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A New Gauge to See What's Beyond Happiness

By JOHN TIERNEY

Is happiness overrated?

Martin Seligman now thinks so, which may seem like an odd position for the founder of the positive [psychology](#) movement. As president of the American Psychological Association in the late 1990s, he criticized his colleagues for focusing relentlessly on mental illness and other problems. He prodded them to study life's joys, and wrote a best seller in 2002 titled "Authentic Happiness."

But now he regrets that title. As the investigation of happiness proceeded, Dr. Seligman began seeing certain limitations of the concept. Why did couples go on having children even though the data clearly showed that parents are less happy than childless couples? Why did billionaires desperately seek more money even when there was nothing they wanted to do with it?

And why did some people keep joylessly playing bridge? Dr. Seligman, an avid player himself, kept noticing them at tournaments. They never smiled, not even when they won. They didn't play to make money or make friends.

They didn't savor that feeling of total engagement in a task that [psychologists](#) call flow. They didn't take aesthetic satisfaction in playing a hand cleverly and "winning pretty." They were quite willing to win ugly, sometimes even when that meant cheating.

"They wanted to win for its own sake, even if it brought no positive emotion," says Dr. Seligman, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. "They were like hedge fund managers who just want to accumulate money and toys for their own sake. Watching them play, seeing them cheat, it kept hitting me that accomplishment is a human desiderata in itself."

This feeling of accomplishment contributes to what the ancient Greeks called eudaimonia, which roughly translates to “well-being” or “flourishing,” a concept that Dr. Seligman has borrowed for the title of his new book, “**Flourish.**” He has also created his own acronym, Perma, for what he defines as the five crucial elements of well-being, each pursued for its own sake: positive emotion, engagement (the feeling of being lost in a task), relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

“Well-being cannot exist just in your own head,” he writes. “Well-being is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships and accomplishment.”

The positive psychology movement has inspired efforts around the world to survey people’s state of mind, like a new project in Britain to measure what David Cameron, the prime minister, calls **GWB**, for general well-being. Dr. Seligman says he’s glad to see governments **measuring more than just the G.D.P.**, but he’s concerned that these surveys mainly ask people about their “life satisfaction.”

In theory, life satisfaction might include the various elements of well-being. But in practice, Dr. Seligman says, people’s answers to that question are largely — more than 70 percent — determined by how they’re feeling at the moment of the survey, not how they judge their lives over all.

“Life satisfaction essentially measures cheerful moods, so it is not entitled to a central place in any theory that aims to be more than a happiology,” he writes in “**Flourish.**” By that standard, he notes, a government could improve its numbers just by handing out the kind of euphoriant drugs that Aldous Huxley described in “**Brave New World.**”

So what should be measured instead? The best gauge so far of flourishing, Dr. Seligman says, comes from a study of 23 European countries by Felicia Huppert and Timothy So of the University of Cambridge. Besides asking respondents about their moods, the researchers asked about their relationships with others and their sense that they were accomplishing something worthwhile.

Denmark and Switzerland ranked highest in Europe, with more than a quarter of their citizens meeting the definition of flourishing. Near the bottom, with fewer than 10 percent flourishing, were France, Hungary, Portugal and Russia.

There’s no direct comparison available with the United States, although some other researchers say that Americans would do fairly well because of their sense of accomplishment. The economist Arthur Brooks notes that 51 percent of Americans say they’re very satisfied with their jobs, which is a higher percentage than in any European country except Denmark,

Switzerland and Austria.

In his 2008 book, “Gross National Happiness,” Dr. Brooks argues that what’s crucial to well-being is not how cheerful you feel, not how much money you make, but rather the meaning you find in life and your sense of “earned success” — the belief that you have created value in your life or others’ lives.

“People find meaning in providing unconditional love for children,” writes Dr. Brooks, who is now president of the American Enterprise Institute. “Paradoxically, your happiness is raised by the very fact that you are willing to have your happiness lowered through years of dirty diapers, tantrums and backtalk. Willingness to accept unhappiness from children is a source of happiness.”

Some happiness researchers have suggested that parents delude themselves about the joys of children: They focus on the golden moments and forget the more frequent travails. But Dr. Seligman says that parents are wisely looking for more than happy feelings.

“If we just wanted positive emotions, our species would have died out a long time ago,” he says. “We have children to pursue other elements of well-being. We want meaning in life. We want relationships.”

In observing people’s need for accomplishment, Dr. Seligman says, he’s reminded of his early experiments that famously identified the concept of “learned helplessness.” He found that when animals or people were given a series of arbitrary punishments or rewards, they stopped trying to do anything constructive.

“We found that even when good things occurred that weren’t earned, like nickels coming out of slot machines, it did not increase people’s well-being,” he said. “It produced helplessness. People gave up and became passive.”

To avoid that sort of [malaise](#), Dr. Seligman recommends looking at the basic elements of well-being, identifying which ones matter most to you, setting goals and monitoring progress. Simply keeping track of how much time you spend time each daily pursuing each goal can make a difference, he says, because it’s easy to see discrepancies between your goals and what you do.

You might also start to question some of your goals and activities, the way that Dr. Seligman occasionally wonders why he spends so much time playing bridge. It’s brought him some clear achievements — including a second-place finish in the North American pairs championship — but he doesn’t pretend that bridge provides any meaning in life. He says he plays for another element of well-being, the feeling of engagement. “I go into flow playing bridge,” he writes,

“but after a long tournament, when I look in the mirror, I worry that I am merely fidgeting until I die.”

Is playing bridge for the feeling of flow any more worthwhile than playing it just to win? Dr. Seligman doesn't want to judge.

“My view of positive psychology is that it describes rather than prescribes what human beings do,” he says. “I don't want to mess with people's values. I'm not saying it's a good or a bad thing to want to win for its own sake. I'm just describing what lots of people do. One's job as a therapist is not to change what people value, but given what they value, to make them better at it.”