Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, personal strength, and mindfulness

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Tough economic times are the perfect setting to begin using positive psychology to your advantage, says a new report from Harvard Medical School. *Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, personal strength, and mindfulness* is a guide to the concepts that have made "Positive Psychology" the most popular course at Harvard University, and teaches how to put positive emotion to work in your life.

Positive emotions have been linked with better health, longer life, and greater well being in numerous scientific studies. On the other hand, chronic anger, worry, and hostility increase the risk of developing heart disease, as people react to these feelings with raised blood pressure and stiffening blood vessels. A Harvard School of Public Health study found that people who are generally hopeful were less likely to develop hypertension, diabetes, or respiratory tract infection than those who were less hopeful.

In this video interview, Ronald Siegel, Psy.D., offers a preview of *Positive Psychology* and discusses what it takes to be happy.

Watch the interview...

From this report you'll learn the following:

- Using the positive in your life
- Finding and using your inner character strengths
- Achieving the “flow” experience
- Putting mindfulness to use toward well being
Developing gratitude
Savoring pleasure
Finding the meaningful life

This report was prepared by the editors of Harvard Health Publications in consultation with Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School, and Steven M. Allison, Psy.D. 37 pages. (2009)

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Positive emotions and the brain

Is there a biological dimension to happiness? Why does your heart seem to “jump for joy” or your eyes “light up” when you feel happy? Researchers now agree that there is a biomolecular aspect to happiness and that the brain is command central for the chemical and physiological changes that occur in the body with positive emotions. While many researchers have studied positive emotions by observing human and animal behavior, others are trying to discover what is happening inside the brain at the structural and molecular levels.

Since the middle of the 20th century, neuroscientists have investigated the mechanisms of positive emotion in the brain and body. Before that time, positive emotions were regarded as too subjective for rigorous scientific study. But a better understanding of the brain chemicals known as neurotransmitters and increased ability to use technology to create images of the living brain opened new opportunities for study.

In the 1950s, psychologists identified a “pleasure center” in an area of the brain known as the nucleus accumbens. They found that laboratory animals would press a lever to deliver an electrical stimulus to their own brain’s “pleasure center” repeatedly until they were exhausted—undeterred by hunger, thirst, or pain. When researchers stimulate the nucleus accumbens of people, they smile, laugh, and report feeling pleasure, happiness, or euphoria. Later, by mapping connected areas, the researchers identified a reward circuit in the brain that involves the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of the brain) and several underlying areas, including the nucleus accumbens and the amygdala.

The chemical basis of these pleasurable sensations also came under investigation. While the interactions are extremely complex and variable, some patterns have been described. Researchers found that the neurotransmitter dopamine activates the reward system and is associated with positive emotions, exuberance, and desire. On the downside, the dopamine reward system may also be associated with addictions, in which people develop uncontrollable urges to repeatedly engage in pleasurable but harmful behaviors, ranging from taking drugs to gambling excessively.

Another group of chemicals, the internally produced opiate-like chemicals called endorphins, are also associated with pleasurable feelings, such as those created by eating chocolate or a runner’s high. Endorphins released in the brain also increase the release of dopamine.

When people feel happy, they often feel physical sensations—a rush of passion, a flutter of joy—that correspond to brain signals to nerves of the heart, circulatory system, skin, and muscles. These physical sensations are accompanied by chemical changes in the brain and are interpreted as pleasurable.

Scientists have used modern brain imaging methods to help determine exactly which areas of the brain correspond to sensations of pleasure. This approach has revealed distinct patterns in both the cortex and underlying structures when people feel negative and positive emotions. In the 1990s, researchers used positron emission tomography (PET) scans to produce three-dimensional images of people’s working brains. They observed that positive and negative emotions activated different parts of the brain, and that areas activated by happiness were deactivated by sadness and vice versa.

Another technique, electroencephalography, revealed striking, emotionally-based asymmetries in
the activity of the prefrontal cortex. In these studies, the brains of generally happy people showed greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex, and this area became more active when people were exposed to amusing video clips. The right side, on the other hand, became more active when people experienced negative emotions.

The development of a new brain imaging technology, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), spurred a large increase in the number of brain studies, contributing to some confusion about which areas of the brain were associated with happiness and sadness. Results of these many studies suggest that the brain may be even more complex than once imagined by earlier researchers. Nonetheless, many studies support the notion that the left side of the brain is generally associated with positive emotions and the right side with negative emotions. They have also identified the anterior cingulate cortex as active in emotional regulation, and that part of the brain is often called the “affective division” of the cingulate cortex.

Why do humans have these pleasure centers in the brain? Experts theorize that because human survival depends on achieving basic goals such as finding food and procreating, a rush of pleasurable sensations associated with eating or having sex would positively reinforce these behaviors, leading us to repeat them and hence increase the chances that we will survive and reproduce.

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