

Psi Chi Address: Accentuate the Positive

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Positive Psychology and the
Pursuit of Happiness
David G. Myers
Hope College

What is positive psychology? According to APS Fellow and Charter Member David G. Myers, Hope College, it is “a psychology that is concerned not only with weakness and damage, but also with strength and virtue.”

The first century of psychology was dominated by negative topics. In his address “Positive Psychology and the Scientific Pursuit of Happiness,” Myers pointed out that since 1887, articles on negative topics outnumbered positive ones by 13 to 1. Positive psychology supporters hope for more positive psychology in the 21st century. Myers cited APS Fellow and Charter Member Martin Seligman, who in 2002 noted that in times of prosperity and relative peace we are able to focus on “the highest qualities of life” instead of on weakness, disease, and damage.

Positive psychology is based on three pillars, according to Seligman: positive subjective well-being, which is satisfaction with the past, happiness with the present, and optimism about the future; virtues such as creativity, courage, compassion, and spirituality; and positive groups, communities, and cultures. Myers focused on the first pillar.

If subjective well-being is defined as feeling happy and thinking that life is satisfying, then the question arises: How happy are people? According to Myers, self-reports of people are mostly positive. On a scale from zero to 10, zero being totally unhappy and 10 being completely happy, the average rating in surveys conducted in the United States is 6.75. Furthermore, 83 percent of Americans report that they are in a good mood.

Myers dismissed claims that self-reports are not reliable measures. As he pointed out, they are the only measures of subjective well-being, and they correlate with other positive indicators, with experiment samplings, and with reports of other people.

Next, Myers addressed the question: Who is happy? It is often said that teenagers and middle-aged men are unhappy. However, according to Myers, this is not supported by research or real life data. Studies across nations and across ages consistently show that approximately 80 percent of people are happy. This is true for both genders.

Myers also addressed the difference between well-being and being well off, and the presumption that money buys happiness. "In recent years," Myers said, "it became very important to be well off financially." Comparisons of happiness between people from wealthy and poor countries and comparisons of happiness between rich and poor people within one country reveal a diminishing utility of wealth: Up to a particular financial level, there is a positive correlation between wealth and happiness. Above this level, further increase in wealth does not increase happiness.

Furthermore, Myers concentrated on the effect of economic growth on human happiness. As it turns out, happiness of people does not rise with their affluence. Teenagers from affluent families suffer elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, suggesting that more affluent people are not necessarily happier than those with a lower economic status.

Characteristically, Myers said happy people: 1) have a high self-esteem; 2) have a self-serving bias, which means they perceive themselves as being better off than others; 3) feel that they are in control of their lives; 4) are optimistic; and 5) are extraverted and outgoing.

Close relationships are also important for health and happiness. As Myers pointed out, we have deep need to belong, and the satisfaction of this need is more important to our happiness than the social support itself. In one study, 43 percent of married participants rated themselves as very happy, whereas only 23 percent of never-married people considered themselves as very happy.

The last topic of Myers' address was the relationship of happiness and spirituality. Research data show positive correlations between being very happy and spiritual commitment, closeness to god, believing in God, and religious service attendance. According to Myers' analysis, faith is important to happiness, because it offers social support, meaning and purpose, the ultimate acceptance, focus beyond self, and a sense of hope in crisis time.

Myers demonstrated that impressive research on happiness exists in contemporary psychology. Will psychology become more positive in 21 st century? "Psychologists have reason to be positive," Myers said.