The Unhappy Truth About Positive Psychology

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By Jeffrey B. Rubin, Truthout | News Analysis

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While trying to survive (as opposed to thrive) is the new normal, increasing numbers of people still debate the nature of happiness. I am not a gloomy person, but I don’t spend a single minute working at being happy. Nonetheless, I understand the impulse, which has become a national obsession, the central topic in a plethora of best-selling books, the darling of big business and the media and a boon for motivational speakers and self-help entrepreneurs. In a world as complicated and disheartening as ours, who wouldn't want to have a method for feeling better?

The problem is that this happiness quest is, at its core, an inherently solipsistic and hedonistic enterprise - me feeling better. I like feeling good as much as the next person, but the pursuit of happiness alone is a narrow and ultimately unrewarding vision of a full human life - as even Martin Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology movement that helped spawn the happiness industry - now admits. "Happiness" is "so overused," he writes in his book, "Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being," "that it has become almost meaningless. It is an unworkable term for science, or any other practical goal such as education, therapy, public policy, or just changing yourself."

I couldn't agree more.

In "Flourish," Seligman seeks a better alternative. There are eight elements in his new model of well-being: happiness, flow, meaning, love, gratitude, accomplishment, growth and better relationships. We flourish, according to Seligman, by increasing - and having more of - each element. Seligman has brought this model to elementary schools, the mental health community and the Army. His goal is to "build well-being on the planet."

(Young: EssG; Edited: JR / TO)

I’m glad that Seligman now recognizes that happiness is a flawed foundation for a
meaningful theory and has revised his original model. Still, his "new" view of flourishing is based on one of the core assumptions of his work on happiness, namely a relentless privileging of positive emotions and an aversion to, and consequently an avoidance of, negative ones. This is fatal to his theory of thriving, his strategies for helping us flourish and the foundation of the positive psychology movement. Seligman's one-sided emphasis on positive emotions and relationships ignores, if not outright neglects, vital elements: the inescapable challenges, suffering and deprivation that periodically afflict us all and the darker aspects of human beings and their relationships. The best piece of advice to come out of the positive psychology movement, according to one of its founders, Christopher Peterson, is the importance of strong relationships. Yet, you can't have a psychology of intimacy - clearly a central ingredient in a theory of flourishing - while neglecting, as Seligman and most positive psychologists do, the challenges people in relationships encounter, including conflict, anger and sadness.

Nietzsche recognized that every philosophy is disguised autobiography; a "personal confession ... and an unconscious memoir." I think this provides a clue as to why Seligman remains stuck in his misguided model. The patriarch of a movement devoted to feeling better, Seligman is, by his own admission in "Authentic Happiness," a "dyed-in-the-wool pessimist," a "grouch," even a "walking nimbus cloud."

Seligman comes by his pessimism and grumpiness honestly. He tells us that he idealized his strong, brilliant father, who suffered a stroke at the "height of his powers" when Seligman was thirteen and became "permanently paralyzed" and "physically and emotionally helpless" for the rest of his life. I imagine that young Seligman identified with his father and felt devastated and helpless. I also wonder if his subsequent theories of happiness, and now flourishing, were built on the faulty foundation of a flight from suffering.

The subject of Seligman's early research in the 1960s at the University of Pennsylvania was "learned helplessness," the passivity induced by feeling that your actions are futile, that nothing you do matters. Seligman and Dr. Steven Maier exposed dogs to, in Seligman's words, "inescapable shocks." The vulnerable pups - perhaps like Seligman in the face of his father's illness - felt depressed and helpless in relation to the trauma they experienced and couldn't escape.

"I have been a psychotherapist for thirty-five years," writes Seligman. "I am not a very good one - I confess that I'm better at talking than listening." The approach Seligman uses to attempt to manage his learned helplessness and to help other people flourish - cognitive-behavioral theories and techniques - focuses on changing faulty and catastrophic thinking rather than understanding and coming to grips with the disturbing feelings that give rise to such thinking. If practicing psychotherapy for over three decades has taught me one thing, it's this: doing an end run around one's vulnerability and pain - instead of going into it and healing it - leaves it relatively untouched, creating what Freud called "the return of the repressed." In other words, if you don't deal with your feelings, they will deal with you.

Neglecting human vulnerability and self-blindness not only provides a lopsided view of life; it profoundly compromises the very strategies Seligman and other proponents of positive psychology, like Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want," recommend for change. It's life enhancing to focus on the positive potential we all have, to identify and increase our character strengths, to celebrate what went well in our day, savor good memories,
keep gratitude journals and perform unexpected acts of kindness, as positive psychologists propose. But without also addressing scary and troubling feelings and confronting our remarkable capacity for self-deception and our hidden strategies for self-protection, even the most earnest "happiness interventions" will be undermined. Seligman illustrates this when he recounts how his daughter still complains about his negativity. As does Gretchen Rubin, author of "The Happiness Project," who writes: "I am happy, but I'm not as happy as I should be." She admits that despite her yearlong "happiness project," with its charts and resolutions, in "some ways I'd made myself less happy." Focusing on the positive by itself will not heal deeper psychological wounds; they must be addressed on an emotional and somatic level. And this is why I am doubtful the Army resilience training program will succeed.

There is another way of thinking about what helps people thrive. Sane living involves giving full credence to negative and positive emotions - sadness and joy, shame and compassion, fear and resilience. We flourish when we cultivate our potential without losing sight of our vulnerability. The two objectives should neither be separated, as they were in the first hundred years of Western psychology, nor pursued one-sidedly, as Seligman, and many of his colleagues, do.

Flourishing involves how we live more than what we feel: engaging life wholeheartedly - which includes responding to adversity to the best of our ability - and treating other people honorably. We thrive when we realize the best within ourselves, while enriching the lives of other people.

The first stage of flourishing is to cultivate clarity and equanimity in the face of the frenzied pace of life and the digital overload that threatens to bury us alive. I call this expanding inner space. Reading, meditation and music are my favorite ways of getting there, but your entry might be through exercise, walking in nature or gardening. When we have a more centered and spacious perspective, we can access our untapped capacity for creativity, appreciate the beauty in the world and imaginatively address the challenges that confront us.

Sometimes we must confront painful options or make difficult choices. On occasion, flourishing is playing the hand we are dealt as well as we can, given imperfect and even undesirable circumstances such as family crises or financial distress, job loss or illness - the new reality for increasing numbers of people.

Flourishing is different from happiness and it doesn't always feel good. Behavior that might not immediately make us happy - scrubbing a sick person's bathroom or diving into a freezing lake to save a drowning dog - ultimately enriches us and the world. Many of our most painful experiences - unrequited love, loss of a beloved relative, professional failure - clarify our values, sharpen our determination and deepen our compassion. After his tragic accident, the actor Christopher Reeve said, "I didn't appreciate others nearly as much as I do now."

When we expand inner space we are also in a better position to discover our passions and purposes - what we cherish and what gives our lives meaning. Values are crucial to flourishing - they define the ideas and beliefs we care about to which we are committed. Embodying our highest ideals and having moral accountability are crucial to my vision of flourishing. Seligman emphasizes the importance of seeking meaning and purpose by belonging to and serving something bigger than ourselves, but unless we integrate that quest with ethics and life-affirming values - another topic not included in Seligman's conception of flourishing - there is a danger that one's purpose could be aligned with unethical enterprises, as scandals in American politics and corporations demonstrate on nearly a daily basis.
Seligman's work on learned helplessness "heavily influenced the psychological aspects of the Bush administration's torture program," wrote Jason Leopold in Truthout in 2011. While Seligman denies condoning torture, in May 2002 - when the CIA began to employ brutal torture techniques against several detainees - Seligman spoke about his learned helplessness experiments at one of the US military's SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) schools, (as Jane Mayer reported in The New Yorker, July 11, 2005). Bruce Jessen and James Mitchell - who have been called the "architects of the Bush administration torture program" - were in attendance. Five months earlier, Seligman had met at his home with Mitchell and the CIA's then-Director of Behavioral Science Research, Kirk Hubbard. Seligman claims he was completely unaware his theory of learned helplessness was used against detainees and he denied ever engaging in discussions about the torture program with Mitchell, Jessen or any Bush administration official. "There is no way I could ethically give trauma to other human beings," Seligman wrote in 1990. Still, after 9/11, his theories were used to devise new types of torture for suspected terrorists.

In 2009, Seligman's Positive Psychology Center received a "$31 million, no bid, sole-source Army contract" for training service members "to be psychologically resilient and resist 'catastrophizing' traumatic events" (Leopold, Truthout, January 5, 2011). Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, notes Jim Rendon in an article in the March 25, 2012, New York Times Magazine, was "designed for quick implementation, not research," and has not been tested by even one pilot or study. Individual soldiers and civil rights groups have voiced growing concern about the constitutionality and efficacy of these initiatives. Because it is based on dubious assumptions of positive psychology, I am doubtful the Army resilience training program will succeed.

As with his experimentation with dogs, Seligman's complicity in questionable ethical activities raises troubling concerns about a theory that purports to illuminate and embody human flourishing.

The final aspect of flourishing is treating people (and animals) more humanely and deepening friendships and intimacy. Lasting intimacy - a close and enduring relationship with someone we love who cherishes us - is an indispensable source of strength, resilience and hope. Loving other people and caring for ourselves are not separate and opposed; they are inextricably linked. Genuine self-care is the foundation of intimacy and intimacy is the culmination of self-care. Such intimacy widens our horizon of possibility, deepens our humanity and helps us flourish, which is a priceless gift to the world.

The quest to live a good life has a venerable history. It's the central concern of Aristotle, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, the prophets, Montaigne, Maslow and now positive psychologists. Such a focus on humans at their best is a useful corrective to Western psychology's imbalanced emphasis on pathology and illness in its first hundred years. But the conception of flourishing we need in the twenty-first century must embrace, not ignore, the full spectrum of human experience, from how we live to what we feel, to loving deeply and living ethically.

Now that would make me happy.

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JEFFREY B. RUBIN

Jeffrey B. Rubin Ph.D., is the creator of meditative psychotherapy, a practice that he developed through insights gained from decades of study, teaching and helping hundreds of people flourish. The author of the critically acclaimed books "The Art of Flourishing," "Psychotherapy and Buddhism," "The Good Life" and "A Psychoanalysis for Our Time," Dr. Rubin is a practicing psychotherapist and teacher of meditation in New York City and Bedford Hills, New York, and has taught at various universities, psychoanalytic institutes and Buddhist and yoga centers. He lectures around the country and has given workshops at the United Nations, the Esalen Institute, the Open Center and the 92nd Street Y. His pioneering approach to psychotherapy and Buddhism has been featured in The New York Times Magazine.