

# happiness:

more than the absence  
of mental illness ...

*AT THE Happiness & its Causes held in Sydney in June, conference guest speaker Dr Corey Keyes highlighted the importance of 'functioning positively' to a lasting experience of happiness and wellbeing (see box on next page). A school in Victoria is to 'become the first in the world to incorporate positive psychology into its curriculum'...*

by Anne Fawcett

A revolution at one of the country's premier schools aims to produce children ready for any challenge.

Literacy and numeracy may be the acknowledged benchmarks of a successful education in the schools of the developed world but a new discipline is working its way into the classroom: learned optimism.

At Geelong Grammar School in Victoria, construction is well advanced on a \$16 million Wellbeing Centre, a building at the crux of an approach to teaching and learning that is attracting worldwide attention. The school is to become the first in the world to incorporate positive psychology into its curriculum.

"[In 2007] we have an expectation that every-one can read and write but we can see now that that's not enough," says principal Stephen Meek. "The head

as participants' capacity to direct their attention to the present moment, their mindfulness, increased, their levels of depression, anxiety and stress started to fall

and the heart need to be added to our curriculum.

"The current educational model ... is no longer equipped to deal with the issues that face the modern student," he says. "We need strategies that will help our students take a productive approach in dealing with the issues that will confront them throughout their lives."

Early next year the father of positive psychology, Professor Martin Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness* and a former president of the American Psychological Association, will lead a team of positive psychologists training Geelong Grammar staff in learned optimism. Teachers will be trained to help children recognise and argue against "catastrophic thoughts".

During part of this induction period Seligman will live at the school's senior campus, assisting teachers to incorporate the tenets of positive psychology into all subject areas, as well as pastoral care and boarding facilities.

The positive psychology movement was born in 1998, when Seligman called upon psychologists

to explore the conditions that enable human beings to flourish and give meaning to life.

"[As a psychologist] I'd spent 35 years of my life working on misery," Seligman says. "Psychologists knew something about how to measure depression and how to alleviate it. What we didn't know about was what makes life worth living."

On what he admits were the rare occasions that he did eliminate all of the anger, anxiety and depression from a patient, Seligman was surprised that the result was simply an empty person, rather than a happy and fulfilled patient.

Happiness, he realised, was more than the absence of adversity or **mental** illness, so he began to concentrate on studying what made people happy. He says that positive psychology is not mere "happiology", nor is it to be confused with the "flighty self-help movement". "I'm a crusty old academic so I believe in measuring things using random-assigned placebo control tests," he says.

That is appealing but, as many critics of positive psychology ask, how does one measure happiness?

"Happiness is a scientifically unwieldy term," Seligman says. "In the world of positive psychology we dissolve the term, so there are three distinct routes to happiness."

These are positive emotion and pleasure, engagement (being immersed



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in whatever you're doing at a given time) and meaning (achieved by using one's personal strengths for a higher goal).

It is easy to attain a certain level of happiness by pursuing pleasure (hedonism). But according to research conducted by Seligman and his colleagues, the happiest people are those who use all three routes.

Unlike the claims of self-help books, the interventions recommended by positive psychologists—many of which resemble interventions recommended in the self-help literature—are backed up with scientific evidence. One of the key tools used to measure the efficacy of interventions is the absence of depression.

Seligman and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have tested and researched several interventions. The most effective intervention is a “gratitude visit”.

In Seligman's study, participants were given one week to write and hand-deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had been kind to them but had never been properly thanked.

Surveys revealed that participants were measurably happier and less depressed one month later, although the benefits of this intervention appeared to dissipate within three months.

In a second study, participants completed an online questionnaire (try it at [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org)) which determined their five “signature strengths”. They were then required to use these strengths for a week.

For example, one of Seligman's friends, a waitress, found that social intelligence was one of her signature strengths. She implemented that by aiming to make every customer's

# Ways to Build or Maintain a Flourishing Life ...



## Stop defining yourself & others by material possessions & pursuits

Wealth is like health: its utter absence breeds misery, having it (or any circumstance we long for) doesn't guarantee happiness.



## Take more control of aspects of your life

Happy people feel in control of their lives, often aided by mastering their use of time.



## View things from both sides

Our thoughts are our frames of our feelings and lives. Optimism, hope and the view that life is a challenge all make us more resilient and happier in the long run.



## Restore your energy

Happy people live active vigorous lives yet reserve time for renewing sleep and solitude.



## Nurture your spirituality

For many people, faith provides a support community, a reason to focus beyond self, and a sense of purpose and hope.



## Care, and do, for others

Reach out to those in need. Happiness increases helpfulness but doing good also makes one feel good.



## Prioritise close relationships

Intimate friendships with those who care deeply about you can help you weather difficulties. Confiding is good for body, mind and soul.



## Do things that engage & extend your interests

Happy people are often in a zone called 'flow' – absorbed in a task that challenges them without overwhelming them.



## Be physically active and exercise

An avalanche of research reveals that aerobic exercise not only promotes health and energy, it also is an antidote for mild depression and anxiety.



## Cultivate gratitude

Those who pause each day to reflect on some positive aspect of their lives (their health, friends, freedom, environment etc) experience heightened wellbeing.

*This list is digested from David. Myers, The Pursuit of Happiness (Avon Books, 1993) and from Keyes and Haidt, Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived (APA Books, 2003).*

encounter with her the highlight of their evening.

“Her work became light, she enjoyed it more and the tips were bigger,” Seligman says.

He found that using signature strengths resulted in increased happiness and reduced depressive symptoms for about six months.

A further study found that having participants document three positive things that happened to them, and why, in a journal each night for one week

had the same outcome.

These results have been replicated in studies around the world. Sydney psychologist Dr Gordon Spence is interested in how positive psychology can improve life-coaching techniques - one way is applying the academic rigour of psychology to bolster claims about the benefits of coaching.

“The coaching industry is unregulated and there are a lot of people who claim all sorts of marvellous things without a shred of evidence to

back it up," Spence says.

He studied the effect of mindfulness training, essentially developing the ability to be engaged in the present moment, on mental health and goal attainment. As participants' capacity to direct their attention to the present moment, their mindfulness, increased, their levels of depression, anxiety and stress started to fall.

Spence is aware that positive psychology has its critics. "I think a lot of psychologists bristle at the idea because positive psychology comes with the connotation that what psychology has been about up until then is negative.

"I think what positive psychologists are saying is that psychology has been dominated by a focus on the negative, illness and dysfunction. It doesn't mean they haven't been conducting positive research."

Aside from causing vigorous debate in the psychology community, there are those who say that, at worst, positive psychology is harmless ...

However, Geelong Grammar's Stephen Meek is confident that using positive psychology to invest in the wellbeing of students will yield lasting results.

"Students will feel that they can control their lives, that they're not victims of society," he says. "When things get difficult they'll be able to say I have seen this before, I recognise there is some science here. For me the result will be a mindset that a student can take steps to enable them to counter whatever problem they're about to encounter—and be able to help their friends when they are under pressure."

Seligman agrees. "We should see decreased rates of depression, decreased anxiety, increased physical health and fewer sick days ... students who go through this program will be less likely to suffer from depression across their lifespan." ❧

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# Happiness & its Causes

## Conference Proceedings & DVDs

Copies of the Conference Proceedings are available from the Vajrayana Institute for \$25. Phone (02) 9798 9644 or email [office@vajrayana.com.au](mailto:office@vajrayana.com.au)

A 4-disc DVD of the conference is now available for \$99. It includes 10 hours of footage of all the speakers and panel discussions from the 2-days. Go to the Happiness & Its Causes 2008 website and click on the DVD icon:

[www.happinessanditscauses.com.au](http://www.happinessanditscauses.com.au)



## Where there's smoke

A report released by the Mental Health Council of Australia at the end of last year confirms there is a substantial and growing body of evidence on the relationship between mental illness and cannabis.

The report, *Where There's Smoke: Cannabis and Mental Health* found evidence suggesting that regular cannabis use, particularly by those who begin using at a young age, increases the risk of mental illness. The Council's report found that:

- ◆ Cannabis use increases young people's risk of mental illness, particularly those with a family history of psychosis

- ◆ Cannabis makes almost any mental illness worse
- ◆ Cannabis use is associated with other adverse outcomes such as poor education and employment outcomes.

*Where There's Smoke* brings all the evidence together and the research shows that people with a mental illness or predisposition to mental illness are at risk if they use this drug. The evidence shows that:

- ◆ Cannabis use precipitates schizophrenia in people who have a family history of mental illness
- ◆ More frequent cannabis use is associated with higher relapse rates for people with psychosis and more severe symptoms were associated with increased risk of cannabis relapse
- ◆ Cannabis can induce schizophrenia-like symptoms in otherwise healthy individuals

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