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The art of gratitude

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Finding meaning

The brain on positive emotions

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Mindfulness:
A path to well-being

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SPECIAL HEALTH REPORT

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Dear Reader,

In the summer of 2015, the surgeon general of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy, appeared on National Public Radio's show *Wait Wait … Don't Tell Me!* and shared some thoughts about how to improve Americans' health and well-being. Most people think that you need to be healthy in order to be happy, said Dr. Murthy, a cardiologist at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital. "But I actually think a lot of times it's the other way around," he said. He went on to describe some of the things people can do to improve their happiness, like spending time with friends, boosting social connections, and exercising.

These strategies are among those described in this report, which focuses on the field of mental health research and treatment known as positive psychology. Positive psychology seeks to help people capitalize on their strengths, to heighten their awareness of pleasure and well-being, and to develop the wisdom needed to live a more fulfilling life.

Early on, much of the focus in this nascent field was on the pursuit of happiness, which was understood as having pleasant feelings more of the time. But in recent years, positive psychology has evolved to emphasize cultivation of long-term satisfaction, contentment, and well-being, as opposed to often-fleeting pleasurable experiences. In fact, studies show that people who experience a wide range of emotions—including negative ones—tend to report greater satisfaction with their lives than those with a more limited range of feelings. Contrary to what you might expect, trying to resist painful emotions creates a certain degree of psychological suffering. By opening to pain, people suffer less.

Some of the tenets of positive psychology echo advice heard from wise elders and religious teachers across cultures and centuries. For example, the practice of mindfulness—paying attention to your thoughts, emotions, and other experiences on a moment-to-moment basis, without judgment—has roots in Buddhism and other wisdom traditions. Mindfulness, which has enjoyed a surge of popularity in recent years, is perhaps the best-known practice for enhancing well-being. But there are many others, including gratitude, self-compassion, and cultivation of your personal virtues and strengths. You can explore all of these in the following pages.

Sincerely,

Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D.
Medical Editor

Studying satisfaction

Positive psychology is an umbrella term that encompasses the study of positive emotions, full engagement in activities, virtuous personal characteristics, and paths to fulfillment and meaning in life. It also investigates how people and institutions can support the quest for increased satisfaction and meaning.

The study of mental health used to focus primarily on treating mental illness and paid scant attention to the development of meaning, fulfillment, positive emotion, and connection—all of which are crucial to the quality of daily life. Positive psychology doesn't consider the traditional approach of treating mental illness to be misguided. Rather, it supplements the study of mental disorders and their treatment, placing attention on strengths as well as weaknesses, and taking what has been learned about psychological science and applying it to the goal of greater happiness and meaning.

What if you don't have a psychological disorder but you'd like to improve your emotional state, find more meaning in your life, or fulfill your potential? The growth of the field of positive psychology has expanded the number of individuals who are benefiting from techniques and therapies aimed at helping them develop a positive outlook that improves the quality of their daily lives. This burgeoning field also addresses questions of happiness, vitality, and meaning in life as worthy of serious scientific research.

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The field of positive psychology has led to the development of techniques and therapies that can help you find greater satisfaction and meaning in life, harness your strengths, nurture positive emotions, and connect with others.

Tracking happiness levels scientifically

Well-being, of course, is a very subjective and individual experience. Doctors can't quantify it the way they can measure blood pressure or body temperature. In order to conduct valid studies, psychologists have needed to seek ways to measure satisfaction that can be used to compare one group of people with another, and to track individuals over time to assess the impact of life events or interventions. These measures focus on people's emotions and how they assess their lives. Some measures, such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, frequently used by researchers, ask people to rate their current experience of various positive and negative emotions. Others ask people to think about their lives and rate their satisfaction. Satisfaction measures may focus on a specific domain of life, such as health or career, or they may use more general questions that rate overall satisfaction, factoring in various aspects of life.

To get a sense of your current level of satisfaction, try the Satisfaction with Life Scale (see "Measuring your level of satisfaction," page 3), a quick measure that is used in many positive psychology studies. In-depth assessment questionnaires are available online at the Authentic Happiness website (www.authentichappiness.com) run by psychologist Martin Seligman and other researchers at the University of Pennsylvania.

The roots of positive psychology

The concepts underlying positive psychology are not new. Virtually all of the world's religions and philosophies offer paths to inner peace, meaning, and fulfillment. Buddhism, one source of ancient wisdom, teaches that a person can find psychological freedom and inner peace through recognizing the interconnectedness of all things, transcending the illusion of a separate self, and coming to accept the inevitability of change. Other religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have for many centuries embraced the idea that happiness and rewards result from following God's will as revealed in scripture.

Philosophers from the ancient Greeks onward have promoted differing schools of thought on how to find happiness and fulfillment and held varying views on the positive aspects of human experience. Aristotle believed that happiness, which he called *eudaimonia* ("eudaemonia" in English), is achieved through knowing your true self and acting in accordance with your virtues. By contrast, Epicurus and the Hedonists held that maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain was the way to happiness, while the Stoics extolled the value of remaining objective, unswayed by either pleasure or pain.

Centuries later, the utilitarian philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries, including John Stuart Mill, believed that moral actions maximize happiness—not for the individual, but for the greatest number of people. Other schools of thought have been more individualistic. The Romantics, for example, valued individual emotional expression and high passion.

In its early days, the science of psychology also explored pathways to well-being. For example, during a long career at Harvard, the psychologist William James (1842–1910) was fascinated by whether and

Measuring your level of satisfaction

This one-minute survey is used in many studies to gauge contentment and satisfaction.

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1–7 scale below, write down a score to indicate your agreement with each item. Be open and honest in your responses.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree

STATEMENT	SCORE
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	
The conditions of my life are excellent.	
I am satisfied with my life.	
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	
Add up your scores	

INTERPRETATION	
31–35	Extremely satisfied
26–30	Satisfied
21–25	Slightly satisfied
20	Neutral
15–19	Slightly dissatisfied
10–14	Dissatisfied
5–9	Extremely dissatisfied

A short test such as this can give only a general idea of your level of satisfaction and happiness. Your score will depend on your feelings about your life to date, your current circumstances, and the short-term effect of recent events.

If your score indicates you are satisfied or extremely satisfied, you find most areas of your life to be very rewarding.

If you score as slightly satisfied, neutral, or slightly dissatisfied, there are probably several areas of your life that you would like to improve. If so, this report offers a number of strategies.

If you score as dissatisfied to extremely dissatisfied, you may be reacting to recent bad events. However, if you have felt this way for a long time and are not feeling optimistic about the future, you may need to make significant changes in your life, and you might benefit from seeking help from a mental health professional.

how various transcendent and mystical experiences help people live better, fuller lives.

In contrast to these earlier traditions, most of 20th-century psychiatry and psychology shifted the focus to psychological disorders, working within a medical model designed to move people from painful mental states to more neutral ones. Sigmund Freud, for example, sought to turn "hysterical misery into ordinary human unhappiness." After World War II, clinical psychology, with its focus on treating mental disorders, quickly became the largest psychological discipline, spurred on by the necessity of treating the many soldiers who returned from combat with mental health issues. Although this was clearly beneficial to those in need, eventually some psychologists and other mental health professionals became dissatisfied with the field's predominant focus on treating mental illness, alleviating the effects of psychological trauma, and interrupting maladaptive behavior patterns. Instead, these new thinkers sought to understand positive emotions, psychological strengths, and optimal human functioning, and to use that knowledge to assist people in their quest for joy and fulfillment.

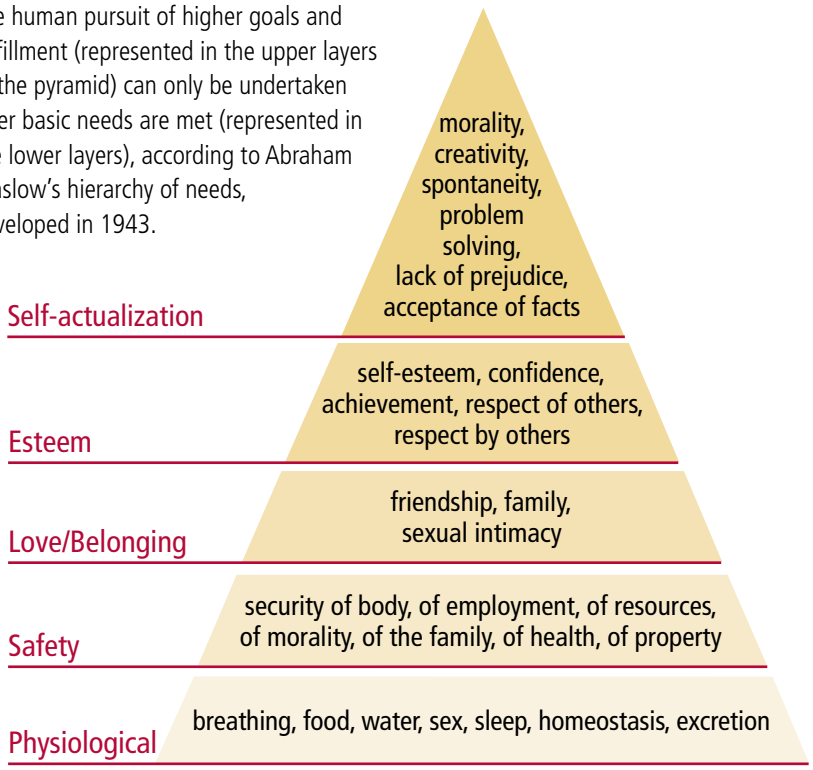
In this transition, the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) proved to be a key figure. Maslow is credited with coining the term positive psychology in 1954. He also introduced the concept of "self-actualization," a yearning for growth and meaning in life that some people pursue after their more basic needs—such as food and safety—have been met (see Figure 1, below).

The field took another step forward in the 1990s when University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman broke new ground with his concept of "learned optimism," widely considered a precursor to today's study of positive emotions. Learned optimism was an outgrowth of Seligman's earlier work on the concept of "learned helplessness," the apathy and depression that can ensue when people or animals are placed in distressing situations where they have little control (like a baby whose cries are never answered). Seligman described optimism as a trait of most happy people and found that optimism could be nurtured by teaching people to challenge their patterns of negative thinking and appreciate their strengths. This idea that people can become happier by bolstering and using their inherent strengths is central to positive psychology.

More recently, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert began exploring how well people predict what will make them happy. In a series of experiments, he and colleagues demonstrated again and again that people are remarkably poor at this. The problem lies in the human ability to imagine the future or the past. How you feel in the moment colors how you imagine you will feel in the future, and alters your ability to predict whether something will make you happy in the future, Gilbert explained in his book *Stumbling on*

Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

The human pursuit of higher goals and fulfillment (represented in the upper layers of the pyramid) can only be undertaken after basic needs are met (represented in the lower layers), according to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, developed in 1943.



Happiness. The truth is, Gilbert said, bad things don't affect people as profoundly as they expect them to. That's true of good things, too. People adapt remarkably quickly to either.

In 2011, Seligman jumped back into the discussion about what makes us happy with his concept of "PERMA." The letters stand for the components that he said allow people to flourish: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. These, he said in his 2011 book *Flourish*, are the building blocks of a fulfilled life.

The field of positive psychology has grown exponentially in recent years. Positive psychology conferences are held around the world, academic journals showcase the research, and hundreds of colleges and universities offer classes on the topic. Positive psychology methods are now used widely by mental health professionals to help a variety of people with different problems.

The brain on 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. Researchers now agree that there is a biological aspect to happiness and that the brain is command central for the chemical and physiological changes that occur in the body with positive emotions.

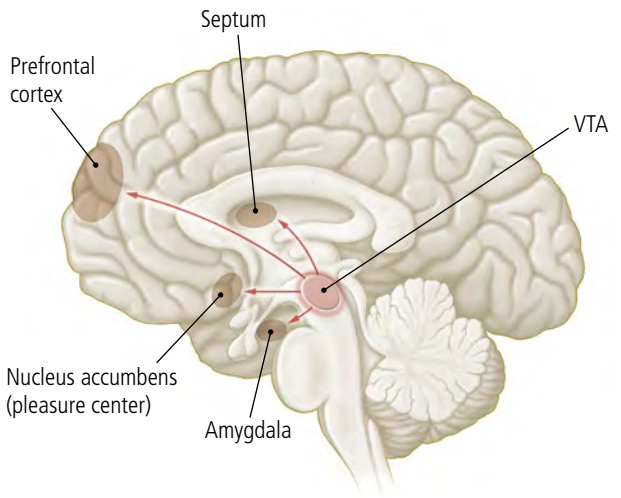
Since the middle of the 20th century, neuroscientists have investigated the mechanisms of positive emotion in the brain and body. Before that time, positive emotions were regarded as too subjective for rigorous scientific study. But a better understanding of the brain chemicals known as neurotransmitters 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 (see Figure 2, above right). They found that laboratory animals would press a lever to deliver an electrical stimulus to their 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, the ventral tegmental area (VTA), and the amygdala.

The chemical basis of these pleasurable sensations also came under investigation. 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, such as taking drugs, gambling excessively, or compulsively viewing pornography.

Another group of chemicals, the internally produced opiate-like chemicals called endorphins, are

Figure 2: How the brain feels pleasure



The brain responds to a pleasure stimulus by activating a reward system. When the brain receives a positive sensory stimulus (something that feels good), it sends a signal to the ventral tegmental area (VTA) in the midbrain. The VTA releases dopamine into the nucleus accumbens (the pleasure center), the septum and amygdala (parts of the brain related to assessing and responding to threats), and the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of the brain).

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 in the heart, circulatory system, skin, and muscles. These physical sensations are accompanied by chemical changes in the brain and are interpreted as pleasurable.

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 surge of pleasurable sensations associated with eating or having sex would positively reinforce these behaviors, leading people to repeat them and hence increase their chances of surviving and reproducing.

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.

More recent research suggests that positive emotions can activate reward pathways in the ventral striatum, an area that projects into the VTA. Lasting activation in the area seems to enhance feelings of well-being and lower levels of stress hormones.

Another technique, electroencephalography, revealed striking, emotionally based asymmetries in the activity of the prefrontal cortex. In these studies, the brains of generally happy people with fewer negative moods 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, anxiety, or depression. For example, the left prefrontal cortex was found to be particularly active in a group of Tibetan monks with extensive experience in meditation and mindfulness, suggesting that these practices may offer an effective path to happiness (see "Can mindfulness change your brain?" on page 26).

While results of these and other studies suggest that the brain is even more complex than once imagined, it is becoming clear that our feelings of well-being or distress correspond to changes in our brain chemistry and structure.

Positive psychology's critics

Positive psychology has its doubters who criticize both the state of the science and the idea of happiness as a goal. Some criticisms and responses from supporters of positive psychology are as follows:

The critics' claim: Positive psychology ignores suffering and devalues sadness.

Response: Most mental health research has focused on treating disorders, whereas positive psychology sheds light on previously ignored areas of positive emotion and meaning that are important to people's quality of life. Positive psychology embraces the full range of emotions, including sadness, and attempts to help people become more resilient in the face of adversity.

The critics' claim: Proponents of positive psychology suggest practices and techniques based on too little evidence from scientific research.

Response: Advocates of positive psychology say that they are committed to controlled, rigorous research, but at the same time are willing to suggest that people try various interventions (meditation, visualization, and others) if they are not harmful and make intuitive sense. Even within conventional medicine, many low-risk medical and psychological therapies are practiced based upon anecdotal evidence until more solid research can be conducted.

The critics' claim: Positive psychology is religion in disguise.

Response: While some of positive psychology echoes themes that have been part of religious tradi-

tions for centuries—especially those suggesting that happiness is less likely to be found in the pursuit of material things and pleasures and more likely to appear with engagement with other people and meaning outside oneself—much of the field is based on scientific research. There is no need to embrace a particular religious doctrine to appreciate and use these real and practical insights and techniques.

The critics' claim: Happy people are foolish or naïve.

Response: The expression "sadder but wiser" only goes so far. Happy people are no less intelligent, and there is some evidence that happy people are more able to look squarely at negative information and learn from it (see "Positive psychology during difficult times," page 35).

The critics' claim: Happy people are unmotivated or lazy.

Response: On the contrary, people who report being happy are more likely to perform better on the job and be conscientious workers. Passive, sedentary activities are less likely to bring happiness than more active and challenging pursuits (see "Flow: Getting engaged and absorbed," page 22).

Happiness: What is it?

"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!" As you once did when you sang, clapped, stomped, and shouted along with the kids' song, you probably recognize when you're feeling happy. Happiness might be experienced differently at times—say, as a warm sense of contentment, or as ecstatic joy—but it is clearly a pleasant feeling. Positive psychologists use the term happiness to refer to this subjective sense of well-being (which also requires a relative lack of negative feelings such as anger, sadness, and fright), as well as the sense that your life is worthwhile.

Happiness and your genes

Research suggests that your general level of happiness is determined, at least in part, by genetics. Results from studies of twins have led to the concept of an inborn "happiness set point." Although your happiness fluctuates with various circumstances, in between, most people return to a familiar level of contentment.

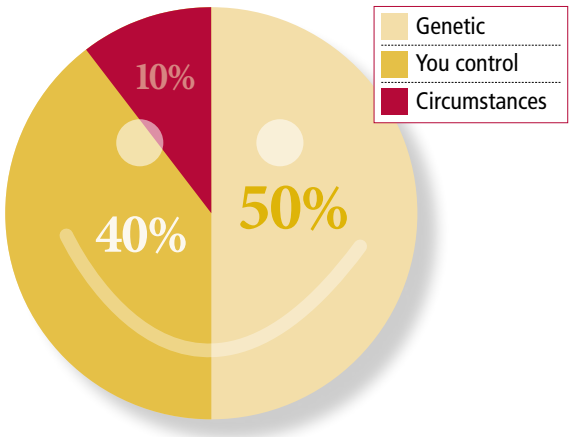
However, genetics are only part of the story. When geneticists calculate heritability (the proportion of the variation in a trait among people that can be attributed to variations in their genes rather than their environments), height is about 90% heritable, body mass index about 65%, happiness about 50%, and religiousness 30% to 45%.

Even a highly heritable physical trait, such as height, can be nudged up or down by environmental factors such as good or poor nutrition. For happiness, with a much lower heritability, there is lots of room for variation based on your life circumstances. Positive psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky of the University of California, Riverside, and her colleagues estimate that across the population, 50% of happiness is genetic, 10% depends on your circumstances (job, home, partner, and so forth), and 40% is under your power to control (see Figure 3, at right). Of course, in a given individual the proportions might be different, especially if a person has had particularly unfortunate or fortunate formative experiences.

Pleasure's fleeting nature

Remember how great it felt the last time you got a new car or a new piece of furniture? Do you still feel the same elation about it today? Probably not. Psychologists have long noted the human tendency to psychologically adapt to new circumstances. Something that initially makes you feel happy soon comes to feel like the norm. The sense of happiness fades, and an urge to acquire the next bigger or better thing takes hold again as you recalibrate and start focusing on the next goal. This can make the pursuit of happiness feel like walking on a treadmill, where you have to keep working to stay in the same place—and, in fact, this cycle has been called the "hedonic treadmill." For example, you may feel happy to buy a house. The euphoria begins to fade

Figure 3: Did you inherit your level of happiness?



Our basic temperament is inherited. Despite this, we have some control over how happy we feel. Positive psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues estimate that happiness is 50% inherited. Another 40% is under our own power to control. The final 10% depends on circumstances.

as you see how much work it needs. Upgrading the kitchen feels good, but then the bathroom looks dated. The pleasure of accomplishing one task fades quickly as the desire for the next improvement arises.

Some classic studies have documented how quickly people adapt to both negative and positive circumstances. Lottery winners, a year later, are no more happy than a control group of people who didn't win. People who were paralyzed in accidents are not as unhappy as you might expect; they rate their pleasure in everyday activities as high as the lottery winners! After relationship breakups and other discouraging events, people generally aren't as upset as they expected to be, and they recover sooner than they would have predicted.

Still, people adapt differently to negative and positive events. In long-term studies in Germany, getting married initially boosted happiness, but two years later people had returned to their usual level of satisfaction. Certain negative changes (divorce, death of a spouse, or unemployment) led to more enduring declines in satisfaction, and even years later people had not totally recovered. In studies of more ordinary negative circumstances (a typical "bad" or "good" day rather than a life-changing event), feeling lousy one day tended to carry over into the next, but the positive feelings after a good day did not.

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Happiness might do more than make you feel better emotionally. It might also improve your physical health. Growing scientific evidence suggests that happiness could make your life both longer and healthier. But the positive emotions need to be long-term.

Sonja Lyubomirsky believes that the evidence to date (which has focused far more on negative than positive experiences) indicates people adapt more quickly and more completely to positive changes—such as becoming accustomed to having more money after winning the lottery. This adaptation, she believes, forms a significant barrier to achieving long-lasting happiness. Based upon this observation, experts have devised a number of self-help exercises to help slow the return to your set point after something good happens (see "Gratitude," page 17, and "Savoring pleasure," page 20).

Happiness and health

Happiness might not just make you feel better emotionally—it may improve your physical health, too. There's growing scientific evidence that it could make your life longer and healthier.

But to produce good health, positive emotions may need to be long-term. In other words, thinking positive thoughts for a month when you already have heart disease won't cure the disease. However, lowering your stress level over a period of years with a positive outlook and relaxation techniques could reduce your risk of health problems.

Improved health

Positive emotions have been linked to a lower risk of some of the nation's leading causes of death. For example, a review published in *Psychological Bulletin* found that psychological well-being makes people less likely to have heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular events.

How might positive emotions and engaging in meaningful activities help? Over all, they seem to override negative feelings that often underlie unhealthy habits, like smoking, excessive drinking, not exercising, and eating an unhealthy diet—all of which can contribute to clogged arteries. People who are happier also seem to be more flexible and resilient, which makes it easier for them to cope with change and disappointment in their daily lives. That, in turn, means they're better able to take good care of themselves and suffer fewer of the harmful effects of chronic stress.

Similar trends have been shown in diabetes. A review of 22 studies in the journal *Psychosomatics*

Did we evolve to be unhappy?

Perhaps surprisingly, some traits that might make us unhappy today may have saved our lives in much earlier times, according to evolutionary psychologists. For example, constant suspicion that physical danger lurks around the next corner would have helped an early human survive attacks from wild animals. Such traits were thus selected for in human evolution. Today, however, constant suspicion is less likely to save your life and more likely to cause unnecessary stress and unhappiness.

Overreacting to possible threats is another example. Recoiling from a bitter taste or fleeing from a rustle in the bushes might have kept an ancestor from death by poison or tiger attack. Negative emotions alert you to danger so you can avoid immediate peril, and there's little harm done if you react to a false alarm, such as spitting out radicchio or running from a bunny. But what used to be good for survival doesn't translate well to the modern world, and over the long term, repeated or constant revving up of your fight-or-flight response can lead to anxiety, unhappiness, and health problems.

Another theory relates to sensitivity to rejection. Early humans lived in small communities in difficult conditions. Being excluded from the group could literally mean death. As a result, humans are naturally sensitive to being socially excluded. Today, however, frequently feeling slighted or jealous can have a negative impact on friendships, marriages, and other social relationships.

It helps to recognize why it takes some work to counter these hard-wired attributes, but just because they're "natural" doesn't mean you have to be ruled by them.

found that three measures of positive emotion—well-being, resilience, and positive affect (the scientific term for having feelings of hope, happiness, enjoyment, and good self-esteem)—help people with diabetes to better care for themselves and live longer, healthier lives. For example, people with diabetes who had positive emotional health traits were more likely to stick to healthy diet and exercise plans. They also had lower average blood sugar levels and lower death rates.

Longer life

Some recent evidence regarding the benefits of happiness for longevity comes from a report in *Archives of Internal Medicine* that used data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA). ELSA researchers are collecting data on the well-being, health behaviors, and survival of more than 11,000 English men and women who were at least 50 years old when the study began in 2002.

Researchers divided participants into four groups based on their self-reported enjoyment of life. During a follow-up period of just over seven years, about 20% of those in the lowest enjoyment group had died, compared with about 6% of those in the highest enjoyment group. People who enjoyed life more also were less likely to have a serious illness, were more likely to be married, and had higher levels of wealth and education than those less happy with their lot in life. But even after accounting for those factors, as well as for depression and health behaviors, greater enjoyment in life in itself was associated with a 28% lower risk of death, according to the study authors.

The longest-term evidence on happiness and longevity comes from the Nun Study, conducted by researchers at the University of Kentucky and published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. When young women entered the American School Sisters of Notre Dame order (around age 22, on average), they wrote a one-page autobiography. Analyzing 180 of these essays years later, when the nuns were between the ages of 75 and 95, researchers found a very strong association between longevity and the expression of positive emotions (such as happiness, interest, love, hope, gratefulness, and contentment). Women who scored in the upper 25% for positive emotional words lived 9.4 years longer than those in the lowest 25%, and women who expressed the most positive emotions lived 10.7 years longer than those expressing the fewest—findings that held up after controlling for linguistic ability.

How do you 'get happy'?

Maybe you think you'd be happiest if you looked great in your bathing suit, and could sit on a pristine beach with someone you love and a tall iced drink in your hand.

Fortunately, you don't have to wait until you have a perfect body and that idyllic beach. For greater happiness now, try things that are easier to do on a typical day: take a walk outdoors, or volunteer for a good cause. Even something as simple as putting your desk in order while the office is quiet can elevate your mood. There are various routes to happiness, and a balance among them may bring the greatest satisfaction. Not all routes will appeal to everyone equally or at all times.

Routes to happiness

In an early phase of positive psychology research, the pioneering psychologist Martin Seligman, along with Christopher Peterson of the University of Michigan, examined several routes to happiness and explored an individual's inclination to pursue each one. They chose three pathways to start:

- **Feeling good:** seeking pleasurable emotions and sensations, from the hedonistic model of happiness put forth by the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. This includes seeking to repeat and savor pleasant experiences (see "The roots of positive psychology," page 3).
- **Engaging fully:** pursuing goals and activities in which you are totally immersed, from the influential research on flow experiences by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University in California (see "Flow: Getting engaged and absorbed," page 22).
- **Doing good:** experiencing meaning by serving someone or something outside yourself, as advised in most religious traditions (see "Finding your life's meaning," page 32).

> **"We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it is all about."**
>
> *—Joseph Campbell, groundbreaking author and speaker on comparative mythology and religion*

By conducting focus groups and testing hundreds of volunteers, they found that each of these pathways individually contributes to life satisfaction, and it is possible to gain a sense of the pathways that come most naturally to you (see "Quiz: How do you seek happiness?" on page 12).

A related area of newer research suggests that people are happiest when they're focusing their minds on the present rather than thinking about other topics, places, or times. Harvard psychologists David Gilbert and Matthew Killingsworth set up an experiment designed to record how frequently people's minds wander, what they wander to, and how it affects their moods. They designed a smartphone application that contacted 2,250 adult volunteers at random intervals to ask how they were feeling, what they were doing, and whether they were thinking about what they were doing or thinking about something else.

The researchers found that people spend about half of their time thinking about things other than what is going on around them. This "mind wandering" often takes the form of thinking about events that happened in the past, may happen in the future, or will never happen at all. And it doesn't make us happy. Rather, people in the study were happiest when their minds were focused on the activity of the moment. This research, published in the journal *Science*, reinforces the advice of various religions, philosophies, and therapies that have suggested since ancient times that happiness and fulfillment may be found more easily by living in the

moment, "being here now," and experiencing the present to its fullest rather than thinking constantly about other things (see "Mindfulness: A path to well-being," page 25). For more information about this research (including how to join the still-ongoing study), see www.trackyourhappiness.org.

What *won't* make you happy

While most people say they want to be happy, people tend to be poor judges of what will actually make them happy. Here are some widely held myths about what will bring happiness:

Money and material things. Can money buy hap-

Quiz: How do you seek happiness?

For each of the following statements, rate whether you find it:

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me

STATEMENT	SCORE
1. Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly.	
2. My life serves a higher purpose.	
3. Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide.	
4. I seek out situations that challenge my skills and abilities.	
5. In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will benefit other people.	
6. Whether at work or play, I am usually "in a zone" and not conscious of myself.	
7. I am always very absorbed in what I do.	
8. I go out of my way to feel euphoric.	
9. In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether I can lose myself in it.	

STATEMENT	SCORE
10. I am rarely distracted by what is going on around me.	
11. I have a responsibility to make the world a better place.	
12. My life has a lasting meaning.	
13. In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will be pleasurable.	
14. What I do matters to society.	
15. I agree with this statement: "Life is short—eat dessert first."	
16. I love to do things that excite my senses.	
17. I have spent a lot of time thinking about what life means and how I fit into the big picture.	
18. For me, the good life is the pleasurable life.	

Add up your scores for	
Items 3, 8, 13, 15, 16, and 18 (pleasurable life)	
Items 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 10 (engaged life)	
Items 2, 5, 11, 12, 14, and 17 (meaningful life)	

Which score is highest? That is your most prominent orientation among the different ways of seeking happiness.

Your principal orientation toward happiness may be seeking pleasurable emotions or sensations, pursuing activities that engage you fully, or seeking meaning in something outside of yourself. On the other hand, you may have no strong orientation toward one route. If you scored high on all factors, you may already be on the road to a full and satisfying life. If you scored low on all factors, you may need to take action to avoid being dissatisfied with your life.

Adapted with permission from the University of Pennsylvania's "Authentic Happiness" website, www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu.

piness? Economist Richard Easterlin first addressed this question in the early 1970s, when he introduced the happiness-income paradox. His research showed that within a given country, happiness tracks closely with income—but only up to the point at which basic needs are met. Between countries, he found that richer countries weren't happier than poorer ones, unless the poor people were very poor and struggling. More recent research has shown that richer countries are marginally happier than poorer ones, but probably because other factors that support happiness, such as social trust, often increase with income.

Youth. People in their late teens tend to say they are fairly happy, but contrary to what you might think, people in their 80s rank their psychological well-being even higher. However, the trajectory toward greater satisfaction isn't a straight one but a U-shaped curve, according to a study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that relied on a poll of more than 340,000 people. The poll included general questions about age, sex, and income, as well as six questions to gauge "hedonic well-being" in which respondents were asked whether they experienced the following feelings during much of the previous day: enjoyment, happiness, stress, worry, anger, or sadness. The results suggest that stress and anger decline as people grow older. Happiness and enjoyment drop gradually until age 50, after which they rise steadily for the next 25 years. Many researchers believe that in our later years, we finally stop looking for happiness in achievements subject to the hedonic treadmill (see "Pleasure's fleeting nature," page 8) and experience greater well-being as a result.

Children. Children can be a tremendous source of joy and fulfillment, but their day-to-day care is quite demanding and can increase stress, financial pressures, and marital strife. When ranking their happiness during daily activities, mothers report being more happy eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching TV than when spending time with their children (although there are ways to increase that enjoyment; see "Savoring pleasure," page 20). In several studies, marital satisfaction declines after the first child is born and only recovers after the last child leaves home. Personal relationships of all types are important, however. In studies, being married, having more friends, and having sexual intercourse more often are all moderately or strongly associated with happiness.

The world's happiest countries

In 2012, the United Nations issued the first World Happiness Report, a global survey of well-being and happiness that ranks countries from the most happy to the least. Published by the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Solutions Network—an international team of economists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and statisticians—the report is intended as a resource for policies to help people worldwide live better lives and to guide progress for sustainable development in developing countries.

The primary data come from the Gallup World Poll, which surveys about 1,000 residents per year from each of 158 countries around the globe. The rankings are based on the main life evaluation question, which asks respondents to rate their life on a scale of 0 (the worst possible life) to 10 (the best possible life). But the report also analyzes how each country's overall score may be explained by the following six variables:

- gross domestic product per capita
- healthy years of life expectancy
- social support (defined as "having someone to count on in times of trouble")
- trust (measured by "perceived absence of corruption in government and business")
- perceived freedom to make life decisions
- generosity (measured by "recent donations, adjusted for differences in income").

In the 2015 report, America doesn't even make the top 10. It's ranked 15th—a slight improvement over the 2014 ranking of 17th.

The top 10 happiest nations are Switzerland, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, New Zealand, and Australia. All have average scores above 7.28. The bottom 10 countries are Chad, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Benin, Syria, Burundi, and Togo, where the average scores are all less than 3.67.

Finding your inner strengths

Positive psychologists want their patients to understand their unique strengths of character and build on them, just as traditional psychologists want their patients to understand the qualities that make people unhappy and overcome them. For example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), long considered the bible of psychiatry, describes and categorizes mental disorders and problematic behavior patterns. As a counterpart, positive psychologists have published a professional handbook jokingly called the "un-DSM" to describe and categorize positive traits. Both books are works in progress that change along with professional opinion and unfolding scientific research.

Shedding light on character

The positive psychology movement asserts that it is legitimate for psychologists to examine strengths and virtues as part of what could be called "moral character." Positive psychologists argue that happiness and fulfillment are as real as distress and disease, and that individual strengths and virtues are as important for psychologists to examine as are individual problems. Manifesting your strengths, they say, is one avenue to greater happiness.

Previously, psychologists studying personality traits considered moral character best left to philosophers, deeming it too value-laden and subjective for psychological research. Freudian psychoanalysts were willing to look at strengths and often saw these as defenses against unconscious negative motivations such as aggression and sexuality. The problem, says Martin Seligman, is that there is no evidence that this is true.

Under the auspices of the VIA Institute on Character, Christopher Peterson (the institute's scientific director) and Martin Seligman undertook a mammoth categorization project with the assistance of a large group of scholars and practitioners. They began by combing the philosophical and religious literature in search of qualities that were prized across many cultures and in different eras, found in both young and old people, able to be cultivated, and believed to lead to fulfillment in life. The idea was to identify qualities that are not primarily valued as a means to another end, or considered to be inborn talents such as intelligence or perfect pitch. In 2004, Seligman and Peterson published their handbook *Character Strengths and Virtues* (the "un-DSM") to catalog these strengths, and they are continually updating it.

What are virtues and strengths?

According to Seligman and Peterson, there are six "virtues," or core characteristics that are universally valued (see Table 1, page 15). These are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Each of the six virtues has a set of character strengths associated with it. Strengths are less abstract than virtues, and are often the characteristics people use to talk about the qualities that differentiate one person from another. For example, one person might gain the virtue of wisdom by using the strength known as curiosity. Another person might gain wisdom through the strength of open-mindedness and a tendency to see all points of view.

Strengths are built-in capacities for certain thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Everyone possesses all of these character strengths to a greater or lesser extent. You can be particularly gifted in one area and weak in another, but if you are like most people, you are often somewhere in between. Your particular pattern of strengths is part of what makes you unique.

You probably enjoy using your strengths and do so naturally. When you play from your strengths, you are likely to feel more energetic and perform better than when you are trying to use a capacity that comes less

Table 1: 6 virtues and their underlying strengths

VIRTUE	STRENGTHS
WISDOM Intellectual strengths that help you gain and use information	• **Creativity:** Using the imagination to develop original ideas and objects. These may be in the artistic realm but can also involve inventive solutions to practical problems. • **Curiosity:** Being fascinated by and eager to learn about a wide variety of topics. Exploring and having new experiences. • **Open-mindedness:** Fairly examining issues from all sides without being influenced by preconceptions. Being willing to change your mind in light of new evidence. • **Love of learning:** Adding systematically to your knowledge and thereby mastering new skills and subjects. • **Perspective:** Being able to provide wise counsel to others. Possessing ways of looking at the world that make sense to yourself and others.
COURAGE Strengths of will that help you accomplish goals in the face of fear and internal or external obstacles	• **Integrity:** Speaking the truth, acting sincerely, and presenting yourself in an authentic way (without pretense). Taking responsibility for your feelings and actions. • **Bravery:** Speaking and acting for what you believe despite opposition. Not shrinking from challenges (physical or not), difficulties, threats, or pain. • **Persistence:** Finishing what you start even in the face of resistance. Displaying perseverance and industriousness. • **Vitality:** Entering life fully, wholeheartedly, with enthusiasm and energy.
HUMANITY Interpersonal strengths that help you befriend others and tend to your relationships	• **Social or emotional intelligence:** Being aware of your motives and feelings and those of others. Knowing how to fit into various social situations. Recognizing what makes other people tick. • **Love:** Having the capacity to give and receive love. Valuing and maintaining close relationships with people. • **Kindness:** Nurturing and caring for others. Showing generosity, compassion, altruism, and simple niceness.
JUSTICE Social or civic strengths that help bolster a healthy community	• **Teamwork:** Working well in a group. Displaying loyalty and responsibility to support the group and do your share. • **Fairness:** Treating everyone fairly and justly without letting personal feelings bias your decisions. • **Leadership:** Encouraging a group to get things done. Organizing and following through. Fostering good relations among members.
TEMPERANCE Protective traits that help you avoid excess and stay on track in the face of temptations	• **Mercy**: Forgiving those who have done wrong or acted against your desires. Giving people a second chance and not being vengeful. Mercy tempers hatred and anger. • **Humility and modesty:** Letting your accomplishments speak for themselves. Not seeking the spotlight or trying to seem more special than you are; truthfully acknowledging who you are and what you've done. Humility tempers arrogance. • **Self-control:** Regulating what you feel and do. Being disciplined; not letting your desires or emotions get out of hand. Self-control tempers impulsiveness. • **Prudence:** Taking care in what you say and do. Not taking undue risks. Prudence tempers actions and decisions leading to regret.
TRANSCENDENCE Strengths of meaning that connect you with the larger world and provide meaning	• **Appreciation of beauty:** Noticing and valuing beauty, excellence, and skill expressed in nature, performance, various professions, and everyday experience. • **Spirituality:** Holding beliefs about the meaning of life and its higher purpose. Knowing where you fit within the larger scheme of life, and taking comfort and direction from that knowledge. • **Gratitude:** Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen. Taking time to express thanks. • **Hope:** Believing that the future can be good and working to bring it about. Being optimistic. • **Humor:** Liking to laugh or see the light side of life. Being playful. Bringing smiles to other people.

Source: Adapted with permission from the VIA Institute on Character.

EXERCISE #1
Use a signature strength in a new way

What are your strengths? Are you highly social? Open-minded? Doggedly persistent? Pick one of your strengths and use it in a new way every day for a week. Think of ways to use this strength in a positive way with a family member, co-worker, or friend. For example:

- **Bravery.** Plunge into a new activity that makes you nervous, like public speaking.
- **Curiosity.** Read an article or watch a documentary on something you know nothing about.
- **Self-control.** Make your week free of insincere comments.
- **Appreciation of beauty.** Set a beautiful table for an ordinary meal.
- **Open-mindedness.** Read an editorial or listen to a talk radio show that you disagree with and consider the legitimate points it may raise.
- **Creativity.** Find an alternative use for an ordinary household object.
- **Love.** Write a note to someone you love and tuck it where the person will find it—in a briefcase, in a lunchbox, or under a pillow.

naturally. For example, one person trying to influence a local school board to ban soft drink sales might have the strength to speak up forcefully and clearly at a general meeting (despite the almost-universal fear of public speaking). Another person strong in team-building might feel uncomfortable speaking out in a meeting but could successfully build consensus among parents, nutritionists, and others to weigh the issue and come to a decision. Likewise, when you set out to do something in alignment with the values you hold dear, you are likely to work harder and have more energy and persistence for the task at hand.

Because deploying a strength is usually the easiest as well as the most effective way to accomplish a goal, you can think of using your strengths as the smallest thing that you can do to make the biggest difference.

To reap the benefits of playing from your strengths, you first need to know what they are. Yet according to a study presented to the British Psychological Society, only about one-third of people have a useful understanding of their strengths. If something comes easily, you may take it for granted and not identify it as a strength. In fact, you may assume the same capacity comes naturally to everyone and get frustrated with people who don't display it. That's one backhanded way to recognize a strength in yourself, but there are more straightforward means. You can ask someone you respect who knows you well, notice what people compliment you on, and think about what comes most easily to you.

To help you assess your strengths, positive psychologists at the VIA Institute on Character have developed an online questionnaire called the *Inventory of Signature Strengths Survey*, available at www.viacharacter.org. The questionnaire is a 30-minute, 240-question survey that provides a ranking of your top five strengths and shows how you compare with others who have taken the test.

There's no magic in the number five—you may have more than five that rate very close together—and particular strengths may rise and fall in the rankings as your circumstances and need to use them change. But the five will give you a good snapshot to work with.

Knowing your strengths is helpful only if you use them. A study published in *American Psychologist* asked people to identify their key strengths and then use one in a new way every day for a week. Compared with a control exercise (spending time each day writing about early memories), simply identifying strengths had no impact on happiness. Actually using signature strengths, however, significantly increased happiness and reduced depression for six months. (For examples of how to do this, see "Exercise #1: Use a signature strength in a new way," above left.)

Certain strengths have been found to be the most closely linked to happiness. They are gratitude (see page 17), hope, vitality, curiosity, and love. These strengths are so important that they're worth cultivating and applying in your daily life, whether or not they come naturally to you.

Keep in mind as you read the remainder of this report that you have unique strengths that will help you in all aspects of cultivating a greater sense of well-being.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what you receive, whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, you acknowledge the goodness in your life. And because, in the process, you recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside yourself, gratitude also helps you connect to something larger than your individual experience—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.

You can be grateful for things large and small: When traffic is light on your way to work, do you feel grateful? When your child puts his own sneakers in the closet, are you thankful? Gratitude is one of the most important signature strengths (see "What are virtues and strengths?" on page 14).

In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish positive experiences, enjoy better health, deal with adversity (see "Positive psychology during difficult times," page 35), and build strong relationships (see "Positive relationships," page 37).

As a signature strength, gratitude is felt and expressed in multiple ways. It can be applied to the past (retrieving positive memories and being thankful for elements of your childhood or past blessings), the present (not taking things for granted as they come), and the future (being hopeful and optimistic that there will be good things arriving). No matter what your inherent or current level of gratitude, it's a quality that can be successfully cultivated further.

Counting your blessings

Gratitude journals, in which you regularly write down things for which you are grateful, help you go through your days with greater appreciation, taking fewer blessings for granted. You can use a formal gratitude journal like the one on page 18 or simply set aside a

Studies on gratitude

Robert Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Mike McCullough of the University of Miami examined the impact of keeping a gratitude journal. All participants in their study were asked to write a few sentences each week, focusing on five things. One group wrote about things they were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily hassles or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about events that had affected them (with no emphasis on them being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on hassles.

Numerous other studies have pointed to the beneficial effects for adults, as well as children and adolescents, of regularly making lists of things for which we're grateful, keeping a gratitude journal, or expressing gratitude to others. Cultivating gratitude in these ways also may also help us deal with common forms of psychological distress such as anxiety or depression.

Gratitude is a way to step off the hedonic treadmill, appreciating what you have instead of always reaching for something new in the hopes it will make you happier. Gratitude helps you refocus on what you have instead of what you lack. As an old saying goes, "If a fellow isn't thankful for what he's got, he isn't likely to be thankful for what he'll get." The implications of this way of thinking are far-reaching, to the benefit of both you and those around you.

Thinkstock

Studies show that keeping a gratitude journal can help you feel better about life.

Your gratitude journal

Throughout the day, briefly note things or events that inspire you to feel grateful.

	WORK	FAMILY OR FRIENDS	NATURE	UPLIFTING EXPERIENCES	MATERIAL COMFORTS
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					

EXERCISE #2
Expressing your thanks

Who likes an ungrateful child? If you're a parent, chances are you have insisted that your children write thank-you notes: you know that expressing thanks for gifts received is a valuable way to nurture the qualities of gratitude and appreciation. As an adult, you may have the thank-you note (or email or call) down pat, but there's a benefit to going deeper. You can make yourself happier and nurture your relationship with another person by writing a gratitude letter expressing your enjoyment and appreciation of that person's impact on your life.

Write a gratitude letter. Send it, or better yet, deliver and read it in person if possible. Make a habit of sending at least one gratitude letter a month. On occasion, write one to yourself.

few minutes every day and write down in any convenient place five large or small things you're grateful for. An item might be a conversation, lovely view, event at work, treasured possession, beloved friend, God, whatever occurs to you. As you write, be specific and relive the sensations you felt as you remember what each thing means to you. Of course, some items may repeat, but keep the list fresh and take the time to experience the feelings. If you find that daily journaling doesn't suit you, find another approach that does: speak or silently contemplate your blessings instead of writing; make it part of an evening prayer; or do it on a different schedule, such as once a week, if that feels more natural.

Those positive effects can be enhanced further by expressing the gratitude that you feel toward someone who has been helpful to you (see "Exercise #2: Expressing your thanks," at left). Martin Seligman and colleagues tested the impact of various positive psychology interventions on 411 people, each compared with a control assignment of writing about early memories. When their week's assignment was to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness, participants exhibited a huge increase in happiness scores (and a decrease in scores on a depression scale) immediately afterward. The immediate impact was greater than any other intervention, with benefits lasting for a month. Subsequent studies have shown that sending or delivering the letter is not essential to the gain in happiness, so people who are deceased or whom you cannot reach are fair game for your thanks.

Savoring pleasure

Savoring is placing your attention on pleasure as it occurs, consciously enjoying the experience as it unfolds. This is in stark contrast to grasping for pleasure, constantly reaching for the next, better thing to come along—a route to chronic discontentment. (Just think of all the celebrities who are unhappy, despite their material wealth and fame.)

Most people are primed to experience pleasure in special moments, such as a wedding day or a vacation. Everyday pleasures, on the other hand, can slip by without much notice unless they disappear or seem threatened. There's nothing like a medical scare to spur a temporary appreciation of good health, or a series of rainy days to have you appreciating sunshine. You can enjoy the experience even more by savoring it.

Fred Bryant of Loyola University and the late Joseph Veroff of the University of Michigan were the first to scientifically study savoring. Their work, described in the 2006 textbook *Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience*, is used by positive psychologists who continue to investigate how you can become happier by learning to savor the positive aspects of your present life.

Whether or not savoring pleasure is already one of your paths to happiness, you can enhance your capacity to recognize and enjoy the pleasures in your day in a number of ways:

Single-task. Multitasking is the enemy of savoring. Try as you might, you can't fully pay attention to multiple things. If you're scanning the newspaper and listening to the radio during breakfast, you're not getting the pleasure you could from that meal—or the newspaper or radio program. If you're walking the dog on a beautiful path but mentally staring at your day's to-do list, you're missing the moment. Of course, some combined activities, like popcorn at the movies or music while you snuggle, make for a richer sensory experience—but don't pile on so much stimulation that you dilute your ability to enjoy it.

Celebrate. Don't keep the good moments of your life (or your loved ones' lives) to yourself. Let yourself be happy when you complete a project or when something goes well. Savor your accomplishments.

Slow down. It turns out that time affluence (having the time to enjoy your life and participate in the activities you want) predicts happiness better than monetary affluence. As much as you can, eliminate some of the less enjoyable ways you spend your time (do you really need to check your email again?) so you can enjoy the pleasurable experiences in your day without rushing.

Underdose. As with kids gorging on Halloween candy, nothing spoils the pleasure of something like an overdose of it. The brain is wired to attend to things that are novel. Too much of a good thing, or repeating the same activity without enough space in between (like a continuous loop of your favorite movie), can strip pleasures of their power to please.

Simplify. Too many options can actually diminish your pleasure (see "Happiness and choice," page 21).

Share the moment. Inviting someone else to share an activity can enhance the pleasure. Together you can relish the sunset, symphony, or ski run.

Set new goals and plan new activities. According to positive psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky's research, the boost in happiness you get from a new undertaking lasts longer than that brought on by a change in circumstances.

Reminisce and anticipate. Savoring pleasure may seem like a strictly "be here now" activity, but you can also savor things in the past and even the future. Reminiscing about vacations and victories, or cherishing your precious moments with loved ones, can be very satisfying. When study participants were asked to spend 10 minutes twice a day reminiscing about a pleasurable event, the positive reminiscence increased the amount of time participants felt happy during the week (compared with members of a control group

who spent the same amount of time thinking about current issues in their lives). They also became better at savoring pleasures as they happened.

Don't try to overanalyze past pleasures (which some research shows actually diminishes their power) or compare them with your current circumstances—just enjoy the trip down memory lane by yourself or with another. Keeping souvenirs, looking at snapshots, rereading letters, or playing music from the past can support this activity.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, you can also enhance pleasures that have not yet happened. As you look over your to-do list, briefly savor the moments that will give you pleasure (stop for flowers, play with the puppy). Similarly, as you plan vacations or meals, imagine and savor the pleasures to come. Talk about your plans.

Happiness and choice

A comedian used to joke that his mother's menu consisted of two choices: "Take it or leave it." It may sound counterintuitive, but having fewer choices can lead to happiness. How? Happiness does depend in part upon having choices, but only up to a point. The more options you have, the more opportunities you have to regret the choice you've made. Do you wish you'd chosen a different cellphone? Would you have been better off with a different financial investment or Medicare drug plan option? The more choices there are, the smaller the percentage that seem to be "right."

On meditation or spiritual retreats, choices are often intentionally limited. Eating and savoring whatever is offered, or not having to choose your outfit or plan your day's agenda, can be very freeing and allow your attention to stay focused.

Simply making choices can be exhausting. In a University of Minnesota study conducted at a mall, published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, having more shopping choices interfered with people's ability to pay attention and complete simple arithmetic problems. If you want to focus your attention on an upcoming activity or need the emotional equilibrium to handle challenging personal situations, you're better off limiting the number of choices you make beforehand (see "Exercise #3: Just say 'no' to too many choices," above).

EXERCISE #3
Just say "no" to too many choices

To keep the burden of choice from robbing you of pleasure, go on a choice diet. For choices of no great consequence, limit the amount of time or number of options you'll consider. Cut off your opportunities for second-guessing: stop looking at car or employment ads after you've made a commitment; go ahead and wrap or mail that gift; wear and launder your new pants so they can't be returned. When critical medical or financial choices need to be made, that's the time to put your maximizer tendencies to work. But for the many small choices you make each day, try to narrow your choices quickly and make your decisions confidently.

Your temperament also influences how you handle choice and how it influences your happiness. "I never settle for second best." Does that sound like you? Psychologists would call you a maximizer: in your quest for the best deal or product, you need to evaluate all the choices before making a decision. Other people have standards for what they want in a given circumstance. As soon as something meets those standards (which can be high or low), they make the decision. These people are what psychologists refer to as satisficers.

Judged by measurable criteria, maximizers may make the best choices. In research at Columbia University and Swarthmore College, students were rated on their tendency toward maximizing or satisficing and were followed for a year as they searched for jobs. By the criterion of starting salary, maximizers found the best jobs, making 20% more. However, going through the process they experienced many more negative emotions, and after being hired they were less happy with their jobs than their classmates who looked for the good-enough option. Who made the best decision: those who ended up with the higher salary or those with greater happiness?

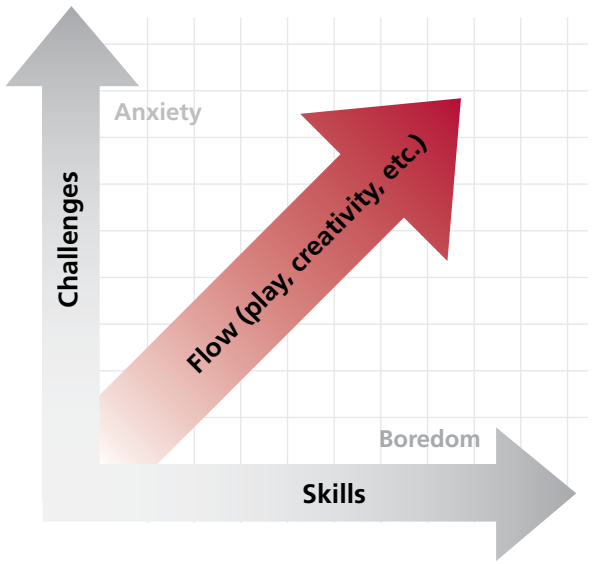
Modern technology has not brought progress in this area. The Internet has opened vast opportunities for choice overload. Shopping, searching for health information, or trying to find love online can be an exhausting process.

Flow: Getting engaged and absorbed

Have you ever been so immersed in what you were doing that all distractions and background chatter just fell away? Nothing existed except the brush and your painting, your skis and the slope, your car and the road. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "chick-SENT-me-high"), a renowned professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, Calif., calls that state of intense absorption "flow."

For decades, he explored people's satisfaction in their everyday activities, finding that people report the greatest satisfaction when they are totally immersed in and concentrating on what they are doing. In studies by Csikszentmihalyi and others, flow experiences led to positive emotions in the short term, and over the long term, people who more frequently experienced flow were generally happier. Researchers have also found that people vary in how much they value having flow experiences, and in how easy they find it to enter flow. No matter what your natural tendency, recognizing how flow occurs (or doesn't) in your life and creating opportunities for more flow experiences can be a potent route to increased happiness.

Figure 4: High skill + high challenge = flow



Flow can happen during any activity when the level of challenge matches the level of skill. High challenge and low skill produce anxiety. Low challenge and high skill produce boredom.

What is flow?

To investigate the flow experience, Csikszentmihalyi used a research method called "experience sampling." He tracked people's actions and feelings in their natural setting (outside of a laboratory) and in real time rather than what they recalled later in interviews or diaries. With this method, participants are contacted at random points during the day and asked to briefly record what they are doing, who they are with, and how they feel. This way, the results are not tainted by memory bias based on whether the experience was pleasant or unpleasant.

According to the research, Csikszentmihalyi and others found that flow experiences have several common characteristics.

You lose awareness of time. You aren't watching the clock, and hours can pass like minutes. As filmmaker George Lucas puts it, talent is "a combination of something you love a great deal and something you can lose yourself in—something that you can start at 9 o'clock, look up from your work and it's 10 o'clock at night."

You aren't thinking about yourself. You aren't focused on your comfort, and you aren't wondering how you look or how your actions will be perceived by others. Your awareness of yourself is only in relation to the activity itself, such as your fingers on a piano keyboard, or the way you position a knife to cut vegetables, or the balance of your body parts as you ski or surf.

You aren't interrupted by extraneous thoughts. You aren't thinking about such mundane matters as your shopping list or what to wear tomorrow.

You have clear goals at each moment but aren't focused on the goal line. Although you may be working toward an ultimate goal, such as earning a graduate degree, making a wedding cake, or winning a chess tournament, that goal is not your primary motivation. Rather, you find the activity itself to be rewarding—mastering or explaining a line of thinking in your academic work, creating tiers of beautiful icing, or visualizing your way out of a sticky chess situation.

You are active and in control. Flow activities aren't passive, and you have some control over what you are doing.

You work effortlessly. Flow activities require effort (usually more effort than what is involved in typical daily experience). Although you may be working harder than usual, at flow moments everything is "clicking" and feels almost effortless.

You would like to repeat the experience. Flow is intrinsically rewarding, something you would like to replicate. A study of people who hiked the full length of the Appalachian Trail reported that 60% experienced flow, usually on a daily basis, and more than 80% expressed a desire to hike the trail again. In rating the things they enjoyed, the hikers said they enjoyed the experience and activity itself, as well as using their skills. In contrast, external factors, such as competition with others and the prestige of completing the trail, were rated dead last in what made the experience enjoyable.

Matching your skill level

The good news about flow and happiness is that you can increase the amount of flow experience in your life and reap the benefits, although it takes a certain amount of effort and comes more naturally to some people than others.

Flow experiences, researchers have found, occur when there is a balance between the challenge of an activity and the skill you have in performing it (see Figure 4, page 22). For an adult, playing a child's card game that requires no real skill is not likely to be a flow experience, but playing the next level on a video game that you have partially mastered may be. When your skill is high but the challenge is low, boredom is the likely result.

Set the challenge too high, though, by undertaking something that is way beyond your skill, and you're out of the flow again. Flow is more likely to happen when you're playing a well-matched opponent, practicing a piano piece that's just a bit harder than the last one, or driving in unfamiliar terrain in a car you feel confident controlling. In one of Csikszentmihalyi's recent studies on flow, he found that people enjoyed a game of chess more if they played against someone who was slightly more skillful than they were, and that close games were more satisfying than blow-outs—even for the person who lost the match.

Enhancing your ability to experience flow in multiple domains can lead to greater happiness. You can't force flow, but you can invite it to occur more often, even in areas of life where it might seem unlikely.

Flowing through the work flow

If asked whether you enjoy your time at work or your time at leisure more, you'd probably answer your time at leisure. But interestingly enough, in a landmark study Csikszentmihalyi carried out in 1989 at the University of Chicago, flow-producing situations occurred more than three times as often when people were working as in their leisure time. The researchers didn't just count extremely intense flow experiences, but also counted any time that participants scored above their personal average in both the challenge faced and skills being used at the time of sampling. Flow experiences at work occurred at all levels—among managers, clerical staff, and blue-collar workers.

With this in mind, try to identify and acknowledge the pleasure you derive from work. Look for moments of engagement and satisfaction on the job. Think and talk about your job in terms of challenge and engagement rather than drudgery and obligation. Encourage your children and loved ones to experience the joy that can occur in work or learning.

Another way to become more engaged and happier at work is to increase the challenge and skill involved in tasks that ordinarily don't result in flow, such as paperwork, filing, or assembly-line work. When doing something you consider boring, can you raise the bar for your performance by setting

small goals, adding some mental games, or otherwise enhancing a task that doesn't require your full attention? Inventing your own challenges can also give you a sense of control in a work environment that may otherwise provide little autonomy.

One disappointment revealed by research was how little of people's leisure time is spent in flow. In the study, driving was the most uniformly positive flow experience, while watching TV was far more likely to be non-flow time. Watching TV may be relaxing (and sometimes you may truly need some downtime), but it isn't particularly satisfying. If you suspect you spend too much time watching TV, look for leisure activities that involve using your skills (carpentry, sports, artwork, music) and see how you feel afterward. Try a mix of physical activities, social interactions, and hobbies that require skill or provide a richer sensory experience (see "Exercise #4: The skill factor," at right).

Of course, flow isn't guaranteed when you pick up your paintbrush, hockey stick, or flute. You can best fan the flames of flow with these strategies:

- Aim to surprise yourself by paying close attention in order to notice something novel in an everyday experience.
- Choose an activity that can provide you with new feelings, experiences, and insights, and allow your feelings and awareness to flow without attempting to interfere.
- Pay attention to your bodily sensations and posture.
- Overcome the urge to stop at every mistake. You are likely to be at your best when you focus on what you want to accomplish or experience and don't allow mistakes to be distracting.
- Accept that physical symptoms of nervousness are normal and will naturally ease off once you get going.
- Try to work or play with others.
- Maintain your sense of humor.

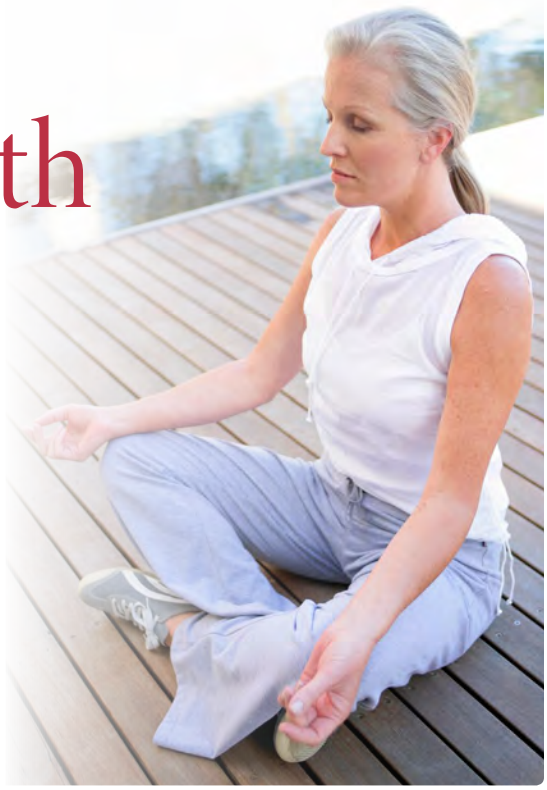
When an activity itself—say, dusting or waiting in line at the bank—isn't likely to be flow-inducing, you can still create your own opportunity for flow. Stop and find ways to experience the moment. What do you hear? Are the birds singing? What do you feel? Your breath? Or the breeze on your skin? Or focus on how your weight shifts as you stand. By focusing on the sensations of the moment, rather than thoughts about what's happening, you're more likely to be engaged and experience flow. When you chat with friends or family members, make these conversations more engaging by asking questions that lead to thoughtful answers. Don't assume you already know their biography, opinions, and approach to life. Actively listen to what they are saying and try to learn something new.

Lastly, don't delay. Procrastination is the enemy of flow. In college-based studies, the more students procrastinate, the less likely they are to experience flow when studying and learning. Students were most likely to procrastinate when they felt that their skills were out of sync with the challenges they perceived in the task at hand, and if they were very self-conscious about their abilities and how their efforts would be judged. If you find yourself procrastinating, take a look at the task ahead. Can you reframe it as a want-to rather than a have-to activity? Can you balance the skill/challenge ratio, perhaps by breaking it down into smaller chunks that you can plunge into without being overwhelmed?

EXERCISE #4
The skill factor

To identify flow activities, spend several days alternating leisure activities that involve skill and those that don't. Try Scrabble or chess one day, TV or an easy word puzzle the next; discussion of politics or literature versus relaxed conversation; or reading a biography versus browsing *People* magazine. Keep notes on how you feel after the activity and the next day. If you find that the more challenging activities are more absorbing and leave you happier and more satisfied, keep that in mind the next time you have a choice of how to spend your leisure time. Go with the flow!

Mindfulness: A path to well-being



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Meditation is one way to practice mindfulness. But you can also practice informally, by simply being present in the moment.

Mindfulness is the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment—and accepting it without judgment. While savoring involves attending to and appreciating pleasurable sensations (see "Savoring pleasure," page 20), mindfulness involves opening fully to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. The cultivation of mindfulness has roots in Buddhism, but most religions include some type of prayer or meditation technique that helps shift your thoughts away from your usual preoccupations toward an appreciation of the moment and a larger perspective on life.

It can be especially hard to be mindful when you're multitasking—how can you take stock of how you feel in the present moment if you are also folding the laundry, keeping one eye on the kids, and trying to watch your favorite TV show? Or perhaps you plan your day while listening to the radio and commuting to work. In the rush to accomplish necessary tasks, you may find yourself losing your connection with the present moment—missing out on what you're doing and how you're feeling. Did you notice whether you felt well-rested this morning, or whether the forsythia is in bloom along your route to work?

Mindfulness is now being examined scientifically and has been found to be a key element in happiness. Professor emeritus Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder and former director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, helped to bring the practice of mindfulness meditation into mainstream health care by demonstrating that practicing mindfulness can bring improvements in both physical and psychological symptoms, as well as positive changes in health attitudes and behaviors.

What's the connection between mindfulness and well-being? Increasing your capacity for mindfulness supports many attitudes that contribute to a satisfied life. Being mindful makes it easier to savor the pleasures in life as they occur, helps you become fully engaged in activities, and creates a greater capacity to deal with adverse events. By focusing on the here and now, many people who practice mindfulness find that they

are less likely to get caught up in worries about the future or regrets over the past, are less preoccupied with concerns about success and self-esteem, and are better able to form deep connections with others.

If greater well-being isn't enough of an incentive, scientists are finding that mindfulness techniques can help alleviate anxiety, pain, and depression. And a 2015 review in the journal *PLOS One* found evidence that mindfulness-based therapies helped alleviate stress and other negative emotions in people with cancer, heart disease, and chronic pain.

There are also many connections between mindfulness and contentment or overall satisfaction. Mindfulness practices can support savoring, flow, gratitude, engagement, and other paths to happiness. It can also change the brain in ways that make you feel better, with less stress and a better mood (see "Can mindfulness change your brain?" at right).

Psychotherapists have turned to mindfulness as an important element in the treatment of a number of problems, including depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, couples' conflicts, anxiety disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Some experts believe that it works, in part, by helping people to accept their experiences—including painful emotions—rather than react to them with aversion and avoidance. It's become increasingly common for mindfulness meditation to be combined with psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy (see "Positive psychology during difficult times," page 35). This development makes good sense, since both meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy share the common goal of helping people gain perspective on irrational, maladaptive, and self-defeating thoughts.

How to learn mindfulness

Mindfulness is generally cultivated by training the mind to focus its attention on the present moment in a systematic way, while accepting whatever arises. Mindfulness meditation and a variety of related techniques, including yoga and tai chi, all involve mindfulness. Some types of meditation primarily involve concentration—repeating a phrase or focusing on the sensation of breathing, allowing the parade of thoughts that inevitably arise to come and go. Concentration meditation techniques, as well as activities such as tai chi or yoga, can induce the relaxation response—a calming of our emergency fight-or-flight reaction—which is very valuable in reducing the harmful effects of overreacting to stresses.

Mindfulness meditation builds upon concentration practices. In

Can mindfulness change your brain?

A rapidly growing number of studies demonstrate that mindfulness meditation leads to measurable changes in your brain's activity and physical structure. For example, in one set of studies, University of Wisconsin researcher Richard Davidson used brain imaging to identify a link between the practice of mindfulness and positive emotion in the brain. He first observed that the right prefrontal cortex was active in people who were anxious, depressed, or hypervigilant (scanning their environment for danger), while the left prefrontal cortex was more active in people who had fewer negative moods. After gathering data on the brains of hundreds of people, he found that the person with the most dramatic left-side activity was a Tibetan monk with extensive experience practicing mindfulness meditation. Further studies showed that not only did other monks share this characteristic, but a shift from right-sided to left-sided activation also occurred in a group of high-tech office workers after they had been trained to do mindfulness meditation. The trained workers also reported improved mood and more engagement in their activities. They even had stronger immune system responses, compared with workers who had not learned to practice mindfulness meditation.

In a separate study at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, researchers followed 26 people who were stressed but otherwise healthy. Participants rated their stress levels and underwent brain scans before and after a two-month-long intervention of mindfulness-based stress reduction. They reported far lower stress levels after the intervention, which correlated with reductions in grey-matter density within the amygdala, a brain structure involved in the processing and expression of fear, anger, and related emotions.

Mindfulness techniques

There is more than one way to practice mindfulness, but the goal of any mindfulness technique is to achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation by deliberately paying attention to thoughts and sensations without judgment. This allows the mind to refocus on the present moment. Many approaches to mindfulness are forms of meditation.

Basic mindfulness meditation: Sit quietly and focus on your natural breathing or on a word or mantra that you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgment and return to your focus on breath or mantra.

Body sensations: Notice subtle body sensations such as an itch or tingling without judgment and let them pass. Notice each part of your body in succession from head to toe.

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Sights and sounds: Notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them "sight," "sound," "smell," "taste," or "touch" without judgment and let them go.

Emotions: Allow emotions to be present without judging them. Practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: "joy," "anger," "frustration."

Urge surfing: When you feel a craving or an urge (to eat excess food, use an addictive substance, or practice an unwanted behavior), acknowledge the urge and understand that it will pass. Notice how your body feels as the craving enters. Replace the wish for the craving to go away with the certain knowledge that it will subside.

mindfulness meditation, once you establish concentration, you observe the flow of inner thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judging them as good or bad. You also notice external sensations such as sounds, sights, and touch that make up your moment-to-moment experience. The challenge is to avoid latching on to a particular idea, emotion, or sensation, or getting caught in thinking about the past or the future. Instead you watch what comes and goes in your mind, while trying to discover which mental habits produce feelings of well-being or suffering. For example, you might notice that whenever you try to push an unpleasant thought out of awareness, or suppress a negative feeling, it tends to return. Or you might see that holding on to wishes for pleasure actually creates a lot of stress. At times, this process may not seem relaxing at all, but over time it provides a key to greater happiness and self-awareness as you become comfortable with a wider and wider range of your experiences.

Above all, mindfulness practice involves accepting whatever arises in your awareness at each moment. It involves being kind and forgiving toward yourself. If your mind wanders into planning, daydreaming, or criticism, notice where it has gone and gently redirect it to sensations in the present. If you miss your intended meditation session, you simply start again. By practicing accepting your experience during meditation, it becomes easier to accept whatever comes your way during the rest of your day.

You can learn to meditate on your own, following instructions from books, DVDs, online, or apps such as Headspace or Buddhify. (Also see "Mindfulness exercises to try," page 28.) However, you may benefit from the support of an instructor or group to answer questions and help you stay motivated. Look for someone using meditation in a way compatible with your beliefs and goals.

If you have a medical condition, you may prefer a medically oriented program that incorporates meditation. Ask your physician or hospital about local groups, or check one of the medical websites listed in the "Resources" section (see page 43). Insurance companies increasingly cover the cost of meditation instruction.

In addition to formal meditation, you can also cultivate mindfulness informally by focusing your attention on your moment-to-moment sensations during everyday activities. This is done by single-tasking—doing one thing at a time and giving it your full attention. As you floss your teeth, pet

Mindful Harvard

In 2014, Cambridge Health Alliance, a group of hospitals in and around Cambridge, Mass., that are affiliated with Harvard Medical School, created a Center for Mindfulness and Compassion in an effort to integrate mindfulness-based practices into primary care. By training health care providers to introduce their patients to the benefits of mindfulness practice, the center hopes to expand its use to people who might not otherwise try it.

One potential benefit of providing mindfulness instruction in primary care is that it can enhance "self-regulation," which may improve how well people follow their doctors' orders—including instructions to exercise, eat well, and take their medications as directed, says the center's director, Dr. Zev Schuman-Olivier. Patients can join mindfulness-training groups within their community health care facilities, including sessions taught in languages other than English.

While such efforts constitute the center's core project, a number of related projects are also in the works, such as offering gratitude training for faculty members and bringing mindfulness training into local schools and businesses.

the dog, or eat an apple, slow down the process and be fully present as it unfolds and involves all of your senses.

Mindfulness exercises to try

If mindfulness meditation appeals to you, here are two mindfulness exercises you can try on your own.

A meditation exercise

This exercise teaches basic mindfulness meditation. (Free guided recordings of this and other mindfulness meditations narrated by Dr. Ronald Siegel, the Harvard faculty editor of this Special Health Report, are available at www.mindfulness-solution.com.)

1. Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
2. Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.
3. Once you've narrowed your concentration in this way, begin to widen your focus. Become aware of sounds, sensations, and ideas.
4. Embrace and consider each thought or sensation without judging it good or bad. If your mind starts to race, return your focus to your breathing. Then expand your awareness again.

The benefits of mindfulness meditation tend to be related to the duration and frequency of your practice—the more you do, the greater the effect it usually has. Most people find that it takes at least 20 minutes for the mind to begin to settle, so this is a reasonable way to start. If you're ready for a more serious commitment, Jon Kabat-Zinn recommends 45 minutes of meditation at least six days a week. But you can get started by practicing the techniques described here for shorter periods and still derive a benefit.

Practicing awareness in daily life

A less formal approach to mindfulness can also help you to stay in the present and fully participate in your life. You can choose any task or moment to practice informal mindfulness, whether you are eating, showering, walking, touching a partner, or playing with a child or grandchild. Attending to these points will help:

1. Start by bringing your attention to the sensations in your body.
2. Breathe in through your nose, allowing the air to fill your lungs. Let your abdomen expand fully. Then breathe out slowly through your mouth. This pattern may slow down your heart rate and lower your blood pressure, helping you relax. Notice the sensations of each inhalation and exhalation.
3. Proceed with the task at hand slowly and with full deliberation.
4. Engage your senses fully. Notice each sight, touch, and sound so that you savor every sensation.
5. When you notice that your mind has wandered from the task at hand, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of the moment.

Self-compassion

Think about how you treat yourself when you make a mistake, fail to reach a goal, or find yourself drifting into a general pattern of inaction or lack of direction. Do you blame yourself or feel worthless? Or do you console yourself, take time to nurture yourself, and gradually build the motivation to try again? If you tend to beat yourself up when things go wrong, you, like most people, can use a little more self-compassion in your life.

Defining self-compassion

Psychologists who are interested in topics related to positive psychology, mindfulness, and the science of happiness and satisfaction are just beginning to study self-compassion. Self-compassion means "being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than flagellating ourselves with self-criticism," says Kristin Neff, associate professor of human development at the University of Texas, Austin, who developed the first scale to measure self-compassion.

How does it work? According to Neff, just as watching another person's suffering can cause you to feel moved by that person's pain and experience an urge to help, so too does compassion toward one's self bring many benefits for both physical and mental health. She outlines three components to self-compassion:

Self-kindness. This is the ability to be warm and understanding toward yourself when you suffer, to soothe and nurture yourself when confronting pain rather than getting angry.

Common humanity. This is the awareness that you are not alone in your imperfection. And because everyone else makes mistakes, too, it is easier to forgive yourself your own transgressions.

Mindfulness. This is the nonjudgmental observation of your own thoughts, feelings, and actions, without trying to suppress or deny them (see "Mindfulness: A path to well-being," page 25). When you look in the mirror and don't like what you see, accept the bad with the good with a compassionate attitude.

Many people have trouble with the concept of self-compassion. They fear it may lead to self-indulgence. They worry that if they are too easy on themselves they will fail to be motivated, or become lazy and less interested in achieving their goals. They think of it as "letting yourself off the hook" or wallowing in self-pity. But this line of thinking has been shown to be incorrect. Instead, people who are self-compassionate are motivated to take on new challenges and learn new skills because these activities make them happy and because they are not afraid to fail.

For example, dieting is an effort at which people repeatedly fail and must motivate themselves to try again. A study published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* showed how self-compassion can help people stick to their diets. Dieters who break

Self-esteem vs. self-compassion

It's easy to confuse the concepts of self-esteem and self-compassion. But while self-esteem entails judging and evaluating yourself compared with others, self-compassion concerns being warm and understanding toward yourself even at times of failure.

SELF-ESTEEM	SELF-COMPASSION
Based on self-evaluation	Based on acceptance of oneself
Based on comparison with others	Based on caring for oneself, not on comparisons with others
Based on feeling special, different, or above average	Based on embracing our common humanity, not on feeling superior to others
Associated with an egotistic lack of tolerance for alternate viewpoints	Emphasizes interconnection and openness rather than defensiveness
Fluctuates depending on whether you feel up or down	Exists consistently whether you feel up or down

their diets by eating too much often tend to blame themselves. They may find themselves thinking, "I'm such a pig. I can't believe I ate that," and then eat even more food, figuring that it's too late to stick to the plan. But women in this study who learned to feel self-compassion were less likely to overeat in reaction to having gone off their diets. They were more likely to be forgiving, perhaps thinking instead, "Nobody's perfect. Everyone indulges from time to time. I'll get back on track now." In a similar way, self-compassion can be useful in quitting smoking.

People sometimes confuse self-esteem with self-compassion. The two are quite different (see "Self-esteem vs. self-compassion," page 29). Self-esteem requires you to compare yourself to others—to feel that you're "better" than other people in some way. By contrast, self-compassion requires no comparison to others. And more importantly, self-compassion is available whether you are feeling up or down. In fact, it is often stronger when things are not going your way. Self-esteem, on the other hand, tends to plummet when things go badly.

Why develop self-compassion?

Forgiving and nurturing yourself seem to have benefits in their own right, but they do even more than that. They set the stage for better health, relationships, and general well-being, says Neff. Lower levels of anxiety and depression have been observed in people with higher self-compassion. Self-compassionate people recognize when they are suffering and are kind to themselves at these times, thereby lowering their own anxiety levels and related depression.

According to Neff, another benefit is greater wisdom and emotional intelligence, suggesting that self-compassion is a wise way to deal with stress and other difficulties in life. Several aspects of well-being have been documented to be associated with self-compassion, including feelings of social connection and life satisfaction. Some research suggests that self-compassionate people experience more happiness, optimism, curiosity, and positive attitudes compared with people who are less self-compassionate.

As for motivation, self-compassionate people have been found to aim just as high as others, but with the recognition that they may not always reach their goals. Self-compassionate people display less self-handicapping behavior, such as procrastination, than those who lack self-compassion. And they are motivated to learn and grow, but are not as concerned with performance goals or the desire to enhance self-esteem. "Thus self-compassionate people are motivated to achieve, but for intrinsic reasons, not because they want to garner social approval," Neff says.

Behaviors that foster better health may also be linked to self-compassion, including the motivation to control weight and quit smoking.

Even interpersonal relationships may benefit from self-compassion. In one study, the partners of self-compassionate people described them as being more emotionally connected, accepting, and supportive of autonomy. They were also described as less detached, controlling, and verbally or physically aggressive than those who were less self-compassionate.

One surprise came when researchers investigated whether self-compassionate people were more compassionate toward others. As it turns out, they were not. In fact, the research suggested that people who are self-critical are often more likely to be compassionate toward others and to defer their own needs to the needs of others or acquiesce to others' demands. People who are self-compassionate, on the other hand, tend to find a compromise with others without fully subverting their own needs.

Compassion training at Stanford

Compassion for other people is important, too, and investigators have repeatedly found that developing compassion for others is a reliable path to well-being.

Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education is dedicated to furthering the understanding of the neural, mental, and social bases for compassion. Housed within the university's department of neurosurgery, the center conducts research on the brain-based origins of compassion, how compassion affects behavior, and methods for cultivating compassion and promoting altruism. Researchers also provide "compassion cultivation training," an eight-week program on improving resilience and feeling more connected to others.

Learn to have self-compassion

While some people come by self-compassion naturally, others have to learn it. Luckily, it is a learnable skill. Several methods have been proposed, and training programs are being developed.

Harvard psychologist Christopher Germer, in his book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion* (see "Resources," page 43), suggests that you can bring self-compassion into your life via five means: physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual. He and other experts in the field have proposed a wide variety of ways to help foster self-compassion. Here are a few:

Comfort your body. Eat something healthy. Lie down and rest your body. Massage your own neck, feet, or hands. Take a walk. Anything you can do to improve how you feel physically gives you a dose of self-compassion.

Write a letter to yourself. Describe a situation that caused you to feel pain (a breakup with a lover, a job loss, a poorly received presentation). Write a letter to yourself describing the situation without blaming anyone. Nurture your feelings.

Give yourself encouragement. Think of what you would say to a good friend if the same thing had happened to him or her. Direct these compassionate responses toward yourself when the pain feels stronger.

Practice mindfulness. Self-compassion adds another dimension to the acceptance of ourselves while we're in pain. Neff and Germer developed an eight-week program, Mindful Self-Compassion, which they tested in a randomized trial comparing program participants to people in a wait-list control group. As hoped, those who completed the program developed greater compassion both for themselves and for others and also reported less depression, stress, and anxiety. The more people practiced the skills they learned in the program, the greater their improvements. To learn more about this training, see www.mindfulselfcompassion.org and www.self-compassion.org.

Finding your life's meaning

What gives your life meaning? Only you know. For some people, it is their religious beliefs. For others, it's the future of their children, or a positive contribution to their community, the larger world, art, literature, or the health and well-being of others.

One thing that is more universal, though: to feel that your life is well-lived, you need to look beyond your own immediate pleasures and comforts—and even beyond engaging fully in your activities, savoring your life's pleasures, and experiencing positive emotions. As philosophers, religious leaders, and even political leaders have argued through the ages, lasting happiness requires that you focus on concerns outside of yourself and feel that your life has purpose. In other words, you need both pleasure *and* meaning in your life in order to feel satisfied.

Studies have examined the effects of having a strong sense of meaning. For example, in a study of 10,000 people in Hungary, participants said how strongly they agreed with a series of statements such as "I feel my life is part of a larger plan." The results showed that life meaning was linked to an enhanced sense of physical and emotional well-being. In addition, according to a later analysis from that study, people who perceived a stronger sense of meaning in their lives were more likely to protect their own lives. For example, nonsmokers and former smokers scored higher on meaning than current smokers.

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To feel that your life is well-lived, you need to look beyond your own immediate pleasures. Activities that increase your engagement in life and help others can prove most fruitful.

EXERCISE #5
A look back at your life

If you died tomorrow, how might you be remembered? Write an obituary for yourself that honestly encapsulates your best qualities and accomplishments as well as those things you might have done better. When you describe how you spent your life, what aspects give you most satisfaction? What effect have you had on the world around you and the people you came in contact with? Has your life mattered? Use your obituary as a vehicle for thinking about your goals for the rest of your life, and taking active steps to reach them.

But what is a meaningful life? Positive psychology pioneer Martin Seligman describes it as one in which you "use your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are" (see "Finding your inner strengths," page 14). In his research, the search for a meaningful life is a way of seeking happiness that is distinct from a general pursuit of pleasurable experiences or highly engaging activities. This does not mean, however, that you should pursue meaningful activity to the exclusion of pleasurable activities and flow experiences—all three are important components of happiness and well-being, and they tend to foster one another.

For example, in studies at the University of Missouri, activities that created more positive emotions also enhanced people's experience of meaning in their daily lives. Some positive psychology researchers have proposed that activities that increase engagement and meaning in life will prove most fruitful in increasing lasting happiness. An exercise in evaluating your leg-

acy may help you recognize where you find the most value in your own life (see "Exercise #5: A look back at your life," page 32).

Practice random acts of kindness

While the specific values and purposes you identify in your life may differ from time to time and from other people's, meaning is almost universally found in concern for others—the desire to reduce their suffering and improve their lives.

In an experiment at two Japanese colleges reported in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, students were rated on happiness and gratitude at various intervals. Half the students were assigned to make a notation every time they were kind to someone, and to report the number of kind acts each day. The other half did not track their acts of kindness. The students who tracked their acts of kindness rated higher on happiness and gratefulness after the experiment, while the students who didn't keep count stayed about the same (see "Exercise #6: Kindness counts," below).

The "warm glow" that comes from helping or sharing with others seems to be an innate part of human nature, and has even been demonstrated in very young children. In a 2012 study published in *PLOS One*, children (all under age 2) were introduced to puppets who "liked treats." A researcher then gave treats to puppets, who "ate" the treats with much pleasure. Next, the children met a new, treat-loving puppet. The researchers then (1) "found" eight treats and gave them to the child in a bowl; (2) found a treat and gave it to the puppet; (3) found a treat and asked the child to give the puppet a treat from the child's own bowl. Getting treats made the children happy, but sharing their own treats made them even happier.

Several studies have demonstrated the link between helping others and experiencing happiness. In a study published in *Social Science and Medicine*, researchers from the London School of Economics examined the relationship between volunteering and measures of happiness in a large group of adults in the United States. Their straightforward finding: the more people volunteered, the happier they were. Compared with people who never volunteered, the chance of being "very happy" rose 7% for those volunteering monthly, 12% for those volunteering every two to four weeks, and 16% for those volunteering weekly.

> **"Only the development of compassion and understanding for others can bring us the tranquility and happiness we all seek."**
>
> —*Dalai Lama*

Giving time to religious organizations had the greatest impact. You might think that a 16% increase in the number of people feeling happy seems small, but in this study, volunteering increased the probability of being very happy as much as did having an income of $75,000 to $100,000 compared with an income of $20,000.

Time is a precious resource, and the ways you spend it can have a big impact on your well-being. But research has also shown that how people spend their money makes a difference. In a study from the University of British Columbia and Harvard Business School, published in *Science*, researchers measured how happy 16 employees reported feeling one month before and six to eight weeks after receiving their profit-sharing bonus, which ranged from about $3,000 to $8,000. Employees who spent a greater proportion of their bonus on others or made charitable donations with it reported greater happiness than employees who spent more of the bonus on themselves—regardless of the actual size of the bonus.

EXERCISE #6
Kindness counts

Every day for a week, make a note whenever you do something kind, whether large or small. Tally your daily totals. Did your acts of kindness increase during the week? Does counting your kindnesses make you feel any different? Happier? More grateful? If so, it's a win-win strategy you can use every day to improve your own life and the lives of others.

In a second study, the researchers asked 46 participants to rate their happiness in the morning. Each participant then received an envelope containing either $5 or $20, and was instructed to spend the money by 5 p.m. Half of the participants were assigned to spend the money on themselves, the other half to buy something for another person or donate the money to charity. Again, participants who spent the money on others reported feeling happier at the end of the day than those who spent it on themselves. The actual amount they spent on others didn't matter.

Experiment in your own life with time spent in altruistic activities versus those designed to please yourself only. When you have a free afternoon, flip a coin. Heads, do something self-indulgent (for instance, get a manicure). Tails, do something to help your community or another person (for example, visit an elderly person). Notice how you feel at the time and in the hours and days that follow. Use that information as you make choices about spending your time.

Positive psychology during difficult times

Can positive psychology help you when you are anxious, depressed, or under stress? As noted earlier, strategies such as practicing gratitude or savoring pleasure can help prolong the good feelings that accompany a positive event, such as a pay raise.

Interestingly, they may also help you develop the resilience to handle difficulties more easily and bounce back more rapidly after negative events. If you develop the habit of counting your blessings, for example, you may be better able to appreciate the good in your life that remains even after a painful event like a job loss or a death. Greater engagement in hobbies or nature and good relationships with family and friends can not only provide meaning in your life, but also be sources of support that help sustain you in difficult times. Knowing your strengths can help you develop realistic goals when your life changes (see "Finding your inner strengths," page 14). And helping others, even when you are struggling, can increase your positive feelings and help you gain perspective.

Studies are beginning to provide intriguing evidence that positive psychology techniques can indeed be valuable in times of stress, grief, or other difficulties. Here are some examples:

Gratitude. In one study, people dealing with an unpleasant emotional memory were given one of three writing assignments: write something neutral, write about the unpleasant event, or write about positive consequences from the event that they could be grateful for (see "Exercise #7: One door closes, one door opens," above right). In results published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, those who focused on gratitude in their writing gained more closure on the incident, had fewer intrusive memories of the event, and had less emotionally fraught memories, compared with participants whose writing did not focus on gratitude.

In a landmark study on gratitude interventions published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, people with chronic neuromuscular diseases kept a daily gratitude journal and completed daily rating forms about their experiences. Those counting their blessings experienced more positive feelings, optimism, life satisfaction, and connectedness with others—and the positive changes were echoed in reports that their significant others kept about them. The participants benefited physically as well, sleeping longer and waking more refreshed.

Strengths. In a Veterans Affairs psychiatric rehabilitation program, patients were given the opportunity to take the 240-question VIA survey (see "What are virtues and strengths?" on page 14) and receive a printout of their five signature strengths. The clinicians reported in the journal *Psychiatric Services* that participants felt pride in their discoveries, had a sense of accomplishment, and improved their mood just by taking the inventory. Later, many of the veterans referred to their lists of strengths for direction and encouragement as they engaged in therapy and made education and career plans for their futures.

Savoring pleasure. Positive reminiscence is not only pleasurable, but it also helps people gain a new perspective that can help them through current difficulties. In a study from the Netherlands, when depressed older adults used the tool of positive reminiscence, they not only thought more positively about

EXERCISE #7
One door closes, one door opens

Recall three occasions when you lost out on something important and write them down. What was the door that closed? What other door opened? How did you change from that experience? Do you recognize any benefits you are grateful for? This exercise can help you recognize that hardships may bring benefits and can help you assimilate different experiences and find value and satisfaction in your present life.

Healthy body, healthy mind

How you treat your physical body affects your mind and your level of happiness. This concept may not be new, but it is buoyed by new evidence. Take sleep and exercise.

Healthy sleep can help both mind and body. For example, in a study of working women, getting a good night's sleep made a huge difference in how much women enjoyed all types of activities during the day—far bigger than the influence of income, marital status, religion, or time pressures.

Exercise helps counteract the depressant effects of a sedentary lifestyle. Humans are designed for physical activity, and regular exercise has been shown to enhance well-being and help prevent or significantly reduce anxiety and depression. Older people who walk for pleasure and who are physically active during their leisure time have higher well-being scores than those who don't engage in those activities, according to a study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

In a study published in *Psychosomatic Medicine*, when 202 people with major depression were randomly assigned to supervised or home exercise programs, the antidepressant sertraline (Zoloft), or a placebo, four months later the exercisers were just as likely to have entered remission as those taking medication. In Britain, exercise is even recommended over medication as one of the main treatments for mild depression, according to the government-sponsored National Health Service website.

their past but also began to evaluate themselves, their social relationships, and their future more positively.

Flow. When you're fully engaged in activities, you are less preoccupied by mundane thoughts. In addition, flow experiences can lessen more disturbing thoughts. In a study published in the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, women living with cancer had fewer intrusive thoughts about their illness and reduced stress when they had flow experiences while creating artwork.

Meaning. In a study of patients who'd had heart attacks, those who blamed their heart attack on others were more likely to have a second attack in the next eight years. People who perceived some benefit in their experience, such as appreciating life more, were less likely to have a recurrence.

Mindfulness. For three decades, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs (first developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical School) have helped reduce physical and psychological symptoms in people facing a variety of challenges, including cancer and chronic pain. As an example, the skin lesions of people undergoing ultraviolet light therapy for severe psoriasis cleared more rapidly when people listened to an recorded mindfulness intervention during treatment sessions.

Taking positive psychology beyond yourself

Happiness, of course, isn't a totally solo enterprise. Your relationships can have a large impact on your sense of well-being. The more you connect with people—even brief exchanges with people you don't know well—the more content you may feel. In one experiment, researchers had people carry around two tiny clickers. When they interacted with someone with whom they had a close social tie, they clicked one clicker. If they interacted with someone they didn't know well, they clicked the other one. People felt better on days with more interactions with close social ties. But they also felt better when they had more interactions with weak social ties.

Your actions and moods can even influence the people with whom you come in contact—and there's evidence that when you become happier, it helps those around you increase their own happiness. Results from the large Framingham Heart Study showed that when people became happy, their nearby friends experienced a 25% greater chance of becoming happy, and their next-door neighbors had a 34% increase. In reporting on this study in *BMJ*, researchers from the University of California, San Diego, and Harvard Medical School concluded that "people's happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected." So working toward your own happiness can benefit the people around you as well.

Thinkstock

The more you connect with people, the more content you tend to feel. And when you become happier, it helps those around you increase their own happiness.

Positive relationships

Day-to-day happiness in a relationship takes effort, and the techniques of positive psychology can be useful tools in that quest.

At the beginning of a relationship, nothing is more fascinating for two people than learning about each other and negotiating the give-and-take of getting along. Long-term relationships can grow deeper and more intimate, but without some active attention, they can also deteriorate, as people repeat the same behaviors and anticipate the same reactions from their mates.

There is some evidence that applying principles from positive psychology can enhance relationships. Engaging in flow experiences together, for example, may lead to more positive feelings for each other, according to a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. In this study, which used the technique of experience sampling (see "What is flow?" on page 22), couples were contacted at random intervals and reported on their activity, mood, and satisfaction and closeness in their relationship. The researchers found that the way a couple spent their time together influenced the quality of their relationship. Watching television was pretty neutral, not making couples feel any better or worse about their relationship. In contrast, pursuing more flow-inviting activities as a couple—such as sailing, hiking, learning a new skill together, or other active leisure (including sex)—led to more positive feelings about the relationship, which lasted for more than five hours after the activity ended (see "Flow experiences to do together," page 38).

In a follow-up laboratory study at Western Washington University in which couples solved word puzzles together, the tasks with a flow-inviting balance of skill and challenge (the couple could successfully complete them, but it took work) made the couples feel better about their relationships than working on a puzzle that was too easy or too hard.

Mindfulness has also been linked to happier, more resilient relationships. In the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, researchers at the University of Rochester assessed people's mindfulness by looking at their self-ratings on 15 statements related to being focused in the present. Those with higher levels of mindfulness had more satisfactory relationships and a greater capacity to respond to conflicts constructively, with less stress and better communication.

Gratitude can also improve people's satisfaction with their relationships. Researchers at Harvard and other universities found a unique way to boost gratitude among those in long-term relationships. One group of participants spent 20 minutes writing about how they met their partner, dated, and ended up together. The others wrote about how they might never have met their partner, never have started dating, and not have ended up together. Those who contemplated not being with their partners showed the biggest gains in relationship satisfaction, the researchers reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. A later article in the same journal reported that conveying your appreciation for your partner can make your partner appreciate you more. Such shared gratitude leads both people to be more responsive to the other's needs—and to be more likely to stay in the relationship.

Relationships are a perfect place to introduce more expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and kindness. You and your partner can support each other in your quest for a happy, meaningful life.

Positive communities

When the American Psychological Association first adopted a focus on positive psychology, it explicitly included the study of how institutions such as schools, employers, and providers of medical care and social services can encourage people to live happier, more meaningful lives—both for the benefit of individuals and for the improved functioning of the larger organizations. A few examples follow:

The workplace. Mindfulness training programs are gaining traction in the workplace, according to a 2014 article in the *Harvard Business Review*. One example is a two-day program called Search Inside Yourself, developed at Google, that incorporates training in mindfulness, self-awareness, optimism, resilience, empathy, and compassion. At its main campus in Silicon Valley, Calif., Google has a team devoted to teaching mindfulness meditation and offers regular practice sessions for workers to attend either in person or online throughout the day. Google also offers retreats, keynote talks, coaching, and a four-week training program, done offsite. A diverse array of clients including Ford, Farmers Insurance, Comcast, and Genentech have brought the training to their companies.

Aetna, one of the country's biggest health insurance companies, has developed a program called Mindfulness at Work in collaboration with Duke Integrative Medicine and eMindful, a provider of online and mobile interactive mindfulness programs. Aetna employees volunteered to participate in a study of the program, which teaches brief mindfulness practices (five to 15 minutes) targeting workplace stress and work-life balance. Those who underwent the training—either online or in person—had a 36% reduction in perceived stress, compared with an 18% decrease among those in a control group. The study authors,

Flow experiences to do together

Following are some types of activities during which people often experience flow. See what works for you.

- Dance
- Meditate
- Play music or sing
- Play tennis
- Make love
- Play board or video games
- Collaborate on cooking dinner
- Ride bikes
- Walk in the woods looking for birds and wildflowers
- Pray or attend services
- Practice yoga

whose findings were published in 2012 in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, note that stress saps productivity and morale in the workplace, and that stressed employees also have higher health care expenses. The program is now available to Aetna employees nationwide, and more than 13,000 have participated in it to date. In addition, 20 companies for which Aetna provides insurance coverage have implemented the Mindfulness at Work program.

In 2015, one of the best-designed studies to date about the potential benefits of mindfulness in the workplace was published the journal *PLOS One*. Researchers surveyed 3,270 factory workers in Taiwan to identify those with high levels of psychological distress and invited particularly unhappy workers to participate in the study. The 144 workers who ultimately agreed were assigned to one of two groups. The first group completed an eight-week mindfulness training program consisting of weekly two-hour classes at work and 45 minutes of daily meditation homework. The other was a control group, who reported regularly on their psychological well-being but didn't receive any mindfulness training. Compared with the control group, the workers who took the mindfulness class reported feeling much better. They had less prolonged fatigue—that feeling of exhaustion that doesn't go away even after having a chance to rest. They also felt less stressed, reported reduced anxiety and depression, and had fewer sleep difficulties, aches and pains, and problems getting along with others.

Health care. Some clinicians have already embraced the concepts of positive psychology as a preventive health strategy. Case managers working to ensure that people get the medical and mental health services they need have adopted a strengths-based approach that helps patients appreciate their own strengths and assume more control over decisions about their care. As an example, people who had recently been diagnosed with HIV were significantly more likely to get appropriate medical care if they met with a case manager who helped them identify their personal strengths and abilities and formulate a plan to get the help they needed.

Schools. Positive psychology offers many possibilities for using the concept of flow to adapt assignments so that each child is engaged and challenged. A 2012 article in the journal *Mindfulness* reviewed the research on the integration of mindfulness training in students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Since 2005, at least 14 studies of programs that train students in mindfulness suggest that the training offers a range of benefits for students, including improvements in working memory, academic and social skills, and emotional control.

In related research, Mindful Schools, a not-for-profit training organization, offers online courses for teachers to learn mindfulness and then teach the practice to children in their classrooms. Mindful Schools partnered with researchers from the University of California, Davis, to conduct a pilot study on the program's effects in three public elementary schools in Oakland, Calif., and found that just four hours of mindfulness training led to improvements in students' attention, self-calming, social compliance, and showing care for others over a six-week period.

The military. Mindfulness training has proven promising for helping soldiers cope with psychological stress after they return from a military deployment. But the training may also be valuable for preparing soldiers for the demands and stress they face before deployment. Before leaving for active duty, soldiers need to psychologically prepare for dangerous, high-stress situations, while also having to leave loved ones. Army researchers found that a special type of training, called Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training, helped the participants prevent lapses in attention and "mind wandering."

Using positive psychology in psychotherapy

Many of the ideas of positive psychology have long been part of psychotherapy. Skilled therapists of all types help people recognize their strengths and identify paths toward greater fulfillment and happiness. For example, feminist therapy usually tries to identify women's strengths (rather than focus on their weaknesses) and accept and validate women's feelings. Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in life and continuing to grow psy-

chologically. These approaches supplement models of psychotherapy that focus more on addressing negative patterns of thoughts and behaviors. Here are some therapies that use positive psychology explicitly:

Acceptance-based therapies. Several "acceptance-based" therapies use mindfulness, often combined with cognitive behavioral techniques, to help people who are depressed or anxious recognize when they are having negative thoughts ("no one likes me") and to accept and watch them dispassionately rather than getting caught up in the negativity. Some of these therapies also stress the positive psychology approach of identifying and acting in accordance with your values. Many hospitals and health centers now offer mindfulness and acceptance-based therapies.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which combines mindfulness practice with cognitive behavioral techniques, has been successfully used to treat depression and anxiety. The best-documented use is to prevent relapses of depression. Mindfulness meditation helps you recognize when your mood is beginning to plummet and helps you to focus on the present rather than on fears of the future or on reliving negative episodes from the past. In randomized clinical trials, MBCT cut the relapse rate in half for people with recurrent episodes of depression. In a randomized clinical trial published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, people with recurrent depression who participated in an eight-week group course of MBCT were significantly less likely to become depressed again than people who continued on antidepressants without therapy. During the study, people in the mindfulness group reported greater physical well-being and enjoyment in daily life, and 75% were able to discontinue their antidepressant medication.

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has become an established treatment for borderline personality disorder, a difficult-to-treat condition in which people experience extreme fluctuations in mood and in their opinions of themselves and others. Unable to tolerate frustration, people with borderline personality disorder often lash out, and their lives are characterized by chaotic and difficult relationships and by self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, self-mutilation, and suicide attempts. Mindfulness skills learned as part of DBT help patients watch their thoughts and emotions nonjudgmentally, enabling them to better tolerate distress and gain more control over their reactions. In one two-year study, patients treated with DBT had far fewer suicide attempts and psychiatric hospitalizations, and they were more likely to stick with their treatment.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is increasingly used to treat a remarkable range of psychological difficulties. While it doesn't teach mindfulness meditation, ACT helps people to see that their thoughts are just thoughts, rather than reality, and to see themselves as the observer of the thoughts rather than as the "thinker." It also helps people to accept their constantly changing kaleidoscope of pleasant and unpleasant experiences and to redirect their lives toward whatever provides meaning. ACT has been shown to lower the need for rehospitalization of psychotic patients, lessen social anxiety, reduce disability due to pain, aid smoking cessation, and reduce high-risk adolescent sexual behavior.

Finding help

Many types of professionals—from traditionally trained mental health professionals to motivational speakers and religious teachers—can draw on the findings of positive psychology to help you become happier. Choose your clinician or practitioner based on your particular needs and recommendations from trusted health professionals, friends, or family members. While a person with a mental health condition, such as depression, should seek help from a qualified, state-licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, or psychiatric nurse, someone in good mental health can seek more broadly among the variety of choices available. Following are some of the options.

Licensed mental health professionals

These practitioners come from a variety of academic disciplines but share knowledge of the causes of psychological distress and its treatment. Each field has its own strengths.

Licensed independent clinical social workers (L.I.C.S.W.) have earned a master's degree in social work (M.S.W.). Many hold state licenses to counsel patients and are covered by health insurance plans. They provide psychotherapy and are trained particularly to focus on a person's place in the family or wider community. They do not prescribe medication.

Psychiatric clinical nurse specialists (R.N.) have earned a degree in nursing with a specialty in providing psychiatric services. They often provide psychotherapy, are usually covered by health insurance, and may prescribe medications.

Psychiatrists (M.D.) are medical doctors who have attended medical school and specialized in psychiatric disorders. These doctors are state-licensed, and their services are covered by health insurance. They generally prescribe medications and may also provide psychotherapy.

Psychologists (Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D.) have earned a doctoral degree in psychology or a related field. They generally provide psychotherapy and may also do psychological testing. Many hold state licenses to treat patients and are covered by health insurance. Most psychologists do not prescribe medication. The field of positive psychology originated with and has been developed mainly by psychologists.

States also license a variety of other master's-level counselors with various areas of specialization.

Life coaches

There has been a surge in the number of people working as "life coaches" or "happiness coaches" who consult with people in person, via scheduled telephone sessions, or through email. Life coaches help people evaluate their values and goals, make plans for areas they wish to change, and take concrete steps to put these plans into action. Life coaches do not provide treatment for depression, anxiety, or other mental disorders and cannot prescribe medication. No degree is required to be a life coach, and there is no licensing requirement. However, some people who practice as life coaches also hold degrees and licenses in mental health fields. For example, some coaches are licensed psychotherapists who have partially or totally shifted their practices into coaching. Entrants to the field include people who have earned master's degrees in positive psychology; this training does not specifically train people as therapists or coaches, but it prepares graduates to incorporate positive psychology techniques into their existing practices.

It's important to note that the quality of programs for training coaches varies widely. Some are rigorous; others are not. Each coaching institute sets its own standards in deciding whom to accept and how much training to require for participants to earn a certificate. In some cases, there are no prerequisites for entering a coaching program, and the training may involve as little as a weekend seminar or watching a DVD. States do not license coaches or restrict who can call themselves life coaches or happiness coaches, as they do with licensed mental health professionals. Medical insurance doesn't cover the cost of using a coach (which can be hundreds of dollars a month).

Which is right for you?

A coach may be the right choice if you are generally doing well but would like some help getting started with positive psychology. Coaches are generally not the right place to start if you are struggling with anxiety, depression, substance abuse problems, or other mental health issues. Recognize, too, that it's a buyer-beware situation. Ask about training and experience, examine references, and schedule a trial session to evaluate the coach's listening skills, knowledge, and compatibility before entering into any type of contract for ongoing coaching.

Most positive psychology interventions carry little risk, but they may heighten your awareness of difficulties in your life. A coach who is not a mental health professional may not be able to assist you in identifying problems that could benefit from medication or psychotherapy or be able to help you process strong feelings that may emerge during the consultations. If you feel that your thoughts, behaviors, and feelings are interfering with your ability to function well in life, or you wish to evaluate the influence that past relationships and experiences are having on your current functioning, it is probably best to seek a traditionally trained mental health professional.

If you are intrigued by the principles and strategies

described in this report, ask whether the therapist's or coach's approach incorporates aspects of positive psychology—such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy or acceptance and commitment therapy. Other questions to ask:

- What is your training and experience?
- What areas do you specialize in?
- What type of treatments do you usually use with people in my situation?
- Do you accept my insurance plan?
- What are your fees?
- How long would you anticipate seeing me before we re-evaluate how things are going?
- Can I schedule an interview or trial session prior to making a decision?
- What is your experience working with people with my concerns?

Moving forward

Whether or not you need to consult a therapist, there is a great deal you can do on your own. Now that you've read about the range of strategies for cultivating greater satisfaction and contentment in your life, start by choosing just one technique that you expect might be a good fit and make time to practice it every day for a week—even if for just 10 minutes a day. In the following weeks, try switching to or adding other practices, experimenting with each at least a few times, to find those that resonate most with you.

Once you identify a technique or group of techniques that feels helpful, allow them to be part of your daily routine—like brushing your teeth. You may begin feeling just a little bit better right away. Even better, the positive effects will likely deepen with time, as your practice becomes a habit.

Recognize that at certain times, well-being may arise naturally and easily. At other times, when life's challenges intervene, a sense of contentment and ease may seem miles away. Stay the course and remember that allowing yourself to experience a full range of emotions can actually lessen your suffering.

But remember to pursue happiness lightly, let it arise naturally, and don't expect to find it once and for all. It turns out that well-being is cultivated through small choices made over a lifetime.

Resources

Organizations

Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania
Solomon Labs
3720 Walnut St.
Philadelphia, PA 19104
215-898-7173
www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu

This website at the Positive Psychology Center headed by Dr. Martin Seligman provides information about positive psychology research and its applications, quizzes with immediate feedback, and an opportunity to participate in online research. The center also oversees the Authentic Happiness website (www.authentichappiness.com), where you can find 18 different self-assessments to help you develop insights into yourself and the world around you. Your answers are anonymous but may be used for research by Dr. Seligman and other researchers.

VIA Institute on Character
312 Walnut St., Suite 3600
Cincinnati, OH 45202
www.viacharacter.org

The VIA Institute on Character does research on character strengths and virtues. The website features a full-length inventory of strengths, a brief survey, and a version for children. All can be taken and scored online.

Books

Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being
Martin E. P. Seligman
(2011, Free Press)

Seligman, a founder of the field of positive psychology, describes the five factors that contribute to happiness and well-being.

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
(Harper and Row, 2008)

A longtime researcher describes the "flow experience," in which one is fully and joyfully absorbed in an activity, and explains how you can apply the concept to become more engaged and satisfied in life.

Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment
Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D.
(McGraw-Hill, 2007)

The former teacher of Harvard's popular undergraduate course in positive psychology, Ben-Shahar uses examples from research, his course, and his life to encourage people to develop greater levels of happiness in their lives.

Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence
Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
(Harmony, 2013)

A psychologist uses neuroscience, humor, and his own experiences to offer a clear and practical path to rewiring your brain for happiness, contentment, and resilience.

The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want
Sonja Lyubomirsky
(Penguin Press, 2007)

A psychology professor and happiness researcher translates the positive psychology research into a detailed, individualized, step-by-step program for increasing happiness.

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions
Christopher K. Germer, Ph.D.
(Guilford Press, 2009)

A Harvard psychologist guides the reader on the path to self-compassion by explaining how to accept difficult emotions, embrace one's limitations, and be kind to yourself when you need it the most.

The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems
Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D.
(Guilford Press, 2009)

The Harvard faculty editor of this Special Health Report guides the reader toward understanding and practicing mindfulness in order to "see more clearly the habits of our minds that create unnecessary suffering."

Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself
Kristen Neff, Ph.D.
(William Morrow Paperbacks, 2015)

A psychologist who pioneered the investigation of self-compassion offers practical advice on how to limit self-criticism and offset its negative effects.

Spiritual Evolution: How We are Wired for Faith, Hope, and Love
George Vaillant, M.D.
(Broadway Books, 2008)

The head of Harvard's Study of Adult Development uses genetic, developmental, and anthropological research to show that positive emotions and spirituality are essential to human survival.

Stumbling on Happiness
Daniel Gilbert
(Vintage, 2007)

A Harvard professor of psychology humorously details his research probing how the mind makes predictions, often erroneous, about the future—and how this can send you in the wrong direction in the search for happiness.

Glossary

acceptance-based therapies: Psychotherapy techniques that use mindfulness to help a person recognize and accept thoughts and feelings but not be controlled by them.

eudaemonism: Fulfilling one's potential and identifying meaningful life pursuits.

experience sampling: A research technique for learning about people's activity patterns and psychological processes that involves contacting them at random times to obtain brief reports.

flow: The experience of being fully involved in an activity, marked by a sense of concentration and control and a lack of self-consciousness or awareness of time or discomfort.

happiness: Feelings of contentment or joy; the overall experience of pleasure, well-being, and meaning in life.

happiness set point: Your baseline level of happiness, determined largely by genetics, around which your moods fluctuate. After reacting to positive or negative life changes, people tend to return to their happiness set points.

hedonic treadmill: The human tendency to adapt to new circumstances and come to consider them normal, so that the emotional effects (negative or positive) generated by a change fade over time.

hedonism: The devotion to pleasure.

maximizer: A person who typically evaluates all options before making a decision, in an effort to identify the perfect choice, and who never settles for second best.

mindfulness: Awareness and acceptance of your present experience.

mindfulness-based cognitive therapy: A well-established acceptance-based therapy, used principally in treatment of depression and anxiety.

optimism: A characteristic frame of mind that leads someone to expect positive outcomes and to view the world as a positive place.

positive psychology: The branch of psychology that studies mental health rather than illness, seeking to learn how normal life can be more fulfilling and to identify the practices that individuals and communities can use to foster greater happiness.

resilience: The ability to adapt to change and recover quickly from setbacks such as illness, injury, or misfortune.

satisficer: A person who can make a choice and be satisfied with it when presented with an option that meets his or her standards, without needing to examine all options or find the absolute best.

self-compassion: Responding to one's own disappointments, failures, and painful emotions with love and kindness, as a caring friend might.

signature strengths: Character strengths that people identify with, appreciate having, and enjoy using.

virtues: Core characteristics that have been universally valued by philosophers and religions throughout history and in different cultures.

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