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Trusted advice for a healthier life

Dear Reader,

The search for happiness is universal. We change jobs, seek partners, buy the latest gizmos, purchase cars and houses, and score tickets to the most sought-after shows or sporting events, all with the hope that these choices will make us happy. And yet, so often, things don't work out as expected. Sometimes we don't get what we hoped for. Other times we do get what we want, but it doesn't bring lasting satisfaction. Why is happiness so fleeting, even during good times? It doesn't need to be. Science is showing us where true contentment may lie—and how to attain it.

This report deals with the field of mental health known as positive psychology. Initially the field focused on the pursuit of special pleasures or highly engaging activities, which can deliver joy, amusement, or even a sense of triumph. But ultimately, psychologists found this approach to be unsatisfactory because this sort of happiness depends on fleeting experiences. Instead, researchers found it was more fruitful to concentrate on cultivating satisfaction, contentment, and well-being, components of a more enduring type of happiness. To this end, positive psychology seeks to help people capitalize on their strengths, heighten their gratitude and awareness, connect to others, and develop the wisdom needed to live a more fulfilling life.

Interestingly, the shift away from focusing on transient pleasures has revealed that people who experience a wide range of emotions—including negative ones—tend to report greater satisfaction in their lives than those with a more limited range of feelings. Contrary to what you might expect, trying to resist painful emotions actually increases psychological suffering. Paradoxically, by opening to pain, people come to suffer less, since it turns out that resisting the experience of the moment is at the heart of psychological distress. So positive psychology is not about avoiding pain—it's about opening to what is happening here and now, and cultivating and savoring the good in your life.

Some of the findings 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 is perhaps the best-known practice for enhancing well-being. But there are many others, including gratitude, self-compassion, cultivation of your personal virtues and strengths, and nurturing of your personal relationships. This report will help show you how to put it all into practice.

Sincerely,

Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D.

Medical Editor