

A life worth living: The science of human flourishing

December 9 2008, By Anthony Ong

What do we know about human well-being? The answer is, surprisingly little, compared with what is known about human illness, dysfunction and disease.

Scientific progress on the positive side of human functioning lags woefully behind strides on the negative side of health assessment, treatment and research. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. Growing empirical research has documented the remarkable capacity of some individuals, from early life through old age, to thrive in the face of life's challenges and setbacks.

Positive emotions as a basic building block of flourishing in the face of adversity

What good are positive emotions, and why do scientists care about whether people are feeling good? Historically, the prevailing scientific view in the field of psychology was that efforts to understand positive emotions should take a back seat while psychologists learn more about how to effectively treat the suffering generated by negative emotions. But what if positive emotions could help to explain some of the problems that negative emotions produced? Emerging research indicates that when we look at the question in a multivariate way, we do not find a single, simple answer to the question of how positive emotions influence health. Instead, the most accurate assessment is to say that it is a process that proceeds along at least three intersecting pathways.

-- **Positive emotions undo negative emotion arousal.** Converging empirical work on positive emotions has raised the possibility that positive emotions are important facilitators of adaptive recovery, undoing the autonomic arousal generated by negative emotions. In laboratory studies in which positive and negative emotions are experimentally induced, researchers have found that positive emotions are linked to faster cardiovascular recovery from negative emotions. Other investigations have confirmed the importance of positive emotions in fostering recovery from such stressful life events as interpersonal loss.

-- **Positive emotions fuel psychological resilience.** What psychological traits are implicated in generating and maintaining positive emotions in the face of stress? Emerging adult literature suggests that individual differences in psychological resilience may account for the adaptive ways in which life stressors are encountered, managed and transformed. Indeed, psychological resilience may serve to strengthen resistance to stress by affording greater access to positive emotions, which, in turn, may help provide a momentary respite from ongoing stress.

-- **Positive emotions trigger emotional and physical well-being.** By undoing lingering negative emotions and fueling psychological resilience, positive emotions should also enhance people's emotional and physical well-being. The results of recent longitudinal studies suggest that psychological resilience may enhance the effects of positive emotion, triggering an upward spiral of prolonged positive emotionality. However, the capacity for positive emotional engagement in times of stress has consequences that are not just emotional but physiological. Research with older adults suggests that deficits in positive emotions create a subtle but persistent difference in cardiovascular function that sets the stage for trouble in later life. By accelerating cardiovascular recovery from daily stress, positive emotions may benefit health by averting delays in adaptation to subsequent stressors.

In sum, the notion that positive emotions have adaptive value is no longer contestable, but what precisely this means for individual lives and societies has not been fully appreciated. However, one thing is for sure: When our positive emotions are in short supply -- when we feel hemmed in by such negative emotions as fear and sadness -- we become stuck in a rut and painfully predictable. But when our positive emotions are in ample supply -- when we feel lifted by the centripetal force of our closest relationships -- we take off and become generative, resilient versions of ourselves.

Tips for Promoting Positive Emotions

1. Find meaning in everyday life through (a) reframing adverse events in a positive light; (b) infusing ordinary events with positive value; and (c) pursuing and attaining realistic goals.
2. Explore relaxation techniques (e.g., imagery, muscle and meditation exercises) that create conditions conducive to experiencing contentment and inner calmness.
3. Make connections by reaching out to others.
4. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find intrinsically motivating.
5. Take care of yourself by eating right, getting enough sleep and engaging in regular physical activity.

Provided by Cornell University

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