

Martin Seligman & Positive Psychology

THE SCIENCE OF FLOURISHING, NOT JUST SURVIVING

Martin E. P. Seligman · University of Pennsylvania · President of the American Psychological Association, 1998

As APA president in 1998, Martin Seligman urged psychology to study not only what goes wrong, but also **what makes life worth living**. Positive psychology doesn't replace clinical work on distress — it complements it, adding the scientific study of wellbeing, strengths and resilience.

A Career in Eight Moments

From helplessness to flourishing



The PERMA Model

Five building blocks of wellbeing, from *Flourish* (2011)



WELLBEING IS MORE THAN HAPPINESS

Five Elements of a Flourishing Life

Seligman proposed that wellbeing has several measurable parts, each valued for its own sake. A good life doesn't need all five equally — and you can feel low on a given day while still living a life rich in meaning and connection.

- P** **Positive emotion** — joy, gratitude, hope, contentment and calm.
- E** **Engagement** — absorption in activities, sometimes called "flow".
- R** **Relationships** — feeling connected, valued and supported.
- M** **Meaning** — belonging to and serving something larger than yourself.
- A** **Accomplishment** — pursuing mastery and achievement for its own sake.

From Helplessness to Optimism

The research that started it all

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

When Effort Seems Not to Matter

Early experiments suggested that repeated exposure to uncontrollable events could lead to giving up, even when change later became possible — a model later linked with depression.

Updated in 2016: Maier and Seligman concluded that passivity is the brain's default response to prolonged stress. What we learn is that we have control — which is what protects us.

	PESSIMISTIC STYLE	OPTIMISTIC STYLE
Permanence TIME	"It will always be like this."	"This is temporary."
Pervasiveness SCOPE	"This ruins everything."	"This affects one area of my life."
Personalisation CAUSE	"It's all my fault."	"Several things contributed."
Explanatory style — how we explain setbacks to ourselves. Realistic, flexible optimism is the aim, not denial.		

The ABCDE Model

Disputing pessimistic thoughts — building on Albert Ellis's ABC model

A

ADVERSITY

What happened.
A friend cancels plans.

B

BELIEF

How you explain it.
"No one wants to see me."

C

CONSEQUENCE

What you feel and do.
Sadness; withdrawing.

D

DISPUTATION

Question the belief.
"They were unwell — we'll rearrange."

E

ENERGISATION

The lift that follows.
Relief; reaching out again.

Three Routes to Happiness

From *Authentic Happiness* (2002) — a forerunner of PERMA

01

The pleasant life

Savouring positive emotions about the past, present and future.

02

The engaged life

Using your strengths in absorbing activities, work and relationships.

03

The meaningful life

Using your strengths in service of something larger than yourself.

Character Strengths & Virtues

Peterson & Seligman (2004) · six virtues, 24 strengths

Drawing on philosophical and religious traditions across cultures, Christopher Peterson and Seligman identified six broadly valued virtues, each expressed through specific strengths. The free VIA Survey helps people discover their "signature strengths".

Wisdom & Knowledge

Acquiring and using knowledge

Creativity Curiosity Judgment
Love of learning Perspective

Courage

Pursuing goals despite difficulty

Bravery Perseverance Honesty
Zest

Humanity

Caring for and befriending others

Love Kindness Social intelligence

Justice

Building healthy community life

Teamwork Fairness Leadership

Temperance

Protecting against excess

Forgiveness Humility Prudence
Self-regulation

Transcendence

Connecting to something larger

Appreciation of beauty Gratitude Hope
Humour Spirituality

Well-Known Exercises

Tested in a randomised online study (Seligman et al., 2005)



Three good things

Each night, write down three things that went well and why.

Happiness up, depressive symptoms down, for 6 months



Signature strengths, new ways

Use one of your top strengths in a new way each day for a week.

Similar lasting benefits over 6 months



Gratitude visit

Write and deliver a letter of thanks to someone who helped you.

Large boost – fading after about a month



You at your best

Write about a time you were at your best and the strengths you showed.

Short-term lift only – similar to the control exercise

The Evidence & a Balanced View

What research supports – and where debate remains

WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS

A Rigorous, Empirical Field

- **Measurable benefits:** meta-analyses find positive psychology interventions can modestly increase wellbeing and reduce depressive symptoms
- **A complement:** strengths-based work sits alongside, not instead of, treatment for distress
- **Resilience:** school programmes such as the Penn Resiliency Program teach optimism skills

HOLDING IT CRITICALLY

Limits and Debates

- Effects are often small, and smaller in higher-quality studies
- Much research comes from Western settings – cultural fit matters
- It is not "just think positive" – difficult emotions have value too

Positive Psychology in Practice

Where these ideas are applied today

In therapy

Strengths alongside symptoms

Clinicians may explore strengths and PERMA elements as well as difficulties, to support recovery and wellbeing.

In education

Positive education

Schools teach skills such as optimism, gratitude and resilience alongside academic learning.

At work

Wellbeing in organisations

Workplaces use strengths and engagement to support staff wellbeing and meaningful work.

A Personal PERMA Check-In

Rate each element for your life right now (0–10)

Positive emotion

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Engagement

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Relationships

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Meaning

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Accomplishment

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

REFLECT

Nourishing Your Wellbeing

Which element feels most present in my life?

Which feels thinnest – and one small way to nourish it?

Which strength could I use more this week?

"Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living."

CHRISTOPHER PETERSON, SELIGMAN'S LONGTIME COLLABORATOR

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