Positive Psychology
By Martin Seligman

Entering a new millennium, we face a historical choice. Left alone on the pinnacle of economic and political leadership, the United States can continue to increase its material wealth while ignoring the human needs of its people and that of the rest of the planet. Such a course is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair.

At this juncture the social and behavioral sciences can play an enormously important role. They can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well being, to positive individuals, and to flourishing communities. Psychology should be able to help document what kind of families result in the healthiest children, what work environments support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic commitment.

Yet we have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living. Psychology has come to understand quite a bit about how people survive and endure under conditions of adversity (For recent surveys of the history of psychology see, e.g. Koch & Leary, 1985; Benjamin, 1985; and Smith, 1997). But we know very little about how normal people flourish under more benign conditions. Psychology has, since World War 2, become a science largely about healing. It concentrates on repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning. This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community. The aim of Positive Psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities.

The field of Positive Psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experience: well being and satisfaction (past), hope and optimism (future), and flow and happiness (present). At the individual level it is about positive individual traits -- the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.

The notion of a Positive Psychology movement began at a moment in time a few months after I had been elected President of the American Psychological Association.

It took place in my garden while I was weeding with my five-year old daughter, Nikki. I have to confess that even though I write books about children, I'm really not all that good with children. I am goal-
oriented and time-urgent and when I'm weeding in the garden, I'm actually trying to get the weeding done. Nikki, however, was throwing weeds into the air and dancing around. I yelled at her. She walked away, came back, and said, "Daddy, I want to talk to you." "Yes, Nikki?" "Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five, I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I've ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch."

This was for me an epiphany, nothing less. I learned something about Nikki, about raising kids, about myself, and a great deal about my profession. First, I realized that raising Nikki was not about correcting whining. Nikki did that herself. Rather, I realized that raising Nikki is about taking this marvelous skill -- I call it "seeing into the soul," -- amplifying it, nurturing it, helping her to lead her life around it to buffer against her weaknesses and the storms of life. Raising children, I realized, is more than fixing what is wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these positive qualities.

As for my own life, Nikki hit the nail right on the head. I was a grouch. I had spent fifty years mostly enduring wet weather in my soul, and the last ten years being a nimbus cloud in a household of sunshine. Any good fortune I had was probably not due to my grouchiness, but in spite of it. In that moment, I resolved to change.

But the broadest implication of Nikki's lesson was about the science and profession of psychology. Before World War 2, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent. The early focus on positive psychology is exemplified by such work as Terman's studies of giftedness (Terman, 1922, 1939) and marital happiness (Terman, Buttenwieser, Ferguson, Johnson & Wilson, 1938), Watson's writings on effective parenting (Watson, 1928), and Jung's work concerning the search and discovery of meaning in life (Jung, 1933). Right after the war, two events -- both economic -- changed the face of psychology: in 1946 the Veteran's Administration was founded, and thousands of psychologists found out that they could make a living treating mental illness. In 1947, the National Institute of Mental Health (which has always been at its core based on the disease model, and should more appropriately be named the National Institute of Mental Illness) was founded, and academics found out that they could get grants if their research was described as being about pathology.

This arrangement brought many benefits. There have been huge strides in the understanding and therapy for mental illness: at least fourteen disorders, previously intractable, have yielded their secrets to science and can now be either cured or considerably relieved (Seligman, 1994). But the downside was that the other two fundamental missions of psychology -- making the lives of all people better and
nurturing genius -- were all but forgotten. It wasn't only the subject matter that was altered by funding, but the currency of the theories underpinning how we viewed ourselves. We came to see ourselves as a mere sub-field of the health professions, and we became a victimology. We saw human beings as passive foci: stimuli came on and elicited responses (what an extraordinarily passive word). External reinforcements weakened or strengthened responses, or drives, tissue needs, or instincts. Conflicts from childhood pushed each of us around.

Psychology’s empirical focus shifted to assessing and curing individual suffering. There has been an explosion in research on psychological disorders and the negative effects of environmental stressors such as parental divorce, death, and physical and sexual abuse. Practitioners went about treating mental illness within a disease-patient framework of repairing damage: damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhood, and damaged brains.

The message of the Positive Psychology movement is to remind our field that it has been deformed. Psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just about illness or health; it is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And in this quest for what is best, Positive Psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, faith, self-deception or hand-waving; it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity.

What foregrounds this approach is the issue of prevention. In the last decade psychologists have become concerned with prevention, and this was the theme of the 1998 American Psychological Association meeting in San Francisco. How can we prevent problems like depression or substance abuse or schizophrenia in young people who are genetically vulnerable or who live in worlds which nurture these problems? How can we prevent murderous schoolyard violence in children who have access to weapons, poor parental supervision, and a mean streak? What we have learned over fifty years is that the disease model does not move us closer to the prevention of these serious problems. Indeed the major strides in prevention have largely come from a perspective focused on systematically building competency, not correcting weakness.

We have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, the capacity for flow and insight, to name several. Much of the task of prevention in this new century will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to understand and learn how to foster these virtues in young people.
Working exclusively on personal weakness and on the damaged brains, however, has rendered science poorly equipped to do effective prevention. We need now to call for massive research on human strength and virtue. We need to ask practitioners to recognize that much of the best work they already do in the consulting room is to amplify strengths rather than repair the weaknesses of their clients. We need to emphasize that psychologists working with families, schools, religious communities, and corporations, develop climates that foster these strengths. The major psychological theories have changed to undergird a new science of strength and resilience. No longer do the dominant theories view the individual as a passive vessel "responding" to "stimuli."; rather individuals are now seen as decision makers, with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious, or, in malignant circumstances, helpless and hopeless. Science and practice that relies on this world view may have the direct effect of preventing much of the major emotional disorders. It may also have two side effects: making the lives of our clients physically healthier, given all we are learning about the effects of mental well-being on the body. It will also re-orient psychology back to its two neglected missions, making normal people stronger and more productive as well as making high human potential actual.

Let me hazard a prediction about psychology in the new century. We believe that a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families, and communities.

You may think that this is pure fantasy, that psychology will never look beyond the victim, the underdog, and the remedial. But we want to suggest that the time is finally right. We well recognize that Positive Psychology is not a new idea. It has many distinguished ancestors. But they somehow failed to attract an empirical body of research to ground their ideas.

Why did they not? And why has psychology been so focused on the negative? Why has it adopted the premise -- without a shred of evidence -- that negative motivations are authentic and positive emotions are derivative? There are several possible explanations. Negative emotions and experiences may be more urgent and therefore override positive ones. This would make evolutionary sense. Since negative emotions often reflect immediate problems or objective dangers, they should be powerful enough to force us to stop, increase vigilance, reflect on our behavior, and change our actions if necessary. (Of course, in some dangerous situations, it will be most adaptive to respond without taking a great deal of time to reflect). In contrast, when we are adapting well to the world, no such alarm is needed. Experiences that promote happiness often seem to pass effortlessly. So, on one level psychology's focus on the negative may reflect differences in the survival value of negative versus positive emotions.

But perhaps we are blinded to the survival value of positive emotions precisely because they are so
important. Like the fish who is unaware of the water in which it swims, we take for granted a certain amount of hope, love, enjoyment, and trust because these are the very conditions that allow us to go on living. They are the fundamental conditions of existence, and if they are present, any amount of objective obstacles can be faced with equanimity, and even joy. Camus wrote that the foremost question of philosophy is why one should not commit suicide. One cannot answer that question just by curing depression; there must be positive reasons for living as well.

There are also historical reasons for psychology's negative focus. When cultures face military threat, shortages of goods, poverty, or instability, they may most naturally be concerned with defense and damage-control. Cultures may turn their attention to creativity, virtue, and the highest qualities in life only when they are stable, prosperous and at peace. Athens during the 5th century B.C., Florence of the 15th century, and Victorian England are examples of cultures that focused on positive qualities. Athenian philosophy focused the human virtues: What is good action and good character? What makes life most worthwhile? Democracy was born during this era. Victorian England affirmed honor, discipline, and duty as important human virtues. Florence chose not to become the most important military power in Europe, but to invest its surplus in beauty.

We are not suggesting that our culture should now erect an aesthetic monument. But rather we believe that the nation -- wealthy, at peace, and stable -- provides a similar world historical opportunity. We can choose to create a scientific monument -- a science that takes as its primary task the understanding of what makes life worth living. Such an endeavor will move the whole of the social science away from its negative bias. The prevailing social sciences tend to view the authentic forces governing human behavior to be self-interest, aggressiveness, territoriality, class conflict and the like. Such a science, even at its best, is by necessity incomplete. Even if utopianly successful, it would then have to proceed to ask how humanity can achieve what is best in life.

We predict that Positive Psychology in this new century will come to understand and build those factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish. Such a science will not need to start afresh. It requires for the most part just a refocusing of scientific energy. In the fifty years since psychology and psychiatry became healing disciplines, they developed a highly useful and transferable science of mental illness. They developed a taxonomy as well as reliable and valid ways of measuring such fuzzy concepts as schizophrenia, anger, and depression. They developed sophisticated methods --- both experimental and longitudinal -- for understanding the causal pathways that lead to such undesirable outcomes. And most importantly they developed pharmacological and psychological interventions which have moved many of the mental disorders from "untreatable" to "highly treatable" and in a couple of cases, "curable." These same methods, and in many cases the same laboratories and the next two generations of scientists, with a slight shift of emphasis and funding, will be used to measure, understand,
and build those characteristics that make life most worth living. As a side effect of studying positive human traits, science will learn how to buffer against and better prevent mental, as well as some physical, illnesses. As a main effect, we will learn how to build the qualities that help individuals and communities not just endure and survive, but also flourish.

References


Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D. is currently Robert A. Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Former President of the American Psychological Association, his work focuses on positive psychology, learned helplessness, depression, and on optimism and pessimism. Well-known in academic and clinical circles, his bibliography includes fifteen books and 150 articles on motivation and personality, including Learned Optimism (Knopf, 1991), What You Can Change & What You Can't (Knopf, 1993), and The Optimistic Child (Houghton Mifflin, 1995). He is recipient of two Distinguished Scientific Contribution awards from the American Psychological Association, the Laurel Award of the American Association for Applied Psychology and Prevention and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Society for Research in Psychopathology. He received both the American Psychological Society's William James Fellow Award (for contribution to basic science) and the James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award (for the application of psychological knowledge). Dr. Seligman's research on preventing depression received the coveted MERIT Award of the National Institute of Mental Health in 1991. He is the founder and Editor-in-chief of Prevention and Treatment, the electronic journal of the American Psychological Association. He is Treasurer of the Council of Scientific.
Society Presidents, director of the Positive Psychology Network, Scientific Director of the Telos Taxonomy Project of the Mayerson Foundation, and chairman of the Board of Advisors of the Solomon Asch Center for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict. Dr. Seligman was named "Distinguished Practitioner" by the National Academies of Practice and served as the leading consultant to Consumer Reports for their pioneering article that documented the effectiveness of long-term psychotherapy. He is scientific director of Foresight, Inc, a testing company which predicts success in various walks of life. He has appeared on television and radio and has lectured around the world.