

Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology is a field of psychology asking about the highest good in life (or “life worth living”) and effective ways of pursuing this good. Positive psychology has been focused on the theory and research on increasing happiness or well-being. Positive psychologists translate this knowledge into clinical and nonclinical evidence-based practice, for example, in the form of positive psychological interventions. The term positive emphasizes the need to examine positive rather than neutral or negative states in human functioning and experience. The reason for positive focus is that it was a neglected scientific area compared to other fields, for example, psychopathology, a complementary field of relieving suffering or the worst in life. This entry presents positive psychology’s definitions and main contributions to the discipline. Moreover, it presents how positive psychology builds upon classical philosophy and earlier psychology, how it overlaps with similar scientific movements, and its limitations. The final section presents how positive psychology has come to grips with issues many authors thought impossible to address.

KeywordsPositive psychology -Happiness -Well-being -Satisfaction with life -Positive emotions - Interventions

Synonyms/Keyword Terms

[Happiness](#), [Well-being](#), [Satisfaction with life](#), [Flourishing](#), [Positive emotions](#)

Definitions

What is the best life possible? What is the highest good in life? When are individuals at their best? How to achieve these global desirable life aims? These are some questions that positive psychology asks. Table 1 presents a considerable variation in how authors have defined positive psychology – “a wooly field with diverse and conflicting views” (Duckworth et al. [2005](#)). This limitation concerning

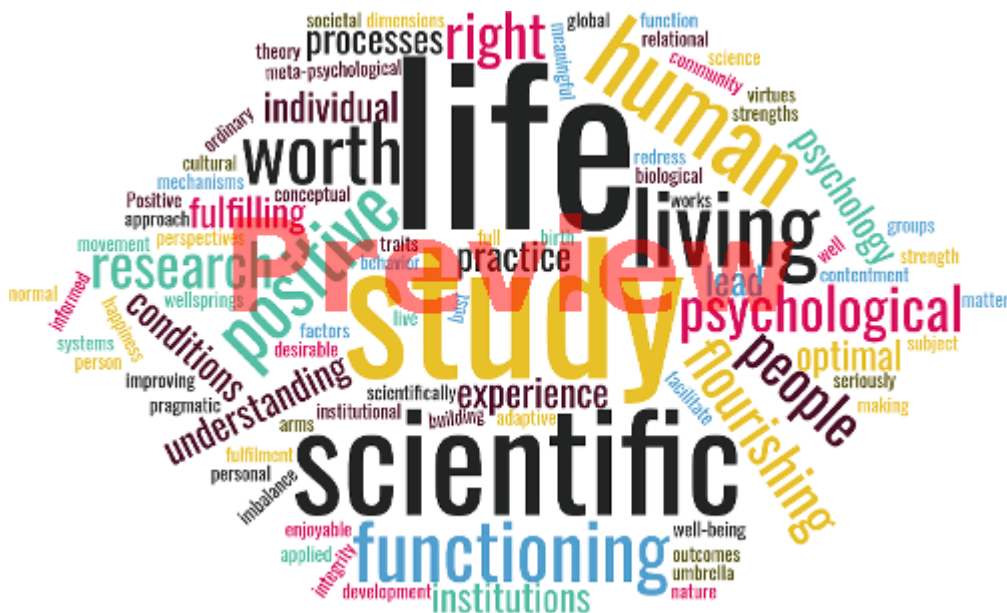
the self-identity of positive psychology was primarily attributed to the youth of the discipline. Nevertheless, after more than two decades, the boundary between what is and is not positive psychology is still considered fuzzy. However, the available definitions of positive psychology bear a clear family resemblance (Fig. 1). Due to its long history and diversity in theoretical approaches, positive psychology can be considered an integrative “umbrella term” for the theory and research on making life worth living (Park et al. 2004). **Table 1**

Positive psychology definitions

Authors/references	Definition/explanation
Diener (2003)	To study the factors that make life more fulfilling, meaningful, and enjoyable.
Duckworth et al. (2005)	The scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits and the institutions that facilitate their development.
Gable and Haidt (2005)	The study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.
Linley et al. (2006)	Scientific study of optimal human functioning. At the meta-psychological level, it aims to redress the imbalance in psychological research and practice by calling attention to the positive aspects of human functioning and experience, and integrating them with our understanding of the negative aspects of human functioning and experience. At the pragmatic level, it is about understanding the wellsprings, processes, and mechanisms that lead to desirable outcomes.
Park et al. (2004)	An umbrella term for the theory and research on what makes life worth living.
Peterson (2006)	The scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death, and at all stops in between. [...] An approach within psychology that takes seriously as a subject matter of those things that make life most worth living.
Peterson (2008)	Positive psychology is the “scientific” study of what makes life most worth living. It is a call for psychological science and practice to be as concerned with strength as with weakness; as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst; and as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling as with healing pathology.
Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000)	The scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life.

Sheldon and King (2001)	The scientific study of ordinary strengths and virtues [...] with interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving.
Sheldon (2009)	It is a conceptual movement in both the research and applied arms of the psychological community which seeks to rectify the “negative” biases of traditional psychology so that a full accounting of human nature and behavior can emerge.
Sheldon and Ryan (2011)	Understanding what goes right, how adaptive systems function, and why the average person does well, such that most people live lives of integrity and contentment.
The Journal of Positive Psychology	Scientifically informed perspectives on what makes life worth living. It focuses on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing.
Wikipedia, Community definition	The scientific study of what makes life most worth living, focusing on both individual and societal well-being.

Note. Some authors provided more than one definition as definitions changed depending on context and time



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Fig. 1

A word cloud presenting a frequency-based illustration of 13 positive psychology definitions. Larger letters represent more frequent words

First, positive psychology aims to identify and understand the most desirable definite outcomes in life, that is, ultimate goals or life fulfillments worth pursuing for their own sake (e.g., happiness, flourishing, or positive emotions). Second, positive psychology aims to identify and regulate processes (wellsprings) that facilitate these positive outcomes, possibly in the most effective way.

Positive psychology usually focuses on positive experiences, positive individual characteristics, and the factors that foster their development.

Positive psychologists insist that the development of knowledge about happiness must follow modern standards of empirical science (e.g., psychological experiments or randomized controlled trials) (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [2000](#)). An emphasis on methods generates robust and cumulative evidence that serves evidence-based practice. Some argue that high standards of empirically oriented science were of lesser interest to many positive psychology predecessors who asked similar questions but used less rigorous methods.

Historical Influences

The main aim of positive psychology (asking about the ultimate good in life) dates to questions formulated by classical philosophers. For instance, Aristotle and Epicurus were concerned with the concept of the ultimate good in life (Tatarkiewicz [1976](#)). Aristotle advocated for eudaimonia (happiness or flourishing) achieved through the pursuit of personal excellence (virtue) and by the realization of the best personal and human potentials (Kaczmarek [2017](#)). Positive psychology embraces eudaimonism with its focus on flourishing and virtue. Nonetheless, positive psychology is also concerned with the hedonic perspective developed by Epicurus, that is, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain as the ultimate goal pursued by increasing positive emotions and reducing negative emotions. Positive psychology attempts to reconcile the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives presenting them as complementary rather than arguing which perspective is more convincing or presents the superior good (Lambert et al. [2015](#)).

Modern Influences

Positive psychology was formally established as a novel field within psychology in 1998 by Martin E. P. Seligman. It was the main scope of his presidential term in American Psychological Association. However, positive psychology explicitly builds upon inspirations derived from earlier psychologists such as William James (healthy mindedness), Gordon Allport (positive human characteristics), Lewis Terman (giftedness and marital happiness), James Watson (effective parenting), Carl Jung (meaning in life), Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (humanistic psychology), or Maria Jahoda (ideal mental health) (Gable and Haidt [2005](#); Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [2000](#)). Of particular note, around the time Seligman delivered his presidential keynote about positive psychology, Carol Ryff and Burton Singer (1998) promoted the need to study positive human health and flourishing by capitalizing on the philosophical accounts of the good life. Thus, positive psychology at its origins aimed at uniting and invigorating scattered and disparate lines of theory and research to provide a basis for further systematic scientific development (Seligman et al. [2005](#)). Until the foundation of positive psychology, psychological research on positive aspects of life never managed to gain a high enough status to become a prominent field of research and practice.

Positive Psychology as a Scientific Movement

Positive psychology is rooted in dissatisfaction with the state of psychological knowledge at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. At that time, psychology focused on the worst in life, for example, human weaknesses, and developed scientifically valid psychological help methods in remedying individual and social problems (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [2000](#)). Seligman himself was a recognized author in psychopathology (e.g., learned helplessness). Some authors falsely believe that positive psychology aims to substitute or suppress other areas of psychological research, for example, assuming that what is not positive psychology is considered “negative psychology.” In contrast, most authors emphasize that positive psychology aims to provide new information that complements the psychological account of problematic or sub-optimal human functioning (Gable and Haidt [2005](#)).

Thus, positive psychology might be perceived and defined from a meta-psychological perspective, that is, as an intellectual force external to the whole body of psychology that aims to reshape psychology (Linley et al. [2006](#)). This involves extending the scope of the investigation, reassigning priorities, restoring the scientific gravity of specific subjects, or introducing more scientific rigor into subjects often examined superficially, speculatively, or taken as granted. The aim was to facilitate evolution towards a more comprehensive discipline of psychology, equally respecting every form of human experience.

A complete science and practice of psychology require an understanding of both suffering and happiness and their interactions, and the development of proven interventions that relieve suffering and enhance happiness. (Seligman et al. [2005](#), p. 410)

Consequently, positive psychology regarded from this meta-perspective was expected to become redundant once psychology accepts as standard, the study of the positive in life.

My hope is that positive psychology is a movement that will eventually disappear because it becomes part of the very fabric of psychology. [...] There will remain many psychologists who study the problems that afflict us; there will also be a large cadre of psychologists who study the factors that make life more fulfilling, meaningful, and enjoyable. (Diener, [2003](#), p. 120)

Terminology

Positive

Positive psychology dedicated little attention to defining what it means that something is “positive.” Some authors proposed that the primary aim of positive psychology might be to define what is “positive” (Diener [2003](#)). Ed Diener equals “positive” with “good” or “valuable.” For instance, people's choices reflect positive, that is, if individuals consistently choose something, they must consider it positive. Second, people’s judgments and experiences reflect positive, that is, something is positive if people are satisfied or pleased with it. Third, value systems based on normative thinking reflect what should be considered positive, for example, positive behavior is based on kindness or gratitude rather than selfishness.

Happiness

Primarily, positive psychology used the concept of happiness (and happiness interventions) more often than presently (Seligman et al. [2005](#)). Happiness was mostly abandoned for the sake of other similar concepts, for example, flourishing, thriving, satisfaction, or well-being. This might be partially explained by the fact that happiness is a term that has absorbed ambiguities collected over centuries as it has been extensively used in various contexts for millennia in the everyday language and across different scientific disciplines (Tatarkiewicz [1976](#)). Consequently, happiness might be considered too unwieldy for a scientific term. For instance, some authors in positive psychology use happiness as a synonym for well-being. Some consider happiness as a broader concept than well-being, and some consider happiness as a well-being ingredient.

Character Strengths and Virtues

Much positive psychological theory, research, and practice have been dedicated to virtues and character strengths (Peterson and Seligman [2004](#)). Character is the moral aspect of a person leading to actions that improve one's own life and the lives of others. Unlike talent, character strengths depend mainly on motivational factors, that is, in most cases, it is sufficient for a person to endorse a specific intention to succeed in acting on their character strengths (e.g., being kind to others). Positive psychologists developed a list of 24 character strengths reviewing moral traditions in Buddhism, Christianity, Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, and Taoism. These strengths were grouped into six overarching virtues: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and spirituality (Peterson and Seligman [2004](#)). Wisdom and knowledge, for example, manifests as creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, a love of learning, or the ability to take different perspectives. Moderation manifests as forgiveness and mercy, modesty, prudence, careful choice, and self-control. Character strengths and virtues are an essential part of positive psychology because the intentional use of character strengths leads to increased well-being (Koydemir et al. [2021](#)). The work on character strengths presents the most detailed and explicit account of the eudaimonic perspective within positive psychology.

Clinical Positive Psychology

Despite the main interest in the upper pole of the well-being dimension (e.g., flourishing), positive psychology is also concerned with clinical perspectives (Duckworth et al. [2005](#)). This assumes that even individuals struggling with severe psychological problems are motivated to build their strengths, life satisfaction, and meaning, not just correct their weaknesses. These positive outcomes do not come automatically when suffering is removed. Corey L. M. Keyes' ([2005](#)) Complete State Model of Health presents a positive clinical perspective. This model locates individuals across two orthogonal dimensions: presence vs. absence of mental disorders and presence (flourishing) vs. absence (languishing) of well-being. Consequently, some individuals languish despite the absence of mental disorders, and some individuals flourish despite the burden of mental disorders.

Overlap of Positive Psychology with Other Psychological Movements

Hedonic Psychology

Several areas of study overlap but do not explicitly integrate with positive psychology. Positive psychology is similar to hedonic psychology (Kahneman et al. [1999](#)). Hedonic psychology is a movement that has received less interest than positive psychology despite some conceptual similarities, for example, hedonic pursuits. Hedonic psychology aims to study “what makes the experience and life pleasant or painful” (Kahneman et al. [1999](#), p. x). Thus, hedonic psychology covers an aspect of human experience explicitly addressed in positive psychology (Seligman et al. [2005](#)). However, positive psychology set sail to cover a broader range of positive outcomes, focusing on superior performance (the good life) and personal fulfillment (meaningful life). Several key contributors to positive psychology also contributed to hedonic psychology. For example, Ed Diener, Barbara Fredrickson, and Christopher Peterson.

Health Psychology and Public Health

Positive psychology shares concepts with health psychology and public health. This overlap holds if health is considered “complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity,” as proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO 1946/[2006](#)). According to this approach, the study of health must not be reduced to the study of the body. It ought to reach psychological and social aspects. Moreover, health must not be reduced to avoiding adversity. It should be conceptualized positively as reaching the “highest possible level of health” (WHO [2006](#)). The World Health Organization constitution explicitly presents happiness as an overarching value and the ultimate aim for applied science. As with positive psychology, health psychologists seek to develop high-quality interventions that promote health by increasing physical, psychological, and social well-being. Despite its focus on positive aims, positive psychology further increases the overlap with health psychology and clinical psychology by targeting well-being among individuals with severe mental disorders (Geerling et al. [2020](#)) and physical problems (Lai et al. [2019](#)).

Salutogenesis

Some positive psychology principles bear a resemblance to the theory of salutogenesis (origins of health) that seeks positive aspects of human experience (Antonovsky [1979](#)). A key concept for salutogenesis is the sense of coherence reflected in understanding and managing the world, maintaining realistic optimism, and leading a meaningful life. As is the case with positive psychology, salutogenesis positions itself as complementary to pathogenesis advocating for the need for psychology to cover the whole spectrum of human functioning along the negative-positive dimension.

Education and School Psychology

There are similarities between the fields of interest in positive psychology and education or school psychology (Froh et al. [2011](#)). Education scientists studied many concepts central to positive psychology over decades, nurturing the best in students and individuals across the lifespan. A bibliographic analysis of the topics addressed by journals devoted to educational psychology revealed that over the past 50 years, the proportion of papers focused on positive psychological concepts has ranged from 25% to 33% (Froh et al. [2011](#)). These contributions covered concepts such

as achievements and competencies more often than concepts more central to positive psychology, such as positive emotions, meaning, or satisfaction.

Positive Psychotherapy

Despite the similar name, positive psychology and its intervention techniques have little in common with positive psychotherapy developed by Nossrat Peseschkian in 1968 within psychiatry. This is important because positive psychology has also used the term positive psychotherapy to address therapeutic programs for clinical groups based on positive psychological interventions.

Positive Psychology Interventions

Positive psychological interventions are activities that promote positive emotions, beliefs, and behaviors to increase well-being. Multiple interventions offered in various settings have been developed to engage psychological processes such as gratitude or kindness. Several intervention outcomes have been studied, for example, satisfaction with life, positive emotions, engagement, meaning, eudaimonic well-being, or prosocial behaviors. Positive psychology offers validated brief interventions and complex psychological support programs using sequences of positive interventions.

As of 2021, the literature has offered 68 randomized controlled trials of positive psychological interventions with 16,085 participants (Koydemir et al. [2021](#)). The results indicated that positive psychological interventions effectively produced long-term effects of moderate increases in subjective well-being and weak increases in eudaimonic well-being (Koydemir et al. [2021](#)). Seligman hopes that positive interventions might become positive psychology's most enduring contribution to the development of psychological practice (Seligman et al. [2005](#)).

Positive Psychology Criticism

W.E.I.R.D-Centrism

A bibliometric analysis of positive psychological interventions revealed that the majority (78.2%) of intervention research was based on recipients residing in Western countries and represented highly educated individuals with high income (W.E.I.R.D) (Hendriks et al. [2019](#)). Consequently, there is some cultural mismatch in the literature. For instance, positive psychological interventions are less effective for Asians than non-Asians (Ng and Ong [2022](#)). This reflects earlier observations that most psychology authors are affiliated with North American institutions (Thalmayer et al. [2021](#)). Thus, their work is likely to implicitly address a specific worldview that might not recognize the needs of individuals living in other societies and cultures.

Context

Positive psychology aims to examine what leads to enhanced well-being. Consequently, some readers might have the impression that the findings presented within the field of positive psychology generalize to all individuals in all circumstances (McNulty and Fincham [2012](#)). However, a more accurate perspective might require an emphasis on contexts by asking under which conditions some traits and processes (e.g., forgiveness or gratitude) serve the well-being and under which conditions they do not influence or undermine well-being (Gruber et al. [2011](#)). This contextual perspective points to the possibility that experiencing and expressing happiness (e.g., positive emotions) does not fit certain situations (e.g., in response to the misery of others). Happiness also can be experienced in a dysfunctional way (as is the case in mania). Finally, happiness can be inherently detrimental to an individual (satisfaction and pride derived despite the absence of sufficient merits) or social (e.g., bragging or presenting hubristic pride that diminishes the self-worth in others) functioning. This contextual approach insists that psychologists avoid labeling traits, processes, and outcomes uniformly and ultimately positive.

Positive Psychology and the Possible

Is It Possible to Become Happier?

Positive psychology as a field of study, to its very beginning, centered on the notion of what is possible and what is impossible within human well-being in general and in becoming happier in particular. Some initial arguments against the aims of positive psychology were that it is not possible to increase happiness intentionally because it is a stable trait. Genetic factors explained this stability (e.g., the high correlation of well-being among monozygotic twins) and general regulatory processes that prevent feeling extraordinary happiness by quickly adapting to favorable circumstances (i.e., hedonic adaptation). The vast literature regarding positive psychological interventions indicated that substantial increases in well-being are possible if individuals engage in intentional activities that promote well-being (Koydemir et al. [2021](#)).

Is Positive Psychology Possible Within Psychology?

The development of knowledge about happiness is not always plausible from a historical perspective. Happiness can be perceived “luxury state” that is morally problematic to pursue in the face of misery experienced by most others. Along similar lines, positive psychology might be considered a luxury field of science that deserves less attention, effort, and research resources than perspectives focused on resolving individual and social problems to relieve suffering and despair. Laypeople and decision-makers might expect psychology to explain the causes of phenomena related to violence, suffering, or inequalities before proceeding to the study of happiness. A particular manifestation of such tendencies was the focus of the post-war psychological research on the dark aspects of the human personality that led to mass genocide. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi ([2000](#)) argued that there were specific periods in history in which society's affluence has provided a foundation for pursuing psychological surplus, for example, developing the human potential to create extraordinarily beautiful (and usually unnecessary) achievements. Over two decades of positive psychology development and its continuous scientific momentum suggest that developing psychology's positive side is possible and feasible.

Summary

Positive psychology is the most recent attempt to revive the question about what is most meaningful in life and how individuals can achieve it effectively. Apart from a basic science perspective, positive psychology is focused on developing and testing interventions to achieve greater well-being. Positive psychology is also criticized for its neglect of non-W.E.I.R.D cultures and an out-of-context one-size-fits-all approach. Among the main achievements of positive psychology is documenting that becoming happier is possible via intentional activity, which can be perceived as a luxury by some individuals and in some social or historical contexts.

Cross-References

- . [Aristotle](#)
- . [Awe](#)
- . [Creativity](#)
- . [Curiosity](#)
- . [Emotional Intelligence](#)
- . [Empathy](#)
- . [Ethics](#)
- . [Flow](#)
- . [Hope](#)
- . [Humor](#)
- . [Maslow, Abraham \(Also Self-actualization\)](#)
- . [Mindfulness](#)
- . [Novelty](#)
- . [Open Mindedness](#)
- . [Openness to Experience](#)
- . [Play](#)
- . [Possible in Education](#)
- . [Possible in Human Development](#)
- . [Possible in Psychology](#)
- . [Potential](#)
- . [Purpose](#)
- . [Social Change](#)
- . [Spirituality](#)
- . [Talent Development](#)
- . [Values](#)

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