

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Can We Cultivate Our Own Happiness?

By ABC News  
2002

*Martin Seligman coined the term “positive psychology” to describe his exploration of how people can improve their own happiness. In this report from 2002, ABC News explains Seligman’s research and findings in the field of positive psychology. As you read, take notes on how Seligman defines happiness.*

- [1] If you want to be happy, forget about winning the lottery, getting a nose job, or securing a raise.

In his new book, *Authentic Happiness*, psychologist Martin Seligman argues that overall lifetime happiness is not the result of good genes, money, or even luck.

Instead, he says we can boost our own happiness by capitalizing<sup>1</sup> on the strengths and traits that we already have, including kindness, originality, humor, optimism, and generosity. He has christened<sup>2</sup> the discipline “Positive Psychology,” arguing that we would be better off building on our own strengths rather than bemoaning,<sup>3</sup> and, hence, trying to repair, our weaknesses.



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By frequently calling upon their strengths, people can build up natural buffers against misfortune and negative emotions, he said.

## **An Epidemic of Depression?**

- [5] Seligman is leading the charge in what might be called Happiness Revolution in psychology.

Since World War II, psychologists have focused on fixing what is broken — repairing psychosis,<sup>4</sup> and neurosis.<sup>5</sup> Research has piled up steadily when it comes to looking at patients who are neurotic or dysfunctional, while the happy or joyful people among us have received little scientific scrutiny.<sup>6</sup>

When Seligman did a search to find academic articles about such “positive psychology” he found only 800 out of 70,000.

1. to benefit by turning something to advantage
2. to give something a name
3. **Bemoan (verb):** to express distress or grief over something
4. a severe mental disorder characterized by loss of contact with reality
5. a mild mental illness involving symptoms of stress, but not a loss of contact with reality
6. **Scrutiny (noun):** critical observation or examination

“Psychologists tend to be concerned with taking a negative 8 person, and helping him get to negative 2,” said Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania psychology professor. “My aim is to take a plus 2 person and boost him to a plus 6.”

In the last 50 years, statistics have shown that we are less happy as a people.

- [10] “While our quality of life has increased dramatically over that time, and we’ve become richer, we’re in an epidemic of depression,” Seligman said. “Depression is 10 times more common now, and life satisfaction rates are down as well.”

Seligman argues that the new science he writes about is shifting psychology’s paradigm<sup>7</sup> away from its narrow-minded focus on pathology,<sup>8</sup> victimology,<sup>9</sup> and mental illness towards positive emotion, virtue and strength, and positive institutions that increase people’s happiness quotient.

## Three Roads to Happiness

Science has shown that there are three distinct roads to being a happy person — though happy might not mean what you think. Material goods — even simple ones like ice cream cones, and massages — are only stimuli,<sup>10</sup> things that fleetingly give people a boost.

Research found that lottery winners are no happier years after their windfall than they had been before, and that paraplegics<sup>11</sup> tended to be no less happy in the years after their misfortune than they were before.

“We used to think that a happy person was just someone who giggled a lot,” Seligman said. “But if you define it solely by how much you laugh, you confine yourself to one category.”

- [15] Here are the three happy people categories that Seligman has set forth in the book:

The Good Life: Some happy people are low on pleasure, but high on “absorption and immersion,” meaning they take great pleasure in the things that they do.

“Think of these people as hobbyists who become so immersed in their work that time ceases to exist,” Seligman said. “A person who enjoys gardening discovers that the day has gone by without notice, for example.”

The Pleasant Life: This is someone who laughs a lot, and thrives on pleasures, such as eating good food. These are people who seem surrounded with contentment, pleasure and hope.

The Meaningful Life: Those who apply their highest strengths and virtues for the greater good, as through charities and volunteer work, religion or politics.

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7. **Paradigm (noun):** a theory or group of ideas about how something should be done  
8. the science of the causes and effects of diseases  
9. the study of victims of crime and how their experience psychologically affects them  
10. **Stimuli (noun):** a thing or event that evokes activity or energy in someone  
11. a person affected by paralysis of the legs and lower body

[20] There are vast benefits to leading a happier life, Seligman said. A study of cloistered nuns<sup>12</sup> found that those scoring high on happiness tests at age 20 lived the longest. (Cloistered nuns make for good research subjects, since variables such as environment and financial status are the same for all.)

To cultivate happiness, you must first identify which of the aforementioned happiness categories you fall into, then ascertain<sup>13</sup> your individual strengths and virtues. Next, apply the qualities in such a way as to enhance your happiness-generating category.

For example a student of Seligman's who fell into the "good life" category was a grocery bagger and did not like it. Further testing identified that one of his key strengths was excelling in social interaction. So Seligman advised the student to try to make the check-out process the social highlight of each of his customers' day.

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12. a nun who doesn't leave her religious community or interact with the outside world  
13. **Ascertain** (*verb*): to find something out for certain

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best summarizes Seligman's ideas about happiness? [RI.2]
  - A. It's easier to achieve happiness by breaking down what keeps you from being happy, such as stress or mental illness.
  - B. Seligman's research has found that an increased quality of life has negatively impacted people's level of happiness.
  - C. Happiness can be achieved if you focus on and develop the characteristics that you value about yourself.
  - D. People who are able to appreciate the small joys of life tend to be happier overall.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
  - A. "By frequently calling upon their strengths, people can build up natural buffers against misfortune and negative emotions" (Paragraph 4)
  - B. "Psychologists tend to be concerned with taking a negative 8 person, and helping him get to negative 2" (Paragraph 8)
  - C. "While our quality of life has increased dramatically over that time, and we've become richer, we're in an epidemic of depression" (Paragraph 10)
  - D. "Think of these people as hobbyists who become so immersed in their work that time ceases to exist" (Paragraph 17)
  
3. Which quote from the text is the least relevant piece of evidence used to support Seligman's ideas about how people become happy? [RI.8]
  - A. "Instead, he says we can boost our own happiness by capitalizing on the strengths and traits that we already have, including kindness, originality, humor, optimism, and generosity." (Paragraph 3)
  - B. "Material goods — even simple ones like ice cream cones, and massages — are only stimuli, things that fleetingly give people a boost." (Paragraph 12)
  - C. "A study of cloistered nuns found that those scoring high on happiness tests at age 20 lived the longest." (Paragraph 20)
  - D. "To cultivate happiness, you must first identify which of the aforementioned happiness categories you fall into, then ascertain your individual strengths and virtues." (Paragraph 21)
  
4. How does the text describe most previous scientific research in the field of psychology? [RI.3]
  - A. It prioritized determining why happy people are happy.
  - B. It focused on improving the lives of very depressed people.
  - C. It neglected to study the happiness of people with neurosis.
  - D. It was centered on improving the moods of already happy people.

5. How do paragraphs 16-19 contribute to the main idea of the text? [RI.5]

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## Discussion Questions

*Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What category of happiness do you most identify with? Why?
2. In the context of the text, how does Seligman suggest people improve their happiness? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the text, does money buy happiness? How has money impacted people's happiness over the years? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.