

Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being

Martin Seligman

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Reviewed by Leland Beaumont

In the eight years since publishing *Authentic Happiness*, Martin Seligman has continued to refine his understanding of positive psychology. “Being in a state of mental health is not merely being disorder free; rather it is the presence of flourishing” he tells us as he makes his case for flourishing as perhaps the wisest goal for humanity.

Flourishing—increasing our well-being—is characterized by these five elements:

1. Positive Emotions—The pleasant life, positive affect, feeling happy,
2. Engagement—Flow, getting lost in your work,
3. (Positive) Relationships—other people,
4. Meaning – Belonging to and serving something bigger than yourself, and
5. Accomplishment—completing tasks and projects.

These can be recalled using the mnemonic: PERMA. His previous *Authentic Happiness* theory includes only the first two of these.

Exercises described in the book that can increase well-being include:

1. **Gratitude Visit**—Recall someone who was kind to you but who you never properly thanked. Write out a one-page note thanking them in depth. Visit that person and read the entire note to them.
2. **Random acts of kindness**—Just do something unexpected and kind to others. He bought \$10 of penny stamps and handed them out to the people standing in a long line at the post office
3. **What Went Well (Three Blessings)**—Every night for the next week set aside ten minutes before going to sleep. Write down three things that went well today and why then went well.
4. **Apply your signature strengths**—Take the VIA Survey at the AuthenticHappiness.org website to identify your signature strengths. Then find a new way to apply and exercise those strengths.
5. **Respond Actively and Constructively** when hearing something good has happened to someone you care about.

This is not frivolous happy talk. Seligman is a careful and experienced researcher. The book describes and references rigorous studies that measure and demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches and methods. He is also candid and cautious in identifying preliminary results and areas where more research is needed. “There is no reason to believe that *faking* positive emotions

will work to improve health,” he admonishes. Flourishing is not a façade, it is a profound transformation.

Much of the book describes programs that are increasing flourishing of young people at the Penn Resiliency Program, the Strath Haven High School, and the remarkable Greelong Grammar School in Australia. Two chapters describe his work to increase resiliency of soldiers as part of the “Comprehensive Soldier Fitness” program now being deployed throughout the US Army. This includes training in “Post-Traumatic Growth”—gaining positive insights after experiencing a tragedy—which seeks to reduce the incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. These sometimes indulgent narratives provide a snapshot of his work in progress while they strengthen his key thesis that flourishing can be taught.

Encouraged by success in teaching people to flourish, he challenges us with a bold “moon shot” goal for positive psychology. “By the year 2051, 51 percent of the people of the world will be flourishing” he credibly predicts. It is only a matter of will, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment!

Read this book, practice the exercises, and become one of the 51 percent he calls PERMA 51.

In his latest book Martin Seligman updates us on the status of positive psychology with this guide to learning, teaching, and increasing our own well-being.