

## **Integrating Faith-Based Positive Psychology For Coaches and Counselors**

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### **A New Branch of Psychology has Emerged**

In 1997, while Dr. Martin Seligman was President of the American Psychological Association, in an effort to bring balance and supplement progress in the helping professions, he gathered together ten of the world's leading experts for a day to see if it was plausible to discuss and think through the future impact of the field of Psychology. Dr. Seligman had noted that a dirty little secret of psychiatry and much of clinical psychology today is that they have been seduced into working mostly on symptom relief and have given up the notion of cure. The field is almost entirely about crisis management and the rendering of cosmetic treatments reaching a dead end – a 65% barrier of treatment effectiveness.

For example, the health sciences haven't proven to be strong in building prevention buffers for the causes of the almost epidemic levels of stress, anxiety and depression, that exist in helping people learn to live well dealing with their challenges. The emphasis on our foibles and pathologies, figuring out 'what is wrong with you', and a primary focus on merely treating mental diseases and maladies have left the field of Psychology lacking in potential – not just getting us from sick to healthy, but also going beyond that to help discover 'what is right with you', and living the 'good life'.

It was during that time that Dr. Seligman also had an 'epiphany' of sorts while gardening with his six year old daughter. He had acted grumpy and in response she commented: "If I can learn how to stop whining, then you can learn how to stop being a grouch". Through this experience he concluded that any endeavor — whether therapy, teaching, parenting, managing personnel, self-improvement or coaching — should not just be the study or focus on *correcting weakness and damage*; it should also study and build on *strengths and virtue*.

This began the formal movement of Positive Psychology, founded on the understanding and belief that people need and want more, and the field of Psychology should offer more. People want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves and to enhance their experience of love, work and play. This new field has come a long way in the last decade and is still gathering momentum, scientific research and reflection as well as providing practical proven exercises and published literature. Many universities are now offering courses in Positive Psychology, and the University of Pennsylvania, where Dr. Seligman teaches and researches, offers a Masters in Positive Psychology.

Drawing from many fields of study, including religion, this new Positive Psychology movement is dramatically changing the way therapists, coaches, mental health practitioners and leaders in a broad range of disciplines deal with the average person's life experience and aspirations. As a legitimately recognized branch of psychology, it pursues and promotes the scientific study, the application and teaching of a new balanced interest in character strengths and virtues that enable individuals and

communities to thrive, and increases well-being and the factors that make life worth living.

The scope of research study, questionnaires and practice in positive psychology covers a wide range of topics such as: personal and executive coaching, positive emotions (happiness, gratitude, kindness, compassion), positive thinking (optimism, hope), positive interpersonal relationships (empathy, connecting, emotion-focused approaches, attachment, John Gottman research), positive institutions (authoritative style, building better communities, healthy leadership, spirituality and religion), positive youth development, forgiveness, emotional intelligence, character strengths, resilience, post traumatic growth, flourishing and thriving, living well through developmental stages, lifestyle strategies for personal well-being, pursuit of purpose, meaning and goals, serving others and doing well by doing good. Most recently, in the winter of 2008, the concept of Positive Health Psychology was launched, which addresses the significant role that lifestyle plays in overall wellbeing such as stress reduction, fitness, nutrition and sleep.

### **Flourish and Thrive**

*Count your blessings with an attitude of gratitude and you will experience more peace and happiness. Show compassion and kindness to others and you in turn will be more fulfilled. Discover your gifts and strengths and use them every day to make a difference in others lives and your life will have more meaning.*

*Change and challenges are opportunities for growth and strengthening character.*

Do these sentiments, words of wisdom and practical interventions sound familiar to you? You might have learned them in Sunday School, seminary or from your grandparents. As it turns out, they are also examples of cutting-edge, scientifically proven, tried and true pathways offering practical exercises to increased positive emotion, meaning and fulfillment in life.

One of the benefits to us as Christian Counselors from this emerging complimentary balance in Psychology is that there is compatibility with the Gospel - an allowance, inclusion and even promotion of spirituality, faith and the many facets of virtuous living. Some of its tenants are actually drawn from Judeo-Christian faith, biblical principles and spiritual practices. To this end, we are in a great position to contribute to this emerging field, being instrumental to come alongside and contribute to the future effectiveness and advances in the helping profession going beyond the 65% barrier - to help people flourish and live an 'abundant life', regardless of their challenges and circumstances.

### **Basic Overview of Positive Psychology**

The scientific study and practical application of Positive Psychology has three central concerns: *positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.*

Understanding **positive emotions** entails the study of *contentment with the past, happiness in the present, hope and optimism for the future.*

Understanding **positive individual traits** consists of the study of the strengths and virtues, and as Christians, this also includes discovering and using our spiritual gifts. The Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) handbook is the first attempt on the part of

the psychological research community to identify and classify *positive character traits and virtues* for psychological health, not psychological illness. It is referred to as ‘the manual of the sanities’, identifying *what is right with people and what makes a good life possible*. The survey consists of 240 questions measuring 24 character strengths and virtues and is organized under the main headings as follows: *Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Temperance, Transcendence* (spirituality).

Understanding **positive institutions** entails the study of strengths that foster better communities, places of faith, families, businesses, and schools.

*I want to suggest that the best buffers we have against substance abuse, depression and violence in our children have to do with a set of human strengths...**find their strengths and ways to build them.***  
Dr. Martin Seligman

### **Pathways to Living Life Well**

Another basic premise of Positive Psychology is founded on the belief that our ‘well being’, a ‘full Life’ or ‘the good life’ - a life of enduring happiness - will be discovered through living *a pleasant life, a life of engagement, a meaningful life and a victorious life*.

**The Pleasant Life or the "life of enjoyment"** is about how people optimally experience, and savor the positive feelings and emotions that are part of normal and healthy living in relationships, hobbies, interests and entertainment. This can be enhanced through counting our blessings, being kind and compassionate, having an attitude of gratitude, savoring meaningful moments, practicing the presence of God and other such ways of enjoying life.

**The Good Life or the "life of engagement"** is about the beneficial affects of immersion, absorption, and ‘flow’ that people feel when optimally engaged with their primary activities. You experience this when discovering and experiencing joy in using your gifts and strengths in work, love, friendship, parenting, and play.

**Inquiry into the Meaningful Life or "life of affiliation"** explores how people derive a positive sense of well-being, belonging, meaning, and purpose from being part of and contributing back to something larger and more permanent than themselves by being connected to spirituality, traditions, marriage, family, social groups and organizations.

Finally, **the victorious life** is about winning at what matters most. Overcoming and experiencing victory in the aspirations and challenges in our life.

Of course, as Christian Counselors, any theoretical model, or scientific discipline doesn’t replace or supersede our belief and faith in following Christ who saves us by grace, calls us to a ‘surrendered life’, transforms us by the power of His Holy Spirit, and manifests the fruit of His spirit as we grow in Christ-likeness. However, we can take the best this emerging field has to offer, serving to compliment and strengthen our fundamental theological beliefs, helping others to more intentionally and practically live out the abundant life that God has called us to. The church and Christian counselors can benefit in drawing from the best resources this emerging field can offer, becoming more

effective in really listening to heart longings and serving God's purposes in leading His people to live a meaningful life that matters, that gives Him glory, and advances His kingdom.

If you are curious to try one of the scientifically proven exercises, before going to bed tonight, write down three blessings you are thankful for today, and think about these before going to sleep. Hopefully you will experience a better nights sleep, and be more aware of anticipating God's presence and blessings in your day tomorrow.

### **Positive Psychology Resources**

**Dr. Catherine Hart Weber**, *Flourish: Discover the Daily Joy of Abundant, Vibrant Living*.

[www.howtoflourish.com](http://www.howtoflourish.com)

Dr. Hart and Dr. Hart Weber's book: *Is Your Teen Stressed or Depressed?*

*Positive Health Psychology*: Dr. Hart's upcoming book on *Sleep*.

*Positive Psychology Coaching*:

Dr. Catherine Hart Weber's session on AACC Coaching Video Series Part 2.

[www.hartinstitute.com](http://www.hartinstitute.com)

University of Pennsylvania

<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>

Authentic Happiness

<http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>

Fuller Theological Seminary Graduate School of Psychology

Positive youth development.

<http://www.fuller.edu/sop/travis/crcad/crcad2.asp>

Thriving Indicators Project

<http://www.thrivefoundation.org/>

Journal of Positive Psychology

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17439760.asp>

Values in Action Institute

<http://www.viastrengths.org/>

BBC News: The Happiness Formula

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness\\_formula/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/)

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