


# THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY  
ENDEAVOURS TO  
FIND PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS  
AND SHOWS THAT PURE  
JOY CAN BE A TRULY  
UNIVERSAL REMEDY.





A reverent hush falls upon the audience in the huge conference hall in Long Beach, California, as Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman takes to the stage. Suntanned and wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt, the 76-year-old economist doesn't look his age – living proof that optimism keeps you young. A Princeton professor and founder of behavioural economics, Kahneman is one of today's most high-profile proponents of positive psychology, a new branch of psychology that has created an unparalleled sensation in the last decade. The subject of his talk today is: What is happiness?

Kahneman cites a story told to him by a man who had been listening to a symphony of wonderful music. "At the very end of the recording there was a dreadful screeching sound," the man said, adding: "It ruined the whole experience." The point of the story? Kahneman is showing how a single negative thought can nullify a great deal of positive experience. All we remember is the horrible scratched tone at the end, not the 20 minutes of glorious music that preceded it.

**W**hy is our perception of negative things so much stronger than that of positive ones? How can we encourage people's potential instead of only addressing their weaknesses? Can happiness perhaps be learned? These are the questions at the heart of positive

psychology. It all started in the 1970s, when the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first described 'the flow' – a surge of happiness and intense concentration sparked by hormones and other neurotransmitters – thus inventing the idea of creativity as a drug. In the 1980s, molecular biology was able to provide increasing proof of how feelings manifest themselves in the body and are discharged as 'nerve storms', how hormones are released and activate immune cells and expand or contract blood vessels. One thing quickly became clear – the psyche determines how people are as well as the state of their health. Then suddenly a new possibility arose: if, on the one hand, the psyche could inhibit people, then it must surely be possible to put it to positive use.

Ed Diener, a professor at the University of Chicago and another luminary of the subject, has developed a special questionnaire, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). "We ask people how satisfied and happy they are with their lives," he says. "They can answer on a scale of one to seven, but the results still tell us a great deal, even though the questions 'only' concern social relationships. We can tell from the data if a person is healthy or if he is a good worker, for example."

It is also easy to find out what makes people really happy. Partnerships, for example, are a definite factor in happiness. "Governments should encourage and promote marriage," says Diener. "Love, friendship, solidarity – these are all factors that don't just guarantee personal happiness but also bring economic success."

It is something also corroborated by the World Database of Happiness run by the Dutch sociologist Ruut Veenhoven at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Veenhoven has analysed more than 2,300 questionnaires which have been completed



over the last 60 years in more than 100 different countries, his overall conclusion being that one's quality of life is closely linked to political, social and economic development. Happiness can be strengthened by the situation prevailing in a country, for example if citizens are able to play an active role in society or if sufficient environmental protection is provided. It is no wonder that it is always places like Denmark which top the list of 'happy countries'. So is Denmark the happiest country in the world? Ebbe Lavendt, a psychologist at Copenhagen's Center for Positive Psychology, thinks it might be. "At least, we have a stable economy, peace, a high level of mutual trust and a tolerant society." Yet money and prosperity alone cannot make people happy and levels of happiness do not automatically increase with a country's GDP. In England in the 1950s, more than half of the population claimed to be happy, but today the figure is only 36 per cent, despite the country's prosperity levels having tripled since then.

Martin E.P. Seligman, one of the American co-founders of positive psychology and author of several bestsellers, therefore concurs with Aristotle. The Greek philosopher always maintained that true happiness is to be found in self-fulfilment.

HAPPINESS IS THE MOST  
IMPORTANT FOUNDATION  
FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNING.

"Every person has his own particular strengths," says Seligman. "Our main task should be to find out what these are." He concludes that positive psychology's findings should be put into practice as soon as possible – ideally at schools.

In many English, Australian and North American schools, this is already happening. For several years now, 'Happiness' has been one of the sub-

jects on the curriculum. "We are developing youngsters' emotional intelligence," explains Rhodri Bryant, headmaster of a school in Hertfordshire, southern England, which has followed Seligman's advice. "Being happy is the most important foundation for successful learning," he believes. The experiment has proved so successful that the London School of Economics advises that by 2011 every pupil across England should be receiving tuition in 'happiness'.

**T**he psychologists and economists have also received support from the field of neuroscience. Morten L. Kringelbach, a research fellow in neuroscience at The Queen's College, Oxford, has established in a study which pleasure centres are activated by neurotransmitters and which neuronal networks are triggered when people motivate themselves. The study has shown that inner motivation is far more effective than external rewards.

The results also make it clear that humans are receptive to happiness from an early stage. From the age of seven months, babies react to words of devotion and love, even if they are still unaware of their actual meaning. Recognition of negative feelings such as anger, rejection or aggression, however, is only learned much later.

At Harvard, the findings of this branch of psychology are now taken so seriously that a medical research institute has been devoted to the subject: the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine. The university's basic premise is that positive thoughts can help healing processes, and so hyp-




nosis and imagination are used to reduce pain and encourage the body's own healing powers in chronic illnesses. Research into happiness is branching out more and more, opening up completely new ways of thinking.

"We mustn't overestimate the possibilities, however," says neurobiologist Gerald Hüther from the University of Göttingen, Germany. "It's not as simple as just reprogramming our minds. Our attitude to life is not only determined by conscious thought, but above all by experience and feelings which are stored in the body." Despite this, the times when proponents of positive psychology were dismissed as fanciful theorists are long past. In the last few years, new research centres have sprung up all over

the world at which neuroscientists, biologists, psychologists and sociologists are joining forces.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the first to set the ball rolling in the 1970s, is today the head of an institute at Claremont Graduate University in California. When asked what he considers to be the aim of positive psychology today, he says: "We want to make the world a better place. Every person must have the opportunity to develop his potential. If we can achieve this – in the family, at school or at work – aggression, terror and desperation will become ghosts of the past." Adherents of positive psychology certainly have one thing in common: they are incorrigible optimists.



INNER  
MOTIVATION  
IS FAR MORE  
EFFECTIVE  
THAN EXTERNAL  
REWARDS.