

# Positive Psychology

## Hope, Strength and Optimism

### Introduction by

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MARTIN SELIGMAN, Ph.D., is considered to be the father of positive psychology. In his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychology Association (APA), Dr. Seligman called upon professionals to build a field focusing on human potential, strengths and virtues. He defined positive psychology as the scientific pursuit of “optimal human functioning.”

Positive psychology focuses on hope, strength and resiliency. It is a science dedicated to investigating strength-based approaches to achieve optimal human functioning. Optimism is the cornerstone of positive psychology.

After years of research in psychology, Seligman began to question his understanding of human behavior while parenting his young daughter Nikki.

“Raising Nikki would be about taking the strength that she had just shown—I call it seeing into the soul—naming it, nurturing it, reinforcing it, helping her to lead her life around it and let it buffer against the weaknesses and the vicissitudes. The most important thing, the most general thing I learned, was that psychology was half-baked, literally half-baked. We had baked the part about mental illness; we had baked the part about repair of damage...The other side’s unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we’re good at...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.”

In other writings, Seligman explained:

“The field of positive psychology...is about...well-being, contentment and satis-

faction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the 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, spirituality, high talent and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic.”

Shane Lopez, Ph.D., reports that therapists and clients have embraced positive psychology and are empowered by the shift in emphasis. Lopez argues that by focusing on inner strengths and talents, positive psychology goes beyond seeking a cure to mental illness. Prevention and promotion of wellness in the end will help to unite science and practice in meaningful ways.

Dr. Seligman describes a number of virtues that promote optimism. These virtues include such things as wisdom, love of learning, open-mindedness, kindness and generosity, loving and allowing oneself to be loved, teamwork, self-control, gratitude, playfulness and humor.

Positive psychology reduces the tension between the science and treatment of mental health disorders. Encouraging optimism, interpersonal skills, prevention and



health promotion are keystones. Positive psychology may hold promise for understanding and treating attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD). Individuals with the disorder may be empowered by the messages of positive psychology—identify hidden talents and build on existing strengths. Robert Brooks, Ph.D., encourages us to find

and nurture “islands of competence.” Adults and teens with AD/HD are often discouraged by repeated failures, which may lead to depression. These feelings of hopelessness must be addressed in the therapy process. Adopting a positive mindset increases personal power and leads to feelings of optimism.

Positive psychology challenges our way of knowing and lets us open our minds to a new way of understanding and treating individuals with AD/HD. As parents and professionals, let us encourage, support a sense of optimism and enhance strengths. Along with treatments that reduce the core features of AD/HD, positive psychology may enhance overall well-being and quality of life and could be a useful addition to traditional multimodal treatment. ■

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