caused by the offending party's offense. Forgiveness is thus a powerful **pro-social** process. It can benefit human social life by helping relationships to heal., on the social level, forgiveness may be the critical element needed for world peace. Culligan (2002) wrote "Forgiveness may ultimately be the most powerful weapon for breaking the dreadful cycle of violence."

Research is answering fundamental questions about what forgiveness is and isn't, how it develops, what are its physiological correlates and physical effects, whether it is always beneficial, and how people—if they are so motivated—might be helped to forgive. Forgiveness is not excusing, condoning, tolerating, or forgetting that one has been hurt because of the actions of another. Forgiveness is letting go of negative thoughts (e.g. wishing the offender harm), negative behaviors (e.g. a desire to retaliate, and negative feelings (e.g. resentment) toward the offender (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006).

There have been numerous studies looking at forgiveness interventions. The interventions involved counseling and exercises which were used to help people move from anger and resentment towards forgiveness. In one study, incest survivors who experienced the forgiveness intervention had at the end of the intervention increased abilities to forgive others, increased hopefulness and decreased levels of anxiety and depression. In another study, college students were randomized to a group that received a forgiveness education program and another group who studied human relations. The group that received the forgiveness education program showed higher levels of hope and an increased willingness to forgive others. This greater self-forgiveness was associated with increased self-esteem, lower levels of anxiety, lower levels of depression and a more positive view of their patient. In many of these studies, it was shown that people who are able to forgive are more likely to have better interpersonal functioning and therefore social support. The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others (Enright, 2001).



There is a famous quotation that does a good job of illustrating the importance of forgiveness: "Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." [Image: CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

Gratitude



It is hard to feel sad when you're feeling grateful. Try to practice giving thanks, even for something small, every day. [Image: Trey Ratcliff, <https://goo.gl/MKJUCl>, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, <https://goo.gl/Toc0ZF>]

Gratitude is a feeling of appreciation or thankfulness in response to receiving a benefit. The emerging science of gratitude has produced some important findings. From childhood to old age, accumulating evidence documents the wide array of psychological, physical, and relational benefits associated with gratitude (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Gratitude is important not only because it helps us feel good, but also because it inspires us to do good. Gratitude heals, energizes, and transforms lives in a myriad of ways consistent with the notion that virtue is both its own reward and produces other rewards (Emmons, 2007).

To give a flavor of these research findings, dispositional gratitude has been found to be positively associated qualities such as empathy, forgiveness, and the willingness to help others. For example, people who rated themselves as having a grateful disposition perceived themselves as having more socially helpful characteristics, expressed by their empathetic behavior, and emotional support for friends within the last month (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). In our research, when people report feeling grateful, thankful, and appreciative in their daily lives, they also feel more loving, forgiving, joyful, and enthusiastic. Notably, the family, friends, partners and others who surround them consistently report that people who practice gratitude are viewed as more helpful, more outgoing, more optimistic, and more trustworthy (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Expressing gratitude for life's blessings – that is, a sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation– is likely to elevate happiness for a number of reasons. Grateful thinking fosters the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that people can extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from their circumstances. Counting one's blessings may directly counteract the effects of hedonic adaptation, the process by which our happiness level returns, again and again, to its set range, by preventing people from taking

the good things in their lives for granted. If we consciously remind ourselves of our blessings, it should become harder to take them for granted and adapt to them. And the very act of viewing good things as gifts itself is likely to be beneficial for mood. How much does it matter? Consider these eye-popping statistics. People are 25% happier if they keep gratitude journals, sleep 1/2 hour more per evening, and exercise 33% more each week compared to persons who are not keeping journals. They achieve up to a 10% reduction in systolic blood pressure, and decrease their dietary fat intake by up to 20%. Lives marked by frequent positive emotions of joy, love and gratitude are up to 7 years longer than lives bereft of these pleasant feelings.

The science of gratitude has also revealed some surprising findings. For example, students who practice gratitude increase their grade point average. Occasional gratitude journaling boosts well-being more than the regular practice of counting blessings. Remembering one's sorrows, failures, and other painful experiences is more beneficial to happiness than recalling only successes. Becoming aware that a very pleasant experience is about to end enhances feelings of gratitude for it. Thinking about the absence of something positive in your life produces more gratitude and happiness than imagining its presence.

To assess your own level of gratefulness, take the test in Table 2.

Humility

What is humility and why does it matter? Although the etymological roots of **humility** are in lowliness and self-abasement (from the Latin term *humilis* meaning "lowly, humble," or literally "on the ground" and from the Latin term *humus* meaning "earth"), the emerging consensus among scholars is that humility is a psychological and intellectual virtue, or a character strength. There is no simple definition but it seems to involve the following elements: A clear and accurate (not underestimated) sense of one's abilities and achievements; the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a "higher power"); an



One aspect of humility is an awareness of the relatively little that one can really know about the world. [Image: Maria Svecova, CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

How Grateful Are You? Test your Gratitude Quotient *(McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002)*

1 = strongly disagree
 2 = disagree
 3 = slightly disagree
 4 = neutral
 5 = slightly agree
 6 = agree
 7 = strongly agree

Scoring Instructions:

- A.** Add up your scores for items 1, 2, 4, and 5.
- B.** Reverse your scores for items 3 and 6. That is, if you scored a "7," give yourself a "1," if you scored a "6," give yourself a "2," etc.
- C.** Add the reversed scores for items 3 and 6 to the total from Step 1. This is your total GQ-6 score. This number should be between 6 and 42.

- ____ 1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.
- ____ 2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.
- ____ 3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.*
- ____ 4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.
- ____ 5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.
- ____ 6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.*

Interpreting your Score:

40-42: Extremely high gratitude. People who score in this range have the ability to see life as a gift. For you, gratitude is a way of life.

37-39: Very high gratitude. Your life contains frequent expressions of gratitude and you are able to readily acknowledge how others have helped you.

34-36: High gratitude. You are above average in gratitude and find it relatively easy to spend time reflecting on your blessings.

30-33: Average gratitude. You may find it easy being grateful when things are going well in your life; but may have difficulties maintaining a grateful outlook in tough times.

25-29: Below average gratitude. You find it challenging to find reasons for gratitude in your life. Life is more of a burden than a gift. Maybe you are just going through a difficult period.

Table 2: Your Gratitude Quotient

openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice keeping one's abilities and accomplishments in perspective; relatively low self-focus or an ability to "forget the self";

appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world. In contemporary society, it is easy to overlook the merits of humility. In politics, business and sports, the egoists command our attention. "Show me someone without an ego," said real estate mogul Donald Trump, "and I'll show you a loser." In contrast, the primary message of this book is that the unassuming virtue of humility, rather than representing weakness or inferiority, as is commonly assumed, is a strength of character that produces positive, beneficial results for self and society. Successful people are humble people. They are more likely to flourish in life, in more domains, than are people who are less humble (Exline & Hill, 2012).

Do you think you are you a humble person? For obvious reasons, you cannot rate your own level of humility. It's an elusive concept to get at scientifically. "I am very humble" is self-contradictory. This has not discouraged personality psychologists from developing questionnaires to get at it, albeit indirectly. For example, to what extent do you identify with each of the following statements:

1. I generally have a good idea about the things I do well or do poorly.
2. I have difficulty accepting advice from other people.
3. I try my best in things, but I realize that I have a lot of work to do in many areas.
4. I am keenly aware of what little I know about the world.

Questions such as these tap various facets of the humble personality, including an appreciation and recognition of one's limitations, and an accurate assessment of oneself.

Humble people are more likely to flourish in life, in more domains, than are people who are less humble. Consider a handful of findings from recent research studies and surveys:

- People who say they feel humble when they are praised report that the experience made them want to be nice to people, increase their efforts, and challenge themselves
- Humble people are more admired and the trait of humility is viewed positively by most
- Humble teachers are rated as more effective and humble lawyers as more likeable by jurors
- CEO's who possessed a rare combination of extreme humility and strong professional will were catalysts for transforming a good company into a great one
- Over 80% of adults surveyed indicated that it is important that professionals demonstrate modesty/humility in their work
- Humility is positively associated with academic success in the form of higher grades (Exline

& Hill, 2012).

The science of positive psychology has grown remarkably quickly since it first appeared on the scene in the late 1990's. Already, considerable progress has been made in understanding empirically the foundations of a good life. Knowledge from basic research in positive psychology is being applied in a number of settings, from psychotherapy to workplace settings to schools and even to the military (Biswas-Diener, 2011); A proper blend of science and practice will be required in order for positive psychology to fully realize its potential in dealing with the future challenges that we face as humans.

Outside Resources

Web: Authentic Happiness.

<http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu>

Web: The International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA).

<http://www.ippanetwork.org/>

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of people in your life who are very humble? What do they do or say that expresses their humility? To what extent do you think it would be good if you were more humble? To what extent do you think it would be good if you were less humble?
2. How can thinking gratefully about an unpleasant event from your past help you to deal positively with it? As the result of this event, what kinds of things do you now feel thankful or grateful for? How has this event benefited you as a person? How have you grown? Were there personal strengths that grew out of your experience?
3. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree or disagree? What are some of the obstacles you have faced in your own life when trying to forgive others?

Vocabulary

Character strength

A positive trait or quality deemed to be morally good and is valued for itself as well as for promoting individual and collective well-being.

Flourishing

To live optimally psychologically, relationally, and spiritually.

Forgiveness

The letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward an offender.

Gratitude

A feeling of appreciation or thankfulness in response to receiving a benefit.

Humility

Having an accurate view of self—not too high or low—and a realistic appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses, especially in relation to other people.

Positive psychology

The science of human flourishing. Positive Psychology is an applied science with an emphasis on real world intervention.

Pro-social

Thoughts, actions, and feelings that are directed towards others and which are positive in nature.

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- To reduce financial burden on students by providing access to free educational content
- To provide instructors with a platform to customize educational content to better suit their curriculum
- To present material written by a collection of experts and authorities in the field

The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award-winning university teachers.

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