

This an excerpt from Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being

The Original Theory: Authentic Happiness

by Martin Seligman Ph.D., April 2011

Positive psychology, as I intend it, is about what we choose for its own sake. I chose to have a back rub in the Minneapolis airport recently because it made me feel good. I chose the back rub for its own sake, not because it gave my life more meaning or for any other reason. We often choose what makes us feel good, but it is very important to realize that often our choices are not made for the sake of how we will feel. I chose to listen to my six-year-old's excruciating piano recital last night, not because it made me feel good but because it is my parental duty and part of what gives my life meaning.

The theory in Authentic Happiness is that happiness could be analyzed into three different elements that we choose for their own sakes: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. **And each of these elements is better defined and more measurable than happiness.** The first is positive emotion; what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like. An entire life led successfully around this element, I call the "pleasant life."

The second element, engagement, is about **flow: being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity.** I refer to a life lived with these aims as the "engaged life." **Engagement is different, even opposite, from positive emotion; for if you ask people who are in flow what they are thinking and feeling, they usually say, "nothing."** In flow we merge with the object. I believe that the concentrated attention that flow requires uses up all the cognitive and emotional resources that make up thought and feeling.

There are no shortcuts to flow. On the contrary, you need to deploy your highest strengths and talents to meet the world in flow. There are effortless shortcuts to feeling positive emotion, which is another difference between engagement and positive emotion. You can masturbate, go shopping, take drugs, or watch television. Hence, the importance of identifying your highest strengths and learning to use them more often in order to go into flow.

There is yet a third element of happiness, which is meaning. I go into flow playing bridge, but after a long tournament, when I look in the mirror, I worry that I am fidgeting until I die. The pursuit of engagement and the pursuit of pleasure are often solitary, solipsistic endeavors. Human beings, ineluctably, want meaning and purpose in life. **The Meaningful Life consists in belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self,** and humanity creates all the positive institutions to allow this: religion, political party, being Green, the Boy Scouts, or the family.

"Your 2002 theory can't be right, Marty," said Senia Maymin when we were discussing my previous theory in my Introduction to Positive Psychology for the inaugural class of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology in 2005. A thirty-two-year-old Harvard University summa in mathematics who is fluent in Russian and Japanese and runs her own hedge fund, Senia is a poster child for positive psychology. Her smile warms even cavernous classrooms like those in Huntsman Hall, nicknamed the "Death Star" by the Wharton School business students of the University of Pennsylvania who call it their home base. The students in this Masters program are really special: thirty-five successful

adults from all over the world who fly into Philadelphia once a month for a three-day feast of what's at the cutting edge in positive psychology and how they can apply it to their professions.

"The 2002 theory in the book *Authentic Happiness*, is supposed to be a theory of what humans choose, but it has a huge hole in it: it omits success and mastery. People try to achieve just for winning's own sake," Senia continued.

This was the moment I began to rethink happiness. Senia's challenge crystallized ten years of teaching, thinking about, and testing this theory and pushed me to develop it further. Beginning in that October class in Huntsman Hall, I changed my mind about what positive psychology is. I also changed my mind about what the elements of positive psychology are and what the goal of positive psychology should be.

Summary of Well-Being Theory

Here then is well-being theory: **well-being is a construct**; and well-being, not happiness, is the topic of positive psychology. **Well-being has five measurable elements (PERMA) that count toward it:**

- Positive emotion (Of which happiness and life satisfaction are all aspects)
- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning and purpose
- Accomplishment

No one element defines well-being, but each contributes to it. Some aspects of these five elements are measured subjectively by self-report, but other aspects are measured objectively.

In authentic happiness theory, by contrast, happiness is the centerpiece of positive psychology. It is a real thing that is defined by the measurement of life satisfaction. Happiness has three aspects: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning, each of which feeds into life satisfaction and is measured entirely by subjective report.

There is one loose end to clarify: in authentic happiness theory, the strengths and virtues—kindness, social intelligence, humor, courage, integrity, and the like (there are twenty-four of them)—are the supports for engagement. **You go into flow when your highest strengths are deployed to meet the highest challenges that come your way.** In well-being theory, these twenty-four strengths underpin all five elements, not just engagement: deploying your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships.

	Authentic Happiness Theory	Well-Being Theory
Topic	Happiness	Well-Being
Measure	Life satisfaction	Positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment

Goal	Increase life satisfaction	Increase flourishing by increasing positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment
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Authentic happiness theory is one-dimensional: it is about feeling good and it claims that the way we choose our life course is to try to maximize how we feel. Well-being theory is about all five pillars, the underpinnings of the five elements is the strengths. Well-being theory is plural in method as well as substance: positive emotion is a subjective variable, defined by what you think and feel. **Meaning, relationships, and accomplishment have both subjective and objective components, since you can believe you have meaning, good relations, and high accomplishment and be wrong, even deluded.** The upshot of this is that well-being cannot exist just in your own head: well-being is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships, and accomplishment. The way we choose our course in life is to maximize all five of these elements.

This difference between happiness theory and well-being theory is of real moment. Happiness theory claims that the way we make choices is to estimate how much happiness (life satisfaction) will ensue and then we take the course that maximizes future happiness: Maximizing happiness is the final common path of individual choice.

For now I want to give just one example of why happiness theory fails abysmally as the sole explanation of how we choose. **It is well established that couples with children have on average lower happiness and life satisfaction than childless couples.** If evolution had to rely on maximizing happiness, the human race would have died out long ago. So clearly humans are either massively deluded about how much life satisfaction children will bring, or else we use some additional metric for choosing to reproduce. Similarly, if personal future happiness were our sole aim, we would leave our aging parents out on ice floes to die. So the happiness monism not only conflicts with the facts, but it is a poor moral guide as well: from happiness theory as a guide to life choice, some couples might choose to remain childless. When we broaden our view of well-being to include meaning and relationships, it becomes obvious why we choose to have children and why we choose to care for our aging parents.

The goal of positive psychology in authentic happiness theory is, like Richard Layard's goal, to increase the amount of happiness in your own life and on the planet. **The goal of positive psychology in well-being theory, in contrast, is plural and importantly different: it is to increase the amount of flourishing in your own life and on the planet.**

Learn More About Well-Being

Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being: Read chapter 1 ("What Is Well-Being?")

Dr. Seligman at Google Zeitgeist

Seligman at TED

<https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/learn/wellbeing>