

# EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Most people seek a life filled with meaning, contentment, gratification, and pleasure. In moments of reflection, we may wonder what we can do to direct our lives not only away from anxiety, anger, stress, and depression – but toward a state of personal fulfillment. We may realize that the typical markers of achievement in our society – a graduation, a marriage, a job promotion, the completion of a project, buying a home – don't always bring us the happiness that we expected, and often they increase our stress levels.

Despite the fact that we are affluent by world standards, able to drive nice cars, live in large, clean houses, and have access to entertainment media, we are subjected to high levels of stress. As a result, many of us carry with us a pervasive feeling of discontent. We pursue the next highest goal in our lives, only to find that achieving that goal does not bring us the feeling of true happiness that we long for. Most of us live better than royalty did in the past, but these high standards of living have not brought us a sense of true contentment. A recent survey of people in nations around the globe learned that the highest levels of personal happiness were found in Nigeria, followed by Mexico. The United States came in at number 16, while Canada and most of Western Europe also scored at similar levels.

Psychotherapy has made great strides over the past half century in understanding various forms of mental illness. We can now classify these conditions and make appropriate interventions to alleviate them through specific forms of psychotherapy and sometimes medication. Less research has been done, however, in finding ways to understand how we can achieve a life filled with meaning and contentment.

We have a host of methods for treating some of the conditions associated with unhappiness – stress, anxiety, depression, anger, lack of assertiveness, substance abuse, poor interpersonal relationships, cognitive and emotional impairments. Now, however, psychotherapy is making similar strides in devising methods



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people can use to move to the next step, from unhappiness to true happiness. The purpose of this new trend in psychotherapy is to understand how people can achieve genuine happiness in their lives. It shifts the focus in psychotherapy from the negative to the positive. There is a place for understanding and treating more negative life experiences, depending on the concerns of the individual, just as, in many cases, the focus should be on the positive. Sometimes, when people have resolved their negative issues, they can begin to focus on more positive concerns.

There are some things we can do about our life circumstances to increase our level of personal happiness. For example, cross-national studies have found that people who live in wealthy democracies are generally happier than those who live in countries with poverty and dictatorships. People who are in committed relationships tend to be happier than people who live alone. People who are lucky enough to avoid negative events in their lives report higher levels of happiness than those who have been hit by unfortunate events, such as job loss, divorce, or the death of a loved one. Those who are religious report higher levels of happiness than those who are not. Surprisingly, however, once a basic level of financial security has been achieved, having more money does not contribute to happiness. Healthy people appear to be no happier than those who suffer from an illness. Higher levels of educational attainment are not linked to more happiness. People in sunny climates report about the same levels of happiness as those in colder climates. And race has no effect on a person's perceived level of happiness.

## SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

Recent research has focused on how a person can work toward a happier life. Martin Seligman and his associates at the University of Pennsylvania base Positive Psychology on years of research into what makes people happy. *They have concluded that happiness is an internal experience based on staying true to one's genuine or authentic self.* When people are able to function well in the world using their strongest abilities (they call these abilities our "signature strengths"), they have a chance to achieve authentic happiness. They have identified twenty-four signature strengths found in cultures across the world.

The first step is to identify your own personal strengths. From there, you can explore ways to incorporate these strengths into your life so that your best abilities can be expressed in whatever you do in your

**Y**ou may want to investigate your own signature strengths by taking a test found on the Internet at [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org). Take the VIA Strengths Survey.

daily life. When you can stay true to the best in yourself, you can achieve an authentically happy life.

The following are the twenty-four signature strengths identified in the Positive Psychology approach. Identify the two or three that fit you best. To work toward authentic happiness, try to see how you can incorporate these strengths into your daily life experiences.

- 1. Curiosity / Interest in the World.** Curiosity suggests being open to experience and flexibility in dealing with ideas that do not fit your preconceived notions about the world. Curious people not only tolerate ambiguity well, but they seek it out and are attracted by it. Curiosity implies an active involvement in learning about new information, not just a passive interest in new things, and it is the opposite of being bored.
- 2. Love of Learning.** This strength refers to the strong enjoyment of learning new things, and it implies that you seek out learning wherever you can find it – through reading, taking classes, going to museums. You love learning even when there are no external incentives for you to do so.
- 3. Judgment / Critical Thinking / Open-Mindedness.** This trait refers to thinking things through based on solid evidence. You examine all sides of an issue before coming to a conclusion, and you are able to change your mind in the face of new information. The opposite of this strength is seeking out information only if it conforms to what you already believe.
- 4. Ingenuity / Originality / Practical Intelligence / Street Smarts.** This attribute refers to an ability to find novel ways of achieving your goals, as long as they are appropriate. It means finding new and creative ways to get what you want, and not going through conventional routes to get there.
- 5. Social, Personal and Emotional Intelligence.** People with social intelligence are those who are able to read the moods, needs and motives of other people and can respond appropriately to others. It does not refer just to being introspective – it also implies being able to engage in socially skilled behavior. Personal intelligence means being tuned into your own feelings. You are able to put yourself into situations that bring out your best abilities, such as a job where you do what you do best.
- 6. Perspective.** This strength is similar to wisdom. It implies that others draw on your experience to help them solve problems and gain perspective for themselves. It means having a

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way of defining the world that makes sense to you and other people.

7. **Valor and Bravery.** This trait pertains to having the courage to face difficult situations or stand for your beliefs in the face of opposition or challenge. This is not mere boldness or rashness. It refers to the ability to face danger, despite fear, without the loss of dignity.
8. **Perseverance / Industry / Diligence.** Perseverance means being able to finish what you start with a positive attitude. You do what you say you'll do. It does not refer to obsessively pursuing unattainable goals or perfectionism. Rather, it implies flexibility and a realistic approach to finishing projects.
9. **Integrity / Genuineness / Honesty.** You live your life with genuineness and authenticity. You are down to earth and let others see your true self. This is more than just telling the truth. It means showing the world who you really are without pretense.
10. **Kindness and Generosity.** This strength involves doing good deeds for others, taking their interests as seriously as your own and acknowledging the worth of other people. Empathy and sympathy are related to this trait.
11. **Loving and Allowing Yourself to Be Loved.** This trait implies an ability to form close and intimate relations with other people, and to choose people who feel the same way toward you. While some people can show love to others, this trait also implies the ability to let others love you in return.
12. **Citizenship / Duty / Teamwork / Loyalty.** You are a loyal, dedicated member of groups and can always be counted on to do your share. You are able to put the interests of the group above your own, respecting the authority of the group.
13. **Fairness and Equity.** This trait involves an ability to treat people equally and fairly regardless of your own personal biases. It implies that you are able to give everyone a fair chance and that you are guided by principles of morality.
14. **Leadership.** A good leader is effective at organizing the activities of people, getting the group's work done while maintaining good relations between group members. This person maintains a humane approach when dealing with group members, as well as in coordinating activities between groups.
15. **Self-Control.** This characteristic involves the ability to hold your impulses and needs in check when appropriate. It implies expertise in regulating your emotions when things go bad, as well as maintaining a positive attitude when faced with difficult situations.
16. **Prudence / Discretion / Caution.** This strength implies an ability to be careful. You avoid saying things you might later

regret. You are more aware of long-term goals and their consequences rather than going for short-term gain.

17. **Humility and Modesty.** Humble people do not seek the spotlight, and they let their accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not define yourself as special, realizing that your life victories and defeats are unimportant in the grand scheme of things. You are unpretentious and others recognize, and admire, you for this quality.
18. **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence.** You are elevated by beauty, excellence, and skill in all domains. You are able to appreciate the awe and wonder of life all around you – in nature, art, science, and little, everyday things.
19. **Gratitude.** You are aware of what is good in the world and you don't take these things for granted. You appreciate the good in people and their accomplishments, as well as in nature. You take the time to count your blessings, and you show this in your actions.
20. **Hope / Optimism / Future-Mindedness.** You have a goal-directed life based on your expectation that you will achieve the best for yourself in the future. Your optimism helps guide you in planning and working hard to achieve your goals.
21. **Spirituality / Sense of Purpose / Faith / Religiosity.** You have strong beliefs in your attachment to something larger than you are. You search for your place in the universe, and these beliefs both mold your actions and serve as a source of comfort for you. You feel that your life has purpose and meaning.
22. **Forgiveness and Mercy.** This strength refers to your ability to forgive those who have done you wrong. You are guided by mercy rather than revenge, and you always give people a second chance. Your way of dealing with others is to be kind and generous rather than avoidant or retaliatory.
23. **Playfulness and Humor.** You enjoy laughing and bringing lightness and fun to other people. You are able to mix work and play, and you, and others, appreciate your ability to lift others out of seriousness and into humor.
24. **Zest / Passion / Enthusiasm.** You are true to your spirit. You approach life with passion and energy and you can enthusiastically throw yourself into activities. You feel inspired by the mere act of living life to the fullest.

### RECOMMENDED READING

Seligman, Martin E. P. **Authentic Happiness.** Free Press, \$26.00, 321 pages. ISBN: 0-7432-2297-0.

# T H E B A C K P A G E

## CAN MONEY BUY HAPPINESS?

The simple answer to this question is that no, money can't buy happiness – in most cases.

**R**esearchers have compared people in countries throughout the world. In the poorest nations, people with more money do report greater happiness in their lives, an easily understood concept. That is, those who live in severe poverty are not as happy as those who have enough money to meet their basic needs. However, once the average income exceeds \$8,000 per person in a country (and industrial countries in the western hemisphere all exceed this figure), it was found that more money does not lead to greater life satisfaction. Even those who are fabulously rich in the United States were found to be only slightly happier than the average citizen. In America, real income has risen 16 percent within the last thirty years, yet people who describe themselves as “very happy” have fallen during that time from 36 percent to 29 percent. People with the highest incomes often have to work long hours, and many of them quit these jobs in order to find work that brings them greater life satisfaction.

**W**e adapt to higher incomes, and then they lose their allure. Just after a promotion and higher salary, a person does report greater life satisfaction and happiness. However, in less than three months the higher level of income loses its impact on happiness levels. We learn to take the higher income for granted. As we accumulate more material possessions, our expectations rise. The things we worked so hard for no longer make us happy. We then work even harder to get to the next level. And then the same thing happens – we adapt to the higher level, and then within three months our happiness levels drop again. We end up on a treadmill, working harder and searching for more, then adapting to the higher levels.

**H**appiness is elusive if we look for it through monetary gain and material possessions. We are no happier driving the luxury car, after the first few months, than we were when we drove our old workhorse. Money is like a drug addiction. We need more and more – and then we adapt to the higher levels. It becomes a never-ending cycle.

**F**inding happiness does not lie in making more money. It is found within.

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