

# The Science of Happiness

Psychology explores humans at their best.

**This doesn't feel** like a normal academic conference. True, the three-day Positive Psychology Summit is a sellout, with 425 attendees thronging the meeting rooms in downtown Washington, D.C. But despite the familiar trappings, something seems different. There's herbal tea available at breaks, and the conference's organizer, Shane Lopez of the University of Kansas, walks around smiling and ringing a dinner bell to prompt people to take their seats for the next session. This group is slimmer, healthier, younger, and more female than the usual scholarly crowd. Some stretch in yoga-like postures in the aisles, or recline on friends' bodies as if resting on a chaise longue. The professional jargon includes recurring words like *flow*, *optimism*, *resilience*, *courage*, *virtues*, *energy*, *flourishing*, *strengths*, *happiness*, *curiosity*, *meaning*, *subjective well-being*, *forgiveness*, and even *joy*.

But the main difference probably shows up in the question periods. Typically, academics seem obsessed with poking holes in the argument of the presentation just made—finding fault, pointing out counter-examples, insisting on qualifications—with the transparent purpose of one-upping the speaker. Such shenanigans are absent here. “They're trying to *build*,” explains one participant. “There's none of this academic carping,” observes professor of psychiatry George Vaillant, who has spoken at five of these “summit” events. “The teaching exercises I've done for positive psychology audiences have been an absolute joy. Here, people really laugh at the jokes.”

This October morning, they are laughing with Tal Ben-Shahar '96, Ph.D. '04, an associate of the Harvard psychology department, who argues in his opening keynote address that positive psychologists need to build bridges between “the ivory tower and Main Street,” to unite academic rigor with the accessibility of popular psychology books. “Most people do not read the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*,” he notes. “In fact, one of my colleagues at Harvard did a study, and he estimated that the average journal article is read by seven people. And that includes the author's mother.”



Tal Ben-Shahar

Ben-Shahar is a psychologist and author who has never pursued a tenure-track position nor published research in professional journals (even so, his third book, *Happier: Finding Meaning, Pleasure, and the Ultimate Currency*, is due this spring). Ben-Shahar's passion is teaching, and he goes on to explain how he teaches positive psychology. His Harvard course on the subject has been offered twice, in 2004 and in 2006, when its enrollment of 854 students was the largest of any course in the catalog, surpassing even introductory economics. This startling fact seized the attention of national media, and pieces about “Happiness 101” (actually, Psychology 1504, “Positive Psychology”) appeared in the *Boston Globe* and on CNN, CBS, National Public Radio, and overseas in the *Guardian*, the *Jerusalem Post*, and the *Shanghai Evening Post*, making Ben-Shahar one of the best-known positive psychologists alive. At 36 years of age, he is a young star in a field that is only eight years old.

For much of its history, psychology has seemed obsessed with human failings and pathology. The very idea of psychotherapy, first formalized by Freud, rests on a view of human beings as troubled creatures in need of repair. Freud himself was profoundly pessimistic about human nature, which he felt was governed by deep, dark drives that we could only tenuously control. The behaviorists who followed developed a model of human life that seemed to many mechanistic if not robotic: humans were passive beings mercilessly shaped by the stimuli and the contingent rewards and punishments that surrounded them.

After World War II, psychologists tried to explain how so many ordinary citizens could have acquiesced in fascism, and did work epitomized in the 1950 classic *The Authoritarian Personality* by T.W. Adorno, et al. Social psychologists followed on, demonstrating in laboratories how malleable people are. Some of the most famous experiments proved that normal folk could become coldly insensitive to suffering when obeying “legitimate” orders or cruelly sadistic when playing the role of prison guard. Research funders invested in subjects like conformity, neurosis, and depression.

A watershed moment arrived in 1998, when University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman, in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, urged psychology to “turn toward understanding and building the human strengths to complement our emphasis on healing damage.” That speech launched today’s positive psychology movement. “When I met Marty Seligman [in 1977], he was the world’s leading scholar on ‘learned helplessness’ and depression,” says Vaillant. “He became the world’s leading scholar on optimism.”

Though not denying humanity’s flaws, the new tack of positive psychologists recommends focusing on people’s strengths and virtues as a point of departure. Rather than analyze the psychopathology underlying alcoholism, for example, positive psychologists might study the resilience of those who have managed a successful recovery—for example, through Alcoholics Anonymous. Instead of viewing religion as a delusion and a crutch, as did Freud, they might identify the mechanisms through which a spiritual practice like meditation enhances mental and physical health. Their lab experiments might seek to define not the conditions that induce depraved behavior, but those that foster generosity, courage, creativity, and laughter.

Seligman’s idea quickly caught on. The Gallup Organization founded the Gallup Positive Psychology Institute to sponsor scholarly work in the field. In 1999, 60 scholars gathered for the first Gallup Positive Psychology Summit; two years later, the conference went international, and ever since has drawn about 400 attendees (the maximum for the meeting space, Gallup’s world headquarters) annually. The October conference-goers represented 28 countries, 70 businesses or foundations, and 140 educational institutions.

Teaching has mushroomed, too. In 1999, the late Philip J. Stone, professor of psychology at Harvard, taught a positive psychology course to 20 undergraduates. There were hardly any college courses on the subject then; seven years later, there are more than 200 across the United States. The University of Pennsylvania offers a master’s degree in the field. International growth, too, is strong. Recently, Ben-Shahar gave seminars in China on the relationship of positive psychology to leadership, and he says “interest from Chinese educators and media was huge.”

The field’s roots go back at least to 1962, when Brandeis psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote about what a human life could be at its greatest in *Toward a Psychology of Being*. His “humanistic psychology” became the discipline’s “third force,” following psychoanalysis and behaviorism. “The fundamental difference between humanistic psychology and positive psychology is in their relationship to research, epistemology, and methodology,” says Ben-Shahar. “Many who joined the ‘Third Wave’ were not rigorous. Humanistic psychology gave birth to the self-help movement, and lots of self-help books have come out with concepts grounded in emotion and intuition. Positive psychology combines those things with reason and research.”

Doing so apparently answers needs the first and second forces have left unsatisfied. “I’m in a department of psychiatry, and psychiatry does not have a good model of mental health,” says clinical instructor in psychology Nancy Etcoff, who is based at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH). “Is there a model of mental health beyond ‘no mental disease’?” Vaillant, a psychiatrist and a trained psychoanalyst, says, “As a psychoanalyst, I’m paid to help you focus on your resentments and help you to find fault with your parents. And secondly, to get you to focus on your ‘poor-me’s’ and to use up Kleenex as fast as possible.” He recalls visiting, as a medical student, the most famous teaching analyst at Harvard and asking him if he knew of any case history in which psychoanalysis had worked. “Yes,” the great man said, after a moment’s thought. “Why, just recently, a former patient of mine referred her 18-year-old daughter to me.”

Vaillant notes that the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, the clinical “bible” of psychiatry and clinical psychology, “has 500,000 lines of text. There are thousands of lines on anxiety and depression, and hundreds of lines on terror, shame, guilt, anger, and fear. But there are only five lines on hope, one line on joy, and not a single line on compassion, forgiveness, or love. Everything I’ve been taught encouraged me to focus on the painful emotions, ‘because people can’t do that themselves.’ My discipline taught me that positive thinking was simply denial, and that Pangloss and Pollyanna should be taken out and shot. But working with people’s strengths instead of their weaknesses made a difference. Psychoanalysis doesn’t get anybody sober. AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] gets people sober.”

Effective psychological interventions like AA are in acute demand nowadays. “There is an epidemic of depression in every industrialized nation in the world,” declared Seligman at the 2006 positive psychology summit. “It’s a paradox; the wealthier we get, the more depressed young people get.” Richard Kadison, chief of mental health at the Harvard University Health Services, writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2005, cited a national survey of 13,500 college students which found that 45 percent reported feeling depression deep enough to prevent them from functioning, and 94 percent felt overwhelmed by everything they had to do. “In our time, depression is on the rise,” Ben-Shahar says. “More and more students experience stress, anxiety, unhappiness. Until a few years ago, we didn’t have e-mail; now, students check their e-mail 20 times a day. Students work longer hours and are having to build up their résumés to levels that, 20 years ago, were not expected of young people. Students today are looking for ideas that will help them to lead better lives.”

Such ideas affect not only psychological states, but economics and culture. “Our world has been run according to neoclassical economics,” said Gallup’s longtime chairman and CEO, Jim Clifton, at the fall summit. “We squeezed every drop out of that rock—data and equations—and that got maxed out. The world has gotten so much more competitive and now, you need so much more. Edward Deming went to Japan and then the world put Total Quality Management on top of classical economics. Now *that’s* maxed out. The next wave will be behavioral economics and cognitive economics—positive psychology, well-being, strengths science. I’m betting my job and this company on it. We are in it for keeps.”

**Despite** abundant evidence arguing for building success on one’s personal strengths, about 75 percent of respondents in surveys say that working on one’s weaknesses is more important than fostering strengths. This may be because human beings are “very sensitive to danger or pain,” says Nancy Etcoff. “Our taste buds respond more strongly to bitter tastes than to sweet ones. That might help us to avoid poison.” Etcoff, an evolutionary psychologist, studies how natural selection may have shaped not only our bodies, but our psychological dispositions. Extending the sweet/bitter argument to relationships, she mentions research showing that, unlike couples destined for divorce, spouses in successful marriages have a five-to-one ratio of positive-to-negative gestures when they argue.

“We start with a mild tendency to approach [others],” Etcoff continues. “But when we encounter something negative, we pay extraordinary attention to it. Think about hearing a description of a stranger: ‘Joe is happy, confident, and funny. But he’s cheap.’” Negative information like this can forecast a problem: if Joe is cheap he may hoard, rather than share his resources with us. “Our emotions are like a smoke detector: it’s OK if they sometimes give a false signal,” Etcoff says. “You don’t die from a false positive. It’s better to be too sensitive. We evolved in a world of much more immediate danger—germs, predators, crevasses.”

Etcoff’s 1999 book, *Survival of the Prettiest*, argued that our attraction to beauty, and beauty itself, were evolutionary outcomes of natural selection. “One big question was, Are beautiful people happier?” Etcoff says. “Surprisingly, the answer is no! This got me thinking about happiness and what makes people happy.” Etcoff, who directs the Center for Aesthetics and Well-Being at MGH, explored “hedonics”—the science of pleasure and happiness—to find out how scholars have measured happiness. (In mood surveys, at any random moment, around 70 percent of people say they are feeling OK, Etcoff says.)

Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman of Princeton (see “[The Marketplace of Perceptions](#),” March-April 2006, page 50) asked thousands of subjects to keep diaries of episodes during a day—including feelings, activities, companions, and places—and then identified some correlates of happiness. “Commuting to work was way down there—people are in a terrible mood when they commute,” Etcoff says. “Sleep has an enormous effect. If you don’t sleep well, you feel bad. TV watching is just OK, and time spent with the kids is actually low on the mood chart.” Having intimate relations topped the list of positives, followed by socializing—testimony to how important the “need to belong” is to human satisfaction. Etcoff applied these methods to 54 women, in a study sponsored by the Society of American Florists, and found that an intervention as simple as a gift of flowers that stayed in one’s home for a few days could affect a wide variety of emotions—for example, less anxiety and depression at home and enhanced relaxation, energy, and compassion at work.

Environ, too, affect mood. Settings that combine “prospect and refuge,” for example, seem to support a sense of well-being. “People like to be on a hill, where they can see a landscape. And they like somewhere to go where they can *not* be seen themselves,” Etcoff explains. “That’s a place desirable to a predator who wants to avoid becoming prey.” Other attractive features include a source of water (streams for beauty and slaking thirst), low-canopy trees (shade, protection), and animals (proof of habitability). “Humans prefer this to deserts or man-made environments,” Etcoff says. “Building windowless, nature-less, isolated offices full of cubicles ignores what people actually want. A study of patients hospitalized for gall-bladder surgery compared those whose rooms looked out on a park with those facing a brick wall. The park-view patients used less pain medication, had shorter stays, and complained less to their nurses. We ignore our nature at our own peril.”

Etcoff’s next book, on happiness and evolution, will attempt to deconstruct happiness itself, distinguishing between concepts like pleasure and desire, or euphoria and craving. “Our reward system is fed by [the neurotransmitter] dopamine that is thought to activate the brain’s pleasure centers,” Etcoff says. “It is really a brain *desire* system—it’s really about wanting. You see all these pleasures, but which ones do you really *want*? People like good-looking faces, but that doesn’t mean they desire them. Pleasure and pain are related in the brain, through the opioid neurotransmitters that produce a feeling of comfort. The opioid system triggers pleasure. Sugar, which recalls the sweetness of mother’s milk, can set it off. Caressing, sex, fatty foods, sunlight on the skin—all these can do it, too.

**Don’t call** Daniel Gilbert a positive psychologist. He isn’t one, and doesn’t approve of the label, although he doesn’t quarrel with the research. “I just don’t see what the parade is for,” he says. “I don’t think psychology needs a movement; movements are almost always counter-productive. By including some people and filling them with irrational exuberance, they divide the field. Positive psychology doesn’t cut psychology at the joint. I wouldn’t condemn the work or ideas; probably 85 percent of the ideas are worthless, but that’s true everywhere in science.”

That said, Gilbert, a professor of psychology, shares a lot of subject matter with the positive psychologists. His book *Stumbling on Happiness* became a national bestseller last summer. Its central focus is “prospection”—the ability to look into the future and discover what will make us happy. The bad news is that humans aren’t very skilled at such predictions; the good news is that we are much better than we realize at adapting to whatever life sends us.



Gilbert Photograph by Jim Harrison

“Is happiness elusive?” Gilbert asks. “Well, of course we don’t get as much of it as we want. But we’re not *supposed* to be happy all the time. We *want* that, but nature designed us to have emotions for a reason. Emotions are a primitive signaling system. They’re how your brain tells you if you’re doing things that enhance—or diminish—your survival chances. What good is a compass if it’s always stuck on north? It must be able to fluctuate. You’re *supposed* to be moving through these emotional states. If someone offers you a pill that makes you happy 100 percent of the time, you should run fast in the other direction. It’s *not* good to feel happy in a dark alley at night. Happiness is a noun, so we think it’s something we can own. But happiness is a place to visit, not a place to live. It’s like the child’s idea that if you drive far and fast enough you can get to the horizon—no, the horizon’s not a place you get to.”

Gilbert reconsiders his grandmother’s advice on how to live happily ever after: “Find a nice girl, have children, settle down.” Research shows, he says, that the first idea works: married people are happier, healthier, live longer, are richer per capita, and have more sex than single people. But having children “has only a small effect on happiness, and it is a negative one,” he explains. “People report being least happy when their children are toddlers and adolescents, the ages when kids require the most from the parents.” As far as settling down to make a living—well, if money moves you into the middle class, buying food, warmth, and dental treatment—yes, it makes you happier. “The difference between an annual income of \$5,000 and one of \$50,000 is dramatic,” Gilbert says. “But going from \$50,000 to \$50 million will not dramatically affect happiness. It’s like eating pancakes: the first one is delicious, the second one is good, the third OK. By the fifth pancake, you’re at a point where an infinite number more pancakes will not satisfy you to any greater degree. But no one stops earning money or striving for more money after they reach \$50,000.”

The reason is that humans hold fast to a number of wrong ideas about what will make them happy. Ironically, these misconceptions may be evolutionary necessities. “Imagine a species that figured out that children don’t make you happy,” says Gilbert. “We have a word for that species: *extinct*. There is a conspiracy between genes and culture to keep us in the dark about the real sources of happiness. If a society realized that money would not make people happy, its economy would grind to a halt.”

When we try to project ourselves into the future, we make a systematic series of errors, and much of *Stumbling on Happiness* analyzes them. One common miscalculation is “presentism,” the belief that we will feel in the future the way we feel today. “In a grocery store, feeling hungry, I try to shop for what I will want to eat next Wednesday,” Gilbert says. “Then Wednesday comes, and I ask myself, ‘Why did I buy jalapeño pockets?’”

Secondly, humans are marvelous rationalizers. “Find a large number of people who’ve been left standing at the altar and ask them if that was the worst day, or the best day, of their lives,” Gilbert says. “On the day it happens, almost without exception, they will say it is the worst day. But ask these same people the same question a year later and most will say it was the *best* day of their lives. People are much more resilient than they realize. In the lab, it’s very easy to get people to rationalize, but almost impossible to get them to foresee it. Rationalization is an invisible shield that protects us from psychological pain, but we don’t realize that we are carrying it.

“Much recent data show that people fare reasonably well in a variety of tragic and traumatic circumstances—Christopher Reeve was not unusual,” Gilbert continues. “Paraplegics are generally quite happy people. And blind people often say that the worst problem they have is that everyone assumes that they are sad: ‘You can’t read.’ ‘But I *can* read.’ ‘You can’t get around.’ ‘But I *can* get around.’ People *do* feel devastated if they go blind, but it does not last. The human mind is constituted to make the best of the situations in which it finds itself. But people don’t know they have this ability, and that’s the thing that bedevils their predictions about the future.”

**The positive psychology class** Ben-Shahar teaches at Harvard aims to keep its students engaged and excited, too. As they filter in, sit down, and boot up their laptops, a Whitney Houston song plays through the sound system in Sanders Theatre. Ben-Shahar, in black slacks and a blue pullover sweater, fiddles with his own laptop and brings up the first image on the screen for today’s lecture on self-esteem: it’s a *New Yorker* cartoon of a troubled man writing in his diary, “Dear Diary, Sorry to bother you again...” During the lecture, Ben-Shahar will flesh out his discussion with images and film clips, along with concepts and research citations. He also shares a personal experience with the class, telling how, in his 20s, as a College graduate who had been a national squash champion, he nonetheless “realized that I didn’t have the answers. External validation broke down. I had the success and validation, but still experienced low self-esteem.”

This is another way that positive psychology classes are different: they are experiential. “There are two levels to the course,” Ben-Shahar says. “One is, like any other course, an introduction to the research and to the field. But secondly, students explore ways to *apply* these ideas to their lives and communities. They write response papers and perform exercises, connecting these theories with their own lives and experiences. We try to ask, to use William James’s phrase, ‘What is the cash value of these ideas?’”

It is clear that the “cash value” of positive psychology can be far greater than enhanced well-being, though that is a good start. Vaillant brings up one of positive psychology’s constructs, forgiveness, in contrasting the Treaty of Versailles and the Marshall Plan. After World War I, Germany agreed not only to apologize but to send its countrymen to rebuild France. The French rejected this on the grounds that it would hurt employment in France if the Germans rebuilt it, and insisted instead on monetary reparations. In contrast, Vaillant says, “The Marshall Plan put people in Gary and Pittsburgh out of work by giving the Germans and Japanese more efficient steel mills. But the result of Versailles was World War II and the Holocaust. The Marshall Plan led to 60 years of peace in Western Europe for the first time in recorded history.”

Forgiveness, of course, means trusting someone who has hurt you, and so inevitably runs a risk. But positive psychology says such risks are worth taking. “You hope to free up people in their lives,” says Langer, “so they will take more chances and live more before they die.”

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