

Flourish Summary

By Martin E.P. Seligman

'This book will help you flourish.' This is a bold promise. However, it comes from a leading psychologist, researcher, and previous head of the American Psychological Association, who has spent most of his working life practicing what he calls, "psychology as usual." Now, the thought leader in positive psychology, is urging us to re-conceptualize the discipline, by focusing on what's going well, instead of what's wrong.

Flourish updates the ever-evolving field of positive psychology. It unpacks the five elements of well-being, discusses new theories and research, and gives practical ideas on building mental health. It also provides processes that play a crucial role in employee well-being, that are being implemented by institutions.

Ironically, Martin Seligman detests the word "happiness," despite being the founder of a new branch of psychology aiming to make people happier. He feels the idea of happiness is associated with smiley faces, and other symbols that do little to secure our own fulfillment. Furthermore, a relentless pursuit of happiness is exhausting. Hence, he provides an in-depth, practical understanding of well-being that has scientific backing.

Briefly, we'll explore what well-being is, and how it's different from happiness. We'll then dissect the elements of well-being using the mnemonic "PERMA," and finally, look at the specific things we can do to boost our own well-being. And what's important isn't only that we flourish, but that we enable the planet to thrive. Flourishing therefore, should ultimately be a fundamental factor in determining public policy in

countries across the world.

What's Well-Being, and How Does It Differ From Happiness?

We usually regard happiness as a cheerful mood, which implies lots of positive emotion. However, according to our author, that's just "happiology." In the early days of positive psychology, the theory was quite closely tied to three pillars: namely positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. In this book, Seligman explains how he has come to believe that positive psychology is about more than just happiness. It's about well-being.

Well-being has five pillars, each representing five independent elements of well-being. The five pillars are measurable and should be pursued for their own sake. Importantly, each of the five pillars is separate from the other.

For example, you may pursue accomplishment for its own sake, even though it doesn't necessarily make you feel good all the time. And you may go to your child's concert because you value your relationship, even if the thought of a school concert gives you a headache.

The Useful Mnemonic PERMA

P stands for positive emotion. Positive emotion is all about a pleasant life and feeling good.

Leading authority on positive emotion, Barbara Fredrickson, developed the 'broaden and build' theory. This theory tells us that positive emotion isn't just pleasant; it's also a sign that psychological growth is happening. Fredrickson also applied this theory in corporate settings. One such study involved sixty companies, where every word spoken in business meetings was recorded. Comments were then analyzed for positive or negative statements. The companies were chunked into groups, where one-third were flourishing economically, one-third were doing okay, and one-third were in financial difficulty. They found that companies with better than a 2.9:1 ratio for positive to negative statements were flourishing, but below that ratio, they weren't. This was named the Losada ratio. (A caveat though, above a ratio of 13:1, all the positivity becomes too much, and a company loses its effectiveness.)

It's not just companies that need to keep an eye on ratios. Here's an interesting thought. For a healthy and loving relationship, the ratio needs to be about 5:1. This means five positive statements for every critical statement you make to your partner or vice versa.

It might be worth doing a bit of analysis when it comes to your own relationships to see how you're doing?

Positivity is crucial because it highlights what's going well, or what has the potential to do well. Therefore we need to cultivate a range of positive emotions such as gratitude and hope.

Engagement is the second pillar. This is also known as the flow state. Engagement is when we're completely absorbed in a task, and we experience the sensation of time stopping, and thoughts and feelings becoming absent until we stop to reflect.

Relationships are the third pillar, and they're central to living meaningful lives. Humans are social beings, and we need to form social connections. There's a Western bias that dictates that we're individuals. However, we're happiest when we're surrounded by love, intimacy, and positive interactions. We respond to the idea that there's "safety in numbers," so remember, if you're prone to isolation, it's worth seeking out other people and strengthening kinship ties and bonds.

Meaning is the fourth pillar. If you've read Viktor Frankl's highly acclaimed book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, you'll know how pivotal a sense of purpose is to our happiness and fulfillment. So, while it might make you miserable to pursue something with single-mindedness, because you deem it worthwhile, you'll be comfortable for it to define and guide your life. This sense of purpose and meaning will bring you joy.

Accomplishment (or achievement) is the fifth pillar. Accomplishment is pursued for its own sake, and not just a means to an end. Many extremely wealthy business people, for example, see achievement as a separate goal from earning money. This goes some way in explaining why some wealthy individuals give a portion of their wealth to philanthropic causes.

If we use academic achievement as an example, Angela Duckworth's research reveals how important grit is. This is the non-cognitive part of achievement, in which character is crucial. The strength of self-discipline

allows us to engage in deliberate practice. But here's the fascinating finding. Self-discipline is a more important predictor of academic success than IQ. However, self-discipline means sacrificing short-term pleasure for long-term gain, and this takes grit. Duckworth defines grit as the combination of persistence and strong passion when focusing on an outcome.

She tested this at West Point and found that the GRIT test she had developed predicted which newbies would last the demanding initial training course, and who would drop out. They did this more accurately than any other test they took. The test also predicted retention in the U.S. Special Forces, and the number of sales concluded by real estate brokers. A childhood example included thousands of children in the USA who compete in the National Spelling Bee. Grit results were a good predictor of who would make it to the final round. These children's high levels of grit made them more inclined to spend time studying words, which gave them the edge in the competition.

Seligman advises us that if we want to build our knowledge base, it all comes down to 'practice, practice, practice.'

Build Well-Being by Starting With Strengths, and Paying Gratitude a Visit

The 24 character strengths that underpin Positive Psychology, are the supports we draw on to build each of the PERMA elements. Getting to know and name our strengths is a great exercise and can be done for free on authentichappiness.org. The test is also provided in the book.

Seligman suggests that you can practice your top strengths in new ways once you've completed this test. What you learn can then be applied at home, at work, or during leisure time. For example, if your signature strength is Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, try to take a more scenic route to and from work, or soak in your surroundings when walking in nature.

As many of us know, gratitude is one of the cornerstones of leading a better and more abundant life. Take time to be grateful for all of the beautiful things that happen to you every day. For example, why not think of someone who has done something that changed your life for the better but who you've never properly thanked. Perhaps they're someone from your past, or maybe they helped you more recently. In any event, write them a letter, and tell them precisely what they did and how it helped you. Then deliver it in person, and read it to them. Expressing gratitude is a small act that has an extraordinary ripple effect.

The "What Went Well" Exercise

Imagine you're about to start packing for a picnic, and you look at the sky and see that one or two dark clouds are emerging. Most of us will abort our plans, believing that it'll rain. However, there are so many times the clouds blow over, and there's no sign of rain after all.

For very sound evolutionary reasons, our brains are good at reminding us of what might go wrong, but pretty useless at reinforcing what goes right.

It might be time to do a little bit of re-wiring, so why not try this exercise? Every night for the next week, set aside ten minutes to write down three things that went well during the day, and why they went well. They don't

have to be major things. Perhaps it was just a great cup of coffee you drank, remembering that someone went out of their way for you, or that you remembered a friend's birthday. Keep a record of this, and write down why you think these things happened. For example, 'the coffee man really wants to make his clients happy,' or 'there are terrific people in this town.'

The research backs up the positive effects of these exercises over a few months. Exercises such as these work well for people suffering from depression, which led Dr. Tayyab Rashid to create PPT (Positive Psychotherapy) for depressed patients. This consists of 14 sessions involving positive psychology exercises. In fact, these exercises relieved depressive symptoms more effectively than many drug therapies.

It's not often that a patient in a therapist's office is told to "deal with it." Yet, that's how fighter pilots are trained. They're taught to fly fearlessly and make split-second decisions, even in the face of fear. Seligman says that we should be helped to understand that on some days, we'll wake up feeling that life is hopeless. We need to learn how to live with positive emotions, alongside the difficult and sad feelings we'll inevitably experience.

So we can try that for ourselves, but what about schools and institutions?

Off to Geelong Grammar School, the Army, and Public Policy Decision-Makers

When Martin Seligman addressed the management and board at Geelong Grammar School, one of the oldest and wealthiest schools in Australia, he

didn't know that he was about to embark on a massive undertaking. The project was a positive education project for the entire school, and when the school agreed to go ahead with it, they committed to Seligman's advice.

Seligman advised on the need to teach the entire faculty about positive psychology. To do this, experts would have to take up residence at the school to help the teachers teach well-being across all grades. He also advised them to recruit some "stars" in positive psychology to engage with the community and report on the curriculum once a month. The results were astonishing, and Seligman himself decided to spend his sabbatical at the school and oversee the project. He summed up the successful project as, 'Teaching positive psychology, embedding it, and living it.'

The armed forces also took part in a long-term project designed to make soldiers psychologically fit. The need was to build resilience. The ability for individuals who can bounce back from the stress of the persistent threat of warfare is paramount. Hence, the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, which involves designing a test that measures psychological fitness, self-improvement courses, and resilience training, was developed. It aims to measure fitness in four domains: emotional fitness, social fitness, family fitness, and spiritual fitness. Once a soldier has completed the GAT (Global Assessment Tool), which measures their fitness in the four areas, they can be directed into programs to suit their needs. In addition to this, work also began regarding post-traumatic growth. Soldiers are fully aware of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), but not about the resilience and development that's possible after trauma. This one-sided knowledge creates what Seligman calls a 'self-fulfilling downward spiral.'

The debate on how to measure well-being is growing in economics. Seligman argues that governments should be judged not only by their achievements on GDP, but also by their people's well-being.

In Conclusion

What is the key to happiness and well-being? Is it a high IQ, fancy cars, and accumulated wealth? Perhaps it's a by-product of being medicated by prescription drugs?

Often we think that we'll be happier if we have to struggle less. Traditional psychotherapy takes away many struggles and tries to remove all disabling conditions. However, eliminating hardships and struggles does not actually solve the underlying problems.

Psychotherapy needs to be extended to help people apply enabling strategies to live well. This book argues that flourishing doesn't mean doing away with misery; it means minimizing it and building our PERMA. We need a range of very different skills to deal with this, and Seligman provides us with numerous exercises, tips, and suggestions to help us reframe how we view happiness.

Ultimately there are two critical factors when it comes to therapy. The first is that we need to learn to function well, alongside our symptoms, and that treatment should continue when therapy ends. Treatment should also build our PERMA skills because they're self-sustaining. The beauty of PERMA skills is that they apply equally in the therapy room, and life beyond it. PERMA can be applied to the classroom, the boardroom, the military, and government.

Perhaps this will be the start of a beautiful and PERMANent journey

towards flourishing.