

Live long and happy

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The new century challenges psychology to shift more of its intellectual energy to the study of the positive aspects of human experience. A science of positive subjective experience, of positive individual traits, and of positive institutions promises to improve the quality of life and also to prevent the various pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless. The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features, which make life worth living. Hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance are either ignored or explained as transformations of more authentic negative impulses. The 16 articles that make up this millennial issue of the American Psychologist take up this challenge. They describe our present state of knowledge about such issues as what enables happiness, the effects of autonomy and self-regulation, how optimism and hope affect health, what constitutes wisdom, and how talent and creativity come to fruition. We outline a framework for a science of positive psychology, point to gaps in our knowledge, and predict that the next century will see a science and profession that will come to understand and build those factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish. Positive Psychology: An Introduction Entering a new millennium, we face an historical choice. Left alone on the pinnacle of economic and political leadership, the United States can continue to increase its material wealth while ignoring the human needs of its people and that of the rest of the planet. Such a course is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair. At this juncture the social and behavioral sciences can play an

enormously important role. They can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities. Psychology should be able to help document what kind of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how our lives can be most worth living. Yet we have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living. Psychology has come to understand quite a bit about how people survive and endure under conditions of adversity ((For recent surveys of the history of psychology see, e. g. Koch & Leary, 1985; Benjamin, 1985; and Smith, 1997). But we know very little about how normal people flourish under more benign conditions. Psychology has, since World War 2, become a science largely about healing. It concentrates on repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning. This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community. The aim of Positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities. The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experience: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (past), hope and optimism (future), and flow and happiness (present). At the individual level it is about positive individual traits -- the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level it is about the civic

virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. Two personal stories, one told by each author, explain how we arrived at the conviction that a movement toward positive psychology was needed and how this special issue came about. For the first author (MEPS), it began at a moment in time a few months after he had been elected President of the American Psychological Association. The moment took place in my garden while I was weeding with my five-year old daughter, Nikki. I have to confess that even though I write books about children, I'm really not all that good with children. I am goal-oriented and time-urgent and when I'm weeding in the garden, I'm actually trying to get the weeding done. Nikki, however, was throwing weeds into the air, singing, and dancing around. I yelled at her. She walked away came back and said, "Daddy, I want to talk to you." "Yes, Nikki?" "Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five, I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I've ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch." This was for me an epiphany, nothing less. I learned something about Nikki, about raising kids, about myself, and a great deal about my profession. First, I realized that raising Nikki was not about correcting whining. Nikki did that herself. Rather, I realized that raising Nikki is about taking this marvelous strength -- I call it "seeing into the soul," -- amplifying it, nurturing it, helping her to lead her life around it to buffer against her weaknesses and the storms of life. Raising children, I realized, is vastly more than fixing what is wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest

qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these strengths. As for my own life, Nikki hit the nail right on the head. I was a grouch. I had spent fifty years mostly enduring wet weather in my soul, and the last ten years being a nimbus cloud in a household full of sunshine. Any good fortune I had was probably not due to my grumpiness, but in spite of it. In that moment, I resolved to change.