

Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment

Martin E. P. Seligman. New York: Free Press (www.simonsays.com). 2002, 336 pp., \$26.00 (hardcover).

Marty Seligman is familiar to cognitive therapists for his groundbreaking work on learned helplessness, attribution styles underlying depression, and his popularization of learned optimism. *Authentic Happiness* attempts to bring to the general public the integrated findings and vision of a field now called “Positive Psychology”. This book is an excellent introduction for the general reader—and the professional—to a field that has great promise for making life better.

Much of clinical psychology—and experimental psychopathology—has been focused on overcoming deficits. This deficit-correcting approach focuses on skill-deficits, information processing errors, failures in emotional regulation, and communication failure. The strategy of contemporary clinical models is to correct these deficits, help heal the wounds, and reduce the anxiety and depression. But little is said about making life happier and more meaningful. Positive psychology attempts to do this.

As Seligman points out, positive psychology incorporates work across a number of fields. In reading this book, I was struck at how one can broaden a positive outlook by drawing on research in social psychology, relationship theory, sociology, religion, and evolutionary theory. Indeed, many of the eternal “truths” of various religious orientations---when positively viewed---are reflected in the “wisdom” of positive psychology.

For example, rather than rely on moralistic exhortations, Seligman carefully reviews the important research on gratitude and forgiveness that demonstrates that these “virtues” are, indeed, keys to mental health and personal happiness. *Authentic Happiness* is replete with questionnaires that help readers identify their character virtues, relationship issues, and optimistic or pessimistic style. Seligman takes the hopeful message of Positive Psychology and shows how empirical research supports it and illustrates how the reader can use simple and life-enhancing self-help techniques to gain more real happiness in life.

I recall recently describing some of the tenets of positive psychology to a college classmate of mine. I indicated that there is now good empirical evidence that appreciation, non-materialistic values, tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness and gratitude are keys to a better life. I was proud to tell my college friend that psychologists were finding important ways of making things better. My friend commented, “I think *other* people have been saying this for a few thousand years!”

Perhaps so. But the value of the new movement in psychology toward this endeavor allows us to test these things out and find out if they really are true. And they are. For example, take the issue of “virtue” or “character”---- ideas that go back to Aristotle. Seligman indicates that these concepts are often ridiculed by those who view such thinking as overly-moralistic and as simple-minded. Yet personality (which used to be called “character”) is predictive. Seligman provides the reader with a list (and simple test) of twenty-four “strengths”---- which reflect wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity/love, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These are qualities to aim for that will make your life a more meaningful, more enjoyable and more humane life. And these are the qualities that can enhance your relationships. Indeed, *virtue is practical*.

Seligman draws on the important work by Michael Csikszentmihalyi on “flow”--- the sense that one is immersed happily and meaningfully in the moment and the activity. Flow is

something that characterizes the experiences of fulfilled individuals—where they are less concerned with prestige, payoffs, compliance, and external control. They flow in and with what they do. One goal, then, is to increase flow in your daily work and activity.

Meaning and satisfaction in life, as Seligman documents, are not derived from income and professional prestige. And lawyers are the key example of this—as Seligman shows. They earn more than other groups—and they are more miserable. Why? Perhaps it is because the meaning of what many of them do is in conflict with the “ubiquitous” values that underlie human happiness. The legal profession is a zero-sum game, filled with pessimistic focus on how things can go wrong and how one can take advantage of someone else who makes a mistake. Although Seligman offers some hopeful guidelines for lawyers, we will have to see if this optimistic view can be effective.

Leaving lawyers aside, however, the reader will find very helpful and insightful ideas about developing a happier intimate relationship and raising children who have a greater capacity for happiness. One can see the counter-point to these virtues in our contemporary consumer culture with images of materialism, dissatisfaction, perfectionism and cynicism--- the *counter-happiness message*. Indeed, parents will find that they will need to communicate values and virtues that may conflict with the more cynical and individualistic qualities of the peer group and the media. The struggle continues, I suspect.

Authentic Happiness will be a valuable book for consumers and professionals. It is highly readable, interactive (with lots of questionnaires), practical, and filled with the insights that can help change the lives of people who dare to use these ideas. It is Seligman’s hallmark virtue, I believe, to bring to the general public the knowledge and wisdom of the many researchers and creative thinkers who are forging new territory in an area that we need to explore more fully. The field of Positive Psychology will be one that therapists will find they turn to when they have completed the work of overcoming someone’s misery and they now want to help build a life that has meaning and fulfillment.

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