

Positive psychology:
a new way to support wellness
in older adults?



What is positive psychology, and what impact does it have on well-being? Learn more about this emerging field, its potential to produce positive change, and how to incorporate its principles in older-adult settings

by Marge Coalman, EdD

“What are the enabling conditions that make human beings flourish? How do we get from zero to plus five?”

Martin Seligman, positive psychology pioneer

What would you pay or do to be happy? It's an intriguing question—one that has been studied, evaluated and marketed for a very long time.

In the annals of history, the pursuit of happiness goes back to ancient times. Aristotle, Abraham, Buddha, Solomon and other ancient scholars wrote about the impact of a positive outlook supported by life choices and creeds that provided the road map to well-being. In the 20th century, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Erich Fromm developed successful theories and practices that became the foundation of many psychology classes in universities worldwide, and that are still taught today. The newest research focus as of the last years of the previous century is positive psychology, defined as the study of positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Leading researchers are convinced that interventions and strategies can, and do, influence an individual's aptitude for happiness. The other side of the positive psychology coin is skepticism.

The debate about positive psychology has led to university programs dedicated to defining and determining how much control anyone has over the ability to overcome depression, lethargy, dark moods and despair. Some researchers believe and cite evidence that we each have a genetic “happiness set point” (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), a concept similar to a set point for body weight.

However, one of these individuals, now-retired University of Minnesota psychology professor David Lykken, PhD, has come to believe that happiness, while genetically influenced, is not fixed. “It's clear that we can change our happiness levels widely—up or down,” Lykken told *Time Magazine's* Claudia Wallis for her 2005 cover story “The New Science of Happiness.”

Other researchers—notably university heavyweights Martin Seligman, PhD, of Penn State, and Daniel Kahneman, PhD, of Princeton—claim that when people have direction and support, there is the opportunity for nurture to overcome nature. And some compelling evidence suggests the ability to change from a negative perspective to positive psychology is achievable for many individuals.

Positive psychology research: a broad view

The millennium issue of the journal *American Psychologist*, published by the Washington, DC-based American Psychological Association, was dedicated to exploring “Happiness, Excellence, and Optimal Human Functioning (Positive Psychology).” The articles in this special issue included, among others, an introduction to the topic by guest editors Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, another top researcher in the field. A question coming out of the *American Psychologist's* comprehensive review was whether or not psychologists could produce evidence-based positive psychology practice that would make people happier for more than the short term. In other words, could this practice create lasting positive change?

The researchers involved—especially Seligman—have emphasized that the human experience is defined by peaks and valleys, and no premise exists for discounting the value of suffering. They further stress that both states are important to a normal life experience. However, as is true in most medical studies and research to date, lots of time, effort and money have been spent on studying the disease aspect of psychology and little on the wellness model. But that is changing.

One outcome of the work of Seligman and University of Michigan colleague Christopher Peterson, PhD, is the 2004 book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. This book, referred to as the CSV, is intended to do for practitioners of psychological well-being what the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* does in defining the psychological disorders that “disable human beings.” An abbreviated list of the virtues and strengths described in the CSV appears in the table on page 53. In addition, all of this cerebral review has led to positive interventions designed by the researchers and defined as “Happiness Exercises” (Seligman et al., 2005).

The researchers conducted a Web-based intervention using the Happiness Exercises (see page 52 for an overview of the exercises), and the results were somewhat startling—even for this optimistic team. Of the 577 participants who completed baseline questionnaires, 411 (71%) completed all five follow-up assessments. A final review of the data gathered in the initial Happiness Exercises study, as well as since that effort, shows the following:

- Long-term improvements were noted in the “Gratitude visit” exercise (largest positive change in the whole study) and in the “Using signature strengths in a new way” exercise.
- Immediate effects were less pronounced for the “Three good things” exercise.

In general, the research team felt the results were straightforward. Adherence to the exercises over time (practicing them at least once per week in this study) netted the most significant effect. This finding follows the principles that active aging professionals apply to all forms of physical conditioning, and that most researchers attribute to lasting positive effects on brain cell development through mental aerobics: New learning of information that is both novel and

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Happiness Exercises: an overview

Placebo control exercise: early memories
Participants were asked to write about their early memories every night for one week.

Gratitude visit

Participants were given one week to write and deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them, but had never been properly thanked.

Three good things in life

Participants were asked to write down three things that went well each day and their causes every night for one week. In addition, they were asked to provide a casual explanation for a good thing.

You at your best

Participants were asked to write about a time when they were at their best and then reflect on the personal strengths displayed in the story. They were told to review their story once every day for a week and to reflect on the strengths they had identified.

Using signature strengths in a new way

Participants were asked to take the inventory of character strengths online at www.authentichappiness.org and to receive individualized feedback about their top five (“signature”) strengths (Peterson et al., 2005) in a new and different way every day for one week.

Identifying signature strengths

This exercise was a truncated version of the one just described, without the instruction to use signature strengths in new ways. Participants were asked to take the survey, to note their five highest strengths, and to use them more often during the next week.

Excerpted from Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions. American Psychologist, 60(5), 410–421; July–August. Published by the American Psychological Association, and reprinted here with permission.

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complex has to be repeated and practiced to achieve lasting change.

Benefits for clients and providers

Many people who work in the active aging industry want to encourage lasting lifestyle changes in their clients. They embrace the multidimensional wellness model, and believe it is possible to positively influence the well-being of adults ages 50 and older. Positive psychology appears to offer these professionals another avenue they can use to support their clients. For older adults, the tangible and intangible benefits of applying positive psychology principles include:

- enhanced self-esteem
- increased independence
- reduced need for assistance from caregivers and providers
- opportunities for new friendships and connectivity
- improved appetite and sleep
- less reliance on mood-altering medications
- increased participation in activities and events
- enhanced access to programs and services
- reduced premiums for health insurance (in some cases)

These indicators add up to improved quality of life for both clients and providers.

Another area of study on this topic will likely interest those who work with adults over 50, and that is: What makes people happy? In the *Time Magazine* article mentioned above, writer Claudia Wallis reviewed the current studies on happiness and included the results of a 2004 poll by the magazine, titled “Feeling Good in the U.S.” The most interesting conclusions? Happiness is not about money; it is about family connections and friendships. In fact, when asked about their major sources of happiness, 75% of the individuals polled by

Time said *contributing to the lives of others*—the third-highest of eight responses and the one immediately below relationships with their children and with their friends. This answer is supported by the *New Face of Work Survey*, released by MetLife/Civic Ventures in 2005. Of the 1,000 adults ages 50–70 polled for this survey, half wanted to do “work that helps others.” How interesting that in our high-tech world, a direct-touch method of influence is significant to a wide variety of individuals.

For active aging professionals, these findings lead to intriguing questions. How much of the happiness equation lies outside the primary relationship of parent and child, and does it make a difference to the well-being of all involved? What about those other influencers—friends and family of choice? And through people’s associations and influences over their friends and neighbors, could there be a decline in the number of older adults who are isolated, depressed and discouraged? Finally, in light of all the research, what means and methods are available to promote positive psychology in aging adults and thereby encourage them, in turn, to positively influence their peers?

Positive psychology in older-adult settings

The average community-dweller who seeks resources to improve happiness and well-being will likely find them. There is a prolific supply of website and print media tools disseminated through insurance providers, elder law attorneys, aging services and the like, and these have an outreach and impact. For the more reclusive older adult, however, these approaches and outreach methods may not be effective. Providers of services through seniors retirement centers, seniors centers, health and fitness clubs for older adults, and other community-

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Classification of 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

Virtue and strength	Definition
<p>1. Wisdom and knowledge</p> <p>Creativity Curiosity Open-mindedness Love of learning Perspective</p>	<p>Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge</p> <p>Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience Thinking things through and examining them from all sides Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge Being able to provide wise counsel to others</p>
<p>2. Courage</p> <p>Authenticity Bravery Persistence Zest</p>	<p>Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal</p> <p>Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way <i>Not</i> shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty or pain Finishing what one starts Approaching life with excitement and energy</p>
<p>3. Humanity</p> <p>Kindness Love Social intelligence</p>	<p>Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others</p> <p>Doing favors and good deeds for others Valuing close relations with others Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others</p>
<p>4. Justice</p> <p>Fairness Leadership Teamwork</p>	<p>Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life</p> <p>Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen Working well as a member of a group or team</p>
<p>5. Temperance</p> <p>Forgiveness Modesty Prudence Self-regulation</p>	<p>Strengths that protect against excess</p> <p>Forgiving those who have done wrong Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves Being careful about one’s choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted Regulating what one feels and does</p>
<p>6. Transcendence</p> <p>Appreciation of beauty and excellence Gratitude Hope Humor Religiousness</p>	<p>Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning</p> <p>Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen Expecting the best and working to achieve it Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life</p>

Table 1. Classification of 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths (adapted from *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* by C. Peterson and M. Seligman, 2004.)

Excerpted from Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions. American Psychologist, 60(5), 410–421; July-August. Published by the American Psychological Association, and reprinted here with permission

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based programs often can reach these clients, as well as more engaged elders. So, as a start, those who work in these settings may want to include Happiness Exercises and related tools, such as surveys and questionnaires, in their programming. (The “Resources” sidebar on this page lists websites with online tools and resources, while suggestions on how to implement the Happiness Exercises appear below.)

In residential settings such as retirement communities and assisted-living facilities, a whole-person wellness approach (Montague et al., 2001) provides the opportunity—and the ongoing systems—to implement the tools in a grass-roots model and follow the responses and data carefully. Importantly, in almost all areas of successful programming within this wellness model, the key influencers turn out to be peers, not instructors or other staff members. Professionals should aim to recruit and train leaders from the peer group before beginning a campaign to incorporate tools such as the Happiness Exercises. In addition, the tools to collect and analyze data need to be practical, user-friendly and available to the “happiness team members.” A pilot program is the best way to see if the results are valid, reliable and reproducible. [Ed. Turn to page 55 to learn how Touchmark Living Centers has incorporated positive psychology principles into its wellness program.]

Other suggestions for implementing the Happiness Exercises format in a community-based program include:

- Use an existing program to introduce the “Happiness Exercises Experiment” or class (e.g., a creative writing class, wellness forum or mindfulness class combined with walking meditation).
- Take the project to the supervisors and resident council (if appropriate) for endorsement and buy-in.

- Determine project objectives and outcomes prior to the launch, plus a timeline and budget.
- Design training for any peer or non-staff leaders.
- Look at how the Happiness Exercises program may help improve communication, participation, marketing and other tangible markers of success.
- Review the outcomes and determine if the offering will be ongoing, or an annual or one-time offering.
- Reward the participants and their volunteer leaders and coaches. Celebrate success!

Positive psychology interventions may offer a promising new way to improve the well-being of individuals. By incorporating these principles and programming into older-adult settings, active aging professionals can build on the potential for positive change to help their clients enjoy happier, healthier lives. ☺

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Resources

Internet

Authentic Happiness

www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu

Centre for Confidence and Well-being

www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp

University of Pennsylvania, Positive Psychology Center

www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu

Print

Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification

By Christopher Peterson and

Martin E. P. Seligman

Published in 2004 by Oxford University Press, New York, and American Psychological Association, Washington, DC

Incorporating positive psychology into an older-adult wellness program: the Touchmark example

In 2004, Oregon-based Touchmark Living Centers implemented the Full Life Wellness Program® companywide (11 older-adult retirement communities in the United States and, later, Canada). Based on the principles of positive psychology and the Sage-ing® movement, as well as the 20 years' experience of Vice President of Wellness and Programs Marge Coalman, this program has eight program categories that integrate whole-person wellness. "The Touchmark Full Life Wellness Program is a programming model which focuses on the abilities, needs and interests of each resident," says Coalman. "The goal of the program is to provide meaning and value to as many 'moments' as possible of the resident's day."

Recognizing that a move into any retirement community is usually initiated by a significant life change, the Touchmark program is designed to assure residents connect and form relationships within their new "family of choice." This connectivity is the key positive psychology element in the Full Life program.

Life enrichment/wellness staff at Touchmark communities interview and meet with residents soon after they move in and on a regular basis throughout their stay. A Wellness Questionnaire is used to assess residents for interests, strengths and skills. Together with this questionnaire, other program components (Friendship Ambassadors, Welcome Home and Sunshine committees, buddy lists, and partners in wellness campaigns) engage residents and staff in programs/events designed to integrate new residents into the living environment. The relationships between wellness staff and residents support the access, knowledge of personality and participation, and other key ingredients that engender support for the programs.

The three program elements below best represent Touchmark's philosophy.



Friendship Ambassadors/ Welcome Home

Staff and residents join together to welcome each new resident who moves into the community, either initially or upon return from a hospital or rehabilitation stay.

- Door ornaments, gift baskets, personal notes and invitations to community offerings are created by Touchmark residents with the leadership and support of staff.
- Selected residents serve as Friendship Ambassadors and work with the Executive Resident Council to plan, organize and lead outreach efforts to new and returning residents. The wellness team provides training for the Ambassadors, including orientation on how to interview and introduce new residents to the community. Ambassadors also invite newcomers to meals, activities and events.
- Monthly events are scheduled to welcome newcomers and introduce them to each other and the staff managers.
- In many communities a Sunshine Committee specifically focuses on calling, sending notes and visiting residents who are recovering from illness, injury or significant loss.

Community Partners

This program component focuses on community outreach through volunteerism, altruism and contributions of time, resources and services.

- Internal opportunities for volunteering are provided to Touchmark residents. The Life Enrichment (LE) program aims to have no less than 30% of the scheduled activities, events and programs led by resident volunteers. Examples include painting, carpentry, gardening, cooking, Bible study, life story projects, and computer tutoring.
- External opportunities for volunteering connect residents with community service organizations. Examples are Reader Pals at local schools, hospital and Red Cross services; trail upkeep with local park and recreation projects; and fundraising for specific non-profit organizations.

Mind/Body/Spirit

The focus in this program category is on whole-person wellness through internal and external program offerings and services.

- Daily physical activity offerings are scheduled for residents in all levels of care, and in the health and fitness clubs located on selected campuses.
- Tai chi, qigong, yoga, and balance and posture classes are offered when qualified instructors are available.
- Bible studies and worship services are available on all campuses.
- Life story and reminiscing activities are provided for residents at all levels of care. This program includes the opportunity to submit stories, poems, recipes and biographies to the community e-newsletter through the Let Your Spirit Soar project. Submissions are also posted on the company and community websites.

More information on the Touchmark Full Life Wellness Program is available online at www.touchmark.com.