

Keys to Contentment
How Insights from Positive Psychology Can Benefit You and Your Clients

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“Happiness is a lasting sense of emotional well-being and contentment.”

Martin Seligman, Ph.D. is the founder of Positive Psychology, Director of the Positive Psychology Center at University of Pennsylvania, and the author of more than 20 books, including *Authentic Happiness* and *Flourish*. (www.authentic-happiness.org)

Positive Psychology, founded by Dr. Seligman, is a new branch of psychology that involves the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and positive institutions that help people find greater meaning in their lives and experience greater happiness, satisfaction, optimism and joy. Simple life-giving insights, attitudes and practices can help us create more positive energy and live at the upper end of our inborn level of happiness.

Happy people are mentally, emotionally, and physically healthier; have better relationships, greater energy, and a better work outcome; and are more active, cooperative, and charitable. *Happiness is like a muscle; the more we exercise it, the happier we are.*

The Happiness Formula

$$\mathbf{H = S + C + V}$$

H = Your Current Level of Happiness

S = Your Set Range of Happiness--Based on Your Innate Personality (contributes 50%)

(Whether fortune or misfortune occurs, our happiness thermostat tends to pull us back to our set range of happiness over time).

C = Your Life Circumstances—including Recent Life Events (contributes 10%)

(The “Hedonic Treadmill” refers to the tendency to rapidly adapt to good things by taking them for granted, so that positive circumstances tend to raise happiness only transiently.)

V = Factors Under Your Voluntary Control (contributes 40%)

V is the single most important issue in Positive Psychology!

(Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*)

1. The First Step Toward Increasing Your Present Level of Happiness

Take 100% Responsibility for Your Life and Your Actions

Happiness is often associated with fortunate circumstances (happenstance). However, we can learn to be content, even in unfavorable circumstances, by changing our attitude and outlook.

Events (things that happen in your life) + **Responses** (your thoughts, beliefs and actions) = **Outcomes** (how you feel, the actions you take, the way you decide to *show up* for life each day)

Stress does not come from the events in our lives. *Stress comes from the story we choose to tell ourselves to give meaning to the events in our lives.*

Our thoughts and inner dialogue create our reality. Learn to listen to your inner voice and recognize how it impacts the way you “show up” for life. Ask yourself, “Am I aware of my present attitude toward this situation?” “If necessary, am I willing to change my attitude?”

Think of a recent challenging situation in your personal or work life. Pause, reflect, stretch your imagination, and write down ten positive things that *did result or could result* from this potentially negative situation. (Alex Pattakos, Ph.D., *Prisoners of our Thoughts*) Now, let the positive become possibilities in your thinking about the situation.

We can learn to stop seeing ourselves as victims of our circumstances. We can choose to stop complaining, blaming, and gossiping. (Will Bowen, *A Complaint-free World*) “Be impeccable with your word,” is the first of *The Four Agreements* (Don Miguel Ruiz).

What are some examples in your life where you are not taking 100% responsibility?

What are the personal costs and the payoffs you reap for not taking 100% responsibility for your life?

Despite the pain that our “default settings” cause us, we derive some benefit from our persistent negative patterns. For example, we get to confirm our view of the world, to preserve a *familiar*—if uncomfortable and ineffective—*identity*... whether as *enabler*...or *victim*...or *dependent*...or a *failure*. We get to *remain in our comfort zone*, instead of venturing to try new experiences or new ways of thinking or being.

When we venture out of our comfort zone, our baseline happiness increases, as we aspire to more lofty goals and continue to grow and learn.

2. The Second Step Toward Increasing Your Present Level of Happiness

PSM—Experience Pleasure, Use Your Strengths, Find Meaning

Dr. Martin Seligman defines **The Full Life** as:

- 1) Savoring life's **pleasures and enjoyable activities**;
- 2) Experiencing **positive emotions about the past and future**;
- 3) Deriving abundant gratification from **using your signature strengths**; and
- 4) **Using these strengths in the service of something larger** that gives your life a **fulfilling sense of purpose and meaning**.

What is pleasurable for you? What do you enjoy doing?

What are your signature strengths? What are you good at? What can you lose yourself in doing?

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Six **core virtues** are valued in every culture and religion across time:

1. Wisdom
2. Courage
3. Love and Humanity
4. Justice
5. Temperance
6. Spirituality and Transcendence

Each of the six virtues can be achieved through multiple moral attributes, or *strengths of character*. Strengths differ from innate talents in that they are voluntary choices and have a greater potential for being developed. The particular strengths that are deeply characteristic of us represent our **signature strengths**. The highest success in living and our deepest emotional satisfaction come from building and using our signature strengths.

When you are using your signature strengths, you may create a **state of “flow,”** an extremely gratifying experience where you are so absorbed that you lose all track of time and are completely immersed in your activity.

(Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*).

What is meaningful to you? What gives you a sense of purpose? What are your governing values?

How can you use your signature strengths in more life arenas (or re-craft your work and life to use them more) and in service to your higher purpose?

3. The Third Step toward Increasing Your Present Level of Happiness

Experience Satisfaction about Your Past and Hope for Your Future

Positive emotions about our past: Satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride, serenity

Negative emotions about our past: Bitterness, anger, regret, remorse, guilt

- Positive memories about our past help us judge our lives as good.
- Coming to terms with painful memories helps make our past more *usable* to us in the present. If we keep re-living old mistakes, hurts, and losses, and dwell on past negative events, we remain trapped in our negative emotions. By remembering, reframing, and reinterpreting past events, we can “rewrite” our past to make it more usable to us today. (*The Art of Growing Old: A Guide to Faithful Aging*, Carol Saussy)

What negative event(s) in your past has held the seed of something good?

Positive emotions about the future: Faith, trust, confidence, hope, optimism, anticipation, expectation. The most significant events of our lives may occur at any age.

Describe your ideal future, assuming that everything in your life goes as well as can be expected.

Change Your Thinking to Create More Positive Emotions: Our thoughts (often distorted) create our emotions, which spur our actions.

Optimists view the *positive* events in their lives as due to enduring traits and abilities (“I’m intelligent and a hard worker”) that predict future positive events. Optimists view the *negative* events as transient, circumstantial, and subject to change: “I made a bad choice, and I have learned from my mistake.” “It’s a temporary setback.” “I always bounce back.”

Pessimists view the *positive* events in their lives as due to chance, luck, or transient circumstances: “The boss was in a good mood today.” “I just got lucky.” Pessimists view *negative* events in their lives as permanent, pervasive, and beyond their control: “I always end up in a dead-end job.” “I have an addictive personality, just like my father.” “I’m not very smart.”

Dispute your pessimistic thoughts: Learn to vigorously argue with your negative thoughts by asking: “What is the evidence that my pessimistic thoughts are accurate?” “Is it really true that I can *never* find love again?” When you successfully dispute your distorted pessimistic thoughts, your negative emotions will diminish and be replaced by more optimistic feelings.

4. The Fourth Step Toward Increasing Your Present Level of Happiness

Practice Daily Habits to Increase Your Positive Emotions

“Happiness Boosters”

- 1. Express Gratitude**—Gratitude focuses on what is working. It is the opposite of complaining. “When you pay more attention to what works in your life, you get more of a life that works.” Grateful people are more satisfied with their lives and deal with life’s challenges in more positive ways. Get in touch with the feeling of gratitude. Keep a gratitude journal; write thank-you letters; look for the seed of something positive in every situation.
- 2. Stop Complaining, Blaming, Gossiping**— Complaining is the common habit of dwelling on what is wrong or missing, and it has the effect of diminishing both complainers and hearers. Critical thoughts release a cascade of stress chemicals that increase anxiety and irritability. Practice observing your thoughts and choosing not to voice negative messages. We create the life we want when we express our desires in the positive, instead of dwelling on what is wrong.
- 3. Perform Acts of Kindness**—Kindness is a natural response to gratitude. Positive feelings increase for the one who performs the kindness and the recipient of the good deed, as well as for observing bystanders. Both financial and non-financial acts of kindness increase happiness.
- 4. Exercise Regularly**—Physical activity enhances our sense of accomplishment and well-being, raises our self-esteem, improves our thinking, and increases our health. Even a 30-minute brisk walk daily (or three 10-minute walks) can raise your level of happiness.
- 5. Get 8 Hours of Sleep Each Night**—Getting enough sleep is a key component of good health and well-being. Raise your energy level by going to bed earlier and taking guilt-free naps. Awaking well rested improves your morning mood and level of functioning. “Sleep knits up the raveled sleeve of care.” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*).
- 6. Experience Human Touch**— Human touch has a powerful effect on behavior and moods, reducing depression, anxiety, stress and physical pain. Touch reassures, relaxes, and comforts, in addition to improving the immune system and aiding in healing. Give at least two hugs daily; hold a baby; hug a child; hold hands; get a massage. If you can’t hug another person, hug yourself. Compliments are verbal hugs.
- 7. Smile More Often**— People smile when they are happier, and they feel happier when they smile. Your brain doesn’t know the difference between a spontaneous and a forced smile. When you smile, others smile back, making both of you happier.
- 8. Set and Reach Goals**—Goals raise our self-esteem and self-confidence, and keep us more engaged with life. Choose both long-term and short-term goals, pleasurable and meaningful goals, and goals involving growth, connection, and contribution.

9. Practice Your Spiritual or Religious Beliefs—Survey data show that religious people are moderately happier than nonreligious people. If spirituality is important to you, make time for daily prayer, devotions, or meditation; weekly worship, small group meetings/Bible studies; or enjoying spiritual music.

10. Nurture Your Relationships—These include your primary family relationships, as well as extended family, friends and colleagues, or even pet companions. The best relationships have a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. Being with others raises happiness, so make an effort to get out and socialize. If feasible, get a pet companion...or at least nurture a plant.

11. Experience Moments of Flow—Regularly engage in those special activities that provide both peak experiences and performance. We experience flow when we perform at our best and enjoy what we are doing. Activities that may create experiences of flow can range from engaging in an athletic endeavor, reading a good book, playing bridge, meditating, painting, writing, or studying a topic about which you are passionate.

12. Schedule Some Simple Pleasures Each Day—Define the small things that give you pleasure—enjoying a fresh brewed cup of coffee or tea; reading the paper or a good book; preparing a healthy meal; taking a leisurely bath; savoring a piece of chocolate. Focus on the warmth of the sun, the majesty of the mountains, or the sweetness of an orange.

13. Prime Your Environment—Our environment influences how we feel, think, act, and perform. Prime your environment with pictures of those you love, art that feeds your spirit, household plants, reminders of your goals, inspirational quotes and affirmations. Reduce clutter and chaos in your environment.

14. Donate and Volunteer on Behalf of a Meaningful Cause. Just as when we perform acts of kindness, whenever we focus on the needs of others, we reap benefits ourselves. Self-absorption contributes to depression. Volunteering on behalf of others is associated with better health and greater life satisfaction. Get involved with a cause that is meaningful to you, and use your signature strengths to make a positive difference.

15. Adopt a Humor Perspective—Laughter diffuses tension, relaxes your muscles, shrinks your problems, buoys your spirits, aids in healing and helps the immune system. Laugh at your own foibles, watch comedies, read the comics, and lighten up.

16. Use Retail Therapy Wisely—Invest in enjoyable experiences over acquiring more material possessions. Happy experiences tend to be remembered even more positively over time, while the momentary joy associated with a new purchase quickly fades.

17. Focus on What You Want in Life, Not on What You Don't Want—Remember that your thoughts trigger your feelings. Positive thoughts are stronger than negative notions. State your desires in the positive, since positive feelings make it more likely that you will draw into your life what you want.

18. Live in the Present Moment—Most of the stress we experience is based on something we interpret as bad that has already happened, or some disaster we anticipate in the future. Yet, the past is gone, and the future calamities we dread may never materialize. Life comes to us one present moment at a time, and happiness is found in savoring the *now*.

19. Practice Mindfulness Meditation—Mindfulness is the practice of shifting your thoughts away from your usual preoccupations and focusing on the present moment. Research suggests that mindfulness meditation may improve mood, decrease stress, boost immune function and promote health. Calm your mind for about 10 minutes twice a day by focusing on your breathing, while observing intruding feelings and thoughts without judging them. You also can practice informal mindfulness in your daily life by performing an ordinary task, such as walking or eating, more slowly and deliberately, with increased awareness of the sensations of the moment.

20. Simplify and De-Clutter Your Life—Too many possessions and commitments can create disharmony in our lives and increase our stress level. Taking things out of our life can bring us more happiness. Begin with small steps to downscale, slow your pace, and simplify your life.

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