

## Positive Psychology or the Psychology of Satisfaction

Martin Seligman, the father of Positive Psychology on which we base much of our Third Act work is a psychologist that not only focuses on how to help people deal with suffering but also to include ways to support people in increasing their happiness by using specific tools and strategies. His research has empirically shown that we can develop and grow happiness by using strategies to actively engage with life, to notice the everyday pleasurable aspects of living to challenge ourselves with the use of our signature strengths in new ways and explore and respond to what gives us meaning in our lives.

To research happiness Dr Seligman divided it into 3 components of living and called them: The Pleasant life, the Engaged life and the Meaningful Life.

The pleasant life is what hedonic theories of happiness endorse. It consists in having a lot of positive emotion about the present, past, and future and learning the skills to amplify the intensity and duration of these emotions.

The second component in Seligman's theory is the engaged life, "a life that pursues **engagement, involvement** and **absorption** in work, intimate relations, and leisure identify people's highest talents and strengths and then help them to find opportunities to use these strengths more. **We call these signature strengths** (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)."

The third component in Seligman's theory involves the pursuit of meaning. "This consists in using one's signature strengths and talents to belong to and serve something that one believes is bigger than the self" perhaps with the family, spiritual community, nature or art. When you combine an engaged life and one that uses your signature strengths in something that focuses outside the self you will transform your circumstances from unfortunate to fortunate and leads to a life well lived.

Seligman has continued with his research and recently published a new book “Flourish” in which he extends his research beyond happiness to well being and includes two more aspects of a flourishing life. His new acronym is P.E.R.M.A., which stands for positive emotions, engagement, intimate relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

In this next section we will explore 4 areas that can lead us to a life full of joy and satisfaction: positive appreciation, meaning, active engagement and the quality of everyday experience.

# The Psychology of Satisfaction<sup>1</sup>

## **Critical determinants of satisfaction:**

**Positive Appreciation** - whether it's experiencing the present moment, looking back with contentment/gratitude or looking ahead with optimism and seeing its potential.

- To some extent positive feelings may fluctuate around an inborn "set point" (research suggests about 50%) However, psychologists say that anyone can learn to increase positive feelings, although, some with lower "set points" may need to work harder.
- Mindfulness is one key to increasing positive feelings and enjoying the present. Mindfulness is actively noticing things without evaluating or categorizing them.
- Researchers have found that we can make positive feelings last longer when we deliberately take a "mental picture" of pleasurable events to share with others or recall later.
- Gratitude exercises such as keeping a Gratitude Journal does more than lift your mood. Research shows they improve physical health, raise energy levels and relieve pain and fatigue.

## **What are you most grateful for?**

*"The grass is not, in fact, always greener on the other side of the fence. Fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greenest where it is watered. When crossing over fences, carry water with you and tend the grass wherever you may be."*

(Robert Fulghum in "It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It")

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<sup>1</sup> Happiness in psychological research and practice received a boost in 1998 from Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, when he became President of the American Psychological Association and introduced the term "Positive Psychology" and calling on colleagues to undertake a systematic and evidence-based approach to the pursuit of happiness

**Meaning** - applying your inherent strengths to something outside of yourself to create meaning in life – whether that involves nature, art, community, spirituality, or something else.

- Transcending the self, to the engaged life. Use your signature strengths to belong to and to serve something that you believe is larger than you are.
- Researchers have found that doing frequent acts of kindness boosts well-being
- Research suggests meaning is one of the two most important components of satisfaction/happiness
- Giving makes you feel good about yourself; when you are volunteering you're distracting yourself from your own existence and puts meaning into your life. Volunteering gives you a sense of purpose because you matter to someone else. And almost everyone feels happier when they are with someone else
- Ask yourself:
  - How can I have more fun?
  - How can I be more like my true self?
  - How can I live my life with more authenticity?
  - How can I find the things that I can uniquely do?
  - What is uniquely here for me to do that addresses the other big questions?

**What has given you the most meaning and purpose?**

*"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we're spiritual beings having a human experience."*  
(Richard King)

**Active Engagement** – known sometimes as “flow”. May be a challenge at any time for some of us, but particularly so in our Third act, when the structure and goals of our 2nd acts are no longer there. Active engagement most likely occurs when we are active rather than passive and when that activity requires skill and focus.

- In the documented results of 10 years of ground breaking research on aging, reported in “Successful Aging” by John Rowe, MD and Robert Kahn PhD, identify that avoiding disease, maintaining high cognitive and physical functioning and ACTIVELY ENGAGING IN LIFE were the three main components of successful aging.
- Being “one with the music,” absorbed and immersed in your work, love, friendship and leisure.
- Key to having more engagement is to identify your signature strengths and virtues and re-craft your life to use them more often. By deploying your highest strengths and talents, you can have more intense absorption in more areas of your life.
- The second most important component of satisfaction/happiness

**What are your three highest strengths and how have you used them for active engagement?**

*“Keep learning. Learn more about the computer, crafts, gardening, whatever. Never let the brain idle.”*  
(George Carlin in “How to Stay Young”)

*“All of us are capable of an incredible amount of love. It can encompass the motions we feel toward our families, our friends our partners, our spouses, our significant others. But I think the word is so much more powerful, and holds much more meaning than that. Love is about the idea of holding in our hearts at the same time compassion, clarity, and commitment. Most of all, it connotes an immense desire, deep down, that we do wish for others to prosper more, just as wish the same for ourselves.”*  
(Rinaldo S. Brutoco, President, World Business Academy)

**Quality of Everyday Experience.** While traditional approaches to life planning often emphasize the importance of vision and goals, it is clear that the quality of our everyday experience is an important determinant of satisfaction.

- What makes our hearts sing is not what we expect according to the researchers. (Not money, education, youth, sunshine) Strong ties to friends and families give a big boost to happiness.
- Savoring the sensory experiences increases the pleasure of our daily lives.
- Almost everyone feels happier when they have some time with other people. If you are alone all the time without connection to others, research shows your quality of life plummets.
- Happiness is like exercise...you have to re-commit to it every day, as Oprah explains how she is able to run 5 miles every day.

**What are the everyday experiences that make you smile?**

*"You have to laugh and find humor every day. You've got to have a dream. When you lose your dreams, you die. We have so many people walking around who are dead and don't even know it."*  
(87 year old college student)

*"Life is not the way it's supposed to be. It is the way it is. The way you cope with it is what makes the difference."*

(Virginia Satir)

## The Psychology of Satisfaction

| Positive Appreciation  | Meaning   |
|--|---|
| <p>I am most grateful for:</p> <p>_____</p>  | <p>_____</p> <p>has given me most meaning and purpose.</p>  |
| Active Engagement  | Quality of Everyday Experience  |
| <p>My 3 highest strengths that I have used in active engagement:</p> <p>1)</p> <p>2)</p> <p>3)</p> | <p>These everyday experiences make me smile:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul> |