

The Science of Happiness:

A Positive Psychology Update

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INTRODUCTION: Four Ways to Increase Happiness

Happiness, a new idea gaining attention among positive psychologists, is not new. What is new, though, is the *Science of Happiness*: how it's defined and how it can give our practice a new direction.

In looking at what exactly makes people happy, the research points to four basic ideas, which we can bring to our work with patients, clients, friends, family, and even ourselves.

And the research even shows that we can increase our levels of happiness as well as our levels of life satisfaction.

So, as we take a closer look at these four components of happiness, I'll interweave, as much as possible, the stories that illustrate their relevant points and the research that backs them up, and I'll begin with a bit of my own story.

I was the shy, and as my mother would say, sensitive, middle kid in a big, Irish Catholic family. And it was expected when you turned 18, that you'd leave home...go off to college or get a job, and make room for the younger siblings. In a family like mine, the next in line is always eyeing your room and even your place at the table.

So, I left the nest, and let me tell you, I was so unprepared...I didn't even flap my wings...I just hit the ground. At Arizona State University, I was far away and I got lost even though I thought philosophy might be my direction. Caught-up, too, in the turmoil and experimentation of the time, I had hair to my waist, too often slept late, wrote poetry instead of getting to class, and became more and more isolated and depressed. And I was telling myself, "I can't do this...I'm way too sensitive...I'm all exposed nerves," and I decided to kill myself.

But amidst all of this was a restraining thought: I needed to say good-bye to a few friends... after all I was kind and civil, and I didn't want to be the cause of shock and pain.

And so, the third friend I talked with said, "You can't." And she offered this: "I have three aunts living in Nebraska on lots of land, and you can live in one of their farmhouses, rent-free for as long as you like...and even grow your own food." And at the time, I wondered how I'd grow pizza, but the whole idea sort of appealed to me and I agreed.

Instantly, I was not suicidal...as a matter of fact, I entered a manic phase, which I've been kind of in and out of for 34 years.

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I still had some miserable moments, but now I was obsessed with a question: how do people get happier? How do they find a life of meaning? How do they get up out of bed every morning and make life worthwhile?

I started reading Victor Frankl and learned how your life is supposed to have meaning. And that seemed like a good idea, but I just didn't know how it happened. So, that became my next goal: how do people get meaning and how do they become happier.

Moving away from philosophy, I looked into psychology, and that was eye-opening as well as a little depressing when I realized how much more dysfunctional than I had ever imagined my own family and I were!

But then I came across psychotherapy, which, for me, offered some hope. I discovered a set of procedures to help people become more functional, happier, and even to live better lives. And I thought, "That's for me!"

I wanted to learn all about this psychotherapy...once again, my obsession took me to every book and workshop I could find.

As I was getting my degrees, I came across Milton Erickson, a psychiatrist and psychologist. But even then, I thought of him as a psychotic optimist - he simply believed that everybody could change. And that idea alone has changed me, my life, and my career.

So from that point on, I became even more interested in what worked in psychotherapy and what worked in life. This was during the 90's when other people were talking about this new kind of approach, but they were doing research, and I was working with individual clients. And now, it's nice to have the confirmation that what I've been doing for some time, really works!

So, what is happiness?

First, let's begin with a couple of definitions of happiness. I like this one from Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD: a joyful, contented life...sounds like a pretty good definition.

And another one from positive psychologists comes to us like an equation: pleasure + engagement + meaning = happiness. That's a pretty good one, as well.

"We're bad at predicting what will make us happier."

So what do we know about happiness?

It's relatively stable. One year after winning a lottery or even becoming para-quadruplegic, people's happiness levels return to where they were before such a drastic change in circumstance.

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We call that the happiness set point. It's genetically influenced, but its not fixed. Some events, however, seem to permanently increase happiness levels, and those are what we'll now examine more closely.

Unfortunately, people are generally pretty bad at predicting what will make them happy. And that happens because of two reasons. First, there's the Hedonic Treadmill, and it works for a while: You get a new car, a pay raise, a new "squeeze," and those can make you happy, but then, the good feeling wears off.

And this happens because the Hedonic Treadmill thrives on more...and more. It's like cocaine. You have to have more, but it has less and less effect. So, the initial happiness that comes with something new, even a budding relationship, doesn't last.

Secondly, we're bad at predicting what will make us happy. We think: if only I had a new car, a new house, a new job, or a new relationship, then everything would be really great. And by the time we get there, our values may have changed and what we thought was so important simply isn't. Or, after we have what we wanted, the Hedonic Treadmill kicks-in.

**Social Connection
Optimism
Appreciation
Purpose Greater
than One's Self**

So, how do we define this new vision of happiness,? Let's begin with its four components, which we'll look at through the lens of story and underlying research.

But first, to help you remember these four components: **Social Connection**, **Optimism**, **Appreciation** (or Gratitude), and a **Purpose Greater Than One's self**, think of the acronym: **SOAP**.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS: Why Relationship Lifts the Spirit

Edmund Morgan Forster says, "Only connect..." And the research says, By far, the greatest predictor of happiness is intimate relationships. So, there we have it: good social relationships.

Robert Putnam, in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, tells how people have become more and more isolated and a number of studies show the link between society and psyche. People who have close friends, friendly neighbors and supportive co-workers are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping.

"By far the greatest predictor of happiness is intimate relationships"

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Putnam continues with this, which I think is absolutely true: The single most common finding from half a century's research on the quality of life's satisfaction, not only in the United States, but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.

— "Happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social Connections."

So, people with five or more close friends excluding family members – this is a survey done at the University of Chicago every year are 50% more likely to describe themselves as very happy as compared to respondents with fewer close friends.

One survey of 800 college alumni shows that classmates who valued high income, job success and prestige more than close friends and a loving marriage are twice as likely to be fairly or very unhappy. Based on this survey, looking for happiness, or love in the wrong places, doesn't seem to work.

39% of married American adults report themselves as very happy as opposed to 26% unmarried. In 44 countries surveyed in 2002 by the Pew Research Center, family life provided the greatest source of satisfaction. Married people live an average of three years longer than unmarried...and I know the joke about that: it just seems longer! But, in truth, the survey shows that those who are married enjoy greater physical and psychological health than the unmarried.

And this brings me to the work of one of my colleagues, Robert Biswas-Diener. He goes to Calcutta every year and continues to survey people in the most desperate of life's circumstances. And shocking as it is, their life satisfaction assessment is above average. Amidst homelessness, prostitution, and living in shelters built out of boxes, their healthy bonds with family and good social relationships correlate with higher life satisfaction. And surveys done in other parts of the world, less dire than in Calcutta, support these same results

So, a basic foundation for happiness is **Social Connection**. If people have good relationships, they are happier with their lives, and more satisfied. (And if I were to give you one suggestion, it would be to pay attention to your social relationships and get them right.)

THE POWER OF OPTIMISM: Why Attitude Is Everything

The second principle of happiness is **Optimism**. And this might surprise you, but we can learn a lot about this from psychotically optimistic dogs.

Martin Seligman, a behavioral psychologist, who did experimental psychology and actually popularized Positive Psychology, did some research in the 60's on depression and came up with the phrase, *learned helplessness*.

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And how did he discover this? Not wanting to use rats, he started working with dogs. He and his staff built cages, long cages with wire-meshed bottoms standing on stilts, where the dogs lived.

After some time elapsed, they divided the cages in half with a hole in the board that separated each side, so that the dogs could go from one side of the cage to the other. When the dogs were used to this, a mild shock (not damaging, but annoying) was installed on one side of the cage.

As expected, the dogs would go to the other side of the cage to get away from the shock.

Then, the shock was placed in both sides of the cage. There was no way for the dogs to escape. And eventually, they gave up and showed signs of depression. Almost all stopped moving around, often wouldn't eat, and slept more. Then, after a number of days went by, the shock was turned off on one side of the cage.

"Positive mood and optimism are highly correlated with increased happiness levels."

But, having given-up, almost none of the dogs even bothered to investigate or try to escape their discomfort. And this is what Seligman called *Learned Helplessness*. And then, he wondered if this was true for people as well. Of course, he didn't use cages or shock, but he developed paper and pencil surveys to find out about attitudes and explanatory styles.

And this is what he discovered: people who decide they can't do anything about the negative circumstances in their lives are more likely to be depressed. And the people, even if delusional in their thinking, who believe they can do something, are much less likely to be depressed.

Seligman, fascinated by this, turned his research toward a new question: Why isn't psychology studying what helps us feel better and be better? And this research resulted in what he called *Learned Optimism*.

Let me paraphrase the story he tells. You know how science goes. Let's say you have 200 dogs and you run them through an experiment. 196 of the dogs seem depressed, but some don't and these are the ones considered statistically insignificant, and as a result, science ignores them.

But it's those four that are really most interesting, and the question comes up: How come every couple of hours a few dogs got up and went to the other side of the cage? And after four days when the shock was turned off, why were they the only dogs who escaped the shock?

Were they psychotically optimistic? Were they *thinking*: Maybe sometime that shock is going to be off? And what was it that made them get up and check out the other side, and as a consequence, escape?

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That was really the most interesting part: They would keep trying despite the evidence (days or weeks) that nothing was going to change. Yet, they never gave up.

And Seligman became more interested in how you teach people this optimistic explanatory style. So, he found that there were typical explanatory styles of people who are pessimistic. (Pessimistic people decide that the bad stuff in life is permanent and will persist, it's pervasive everywhere and it's out of my control. I can't really do anything about it.)

More than that, they tell themselves it's a reflection of what losers they are...I'm a bad person and the self-blame continues. They see themselves as stuck and helpless.

But optimistic people generally see things differently. They know that bad stuff happens. It's not that they deny that it does, it's just that they think, "Well, I'm going through a really rough patch right now." It's not permanent or even pervasive. Even if things at work are not going so well, instead of: "My whole life sucks," optimists have a perspective that's more-time-and-space-and/or contacts-limited, and they say, "I can do something about this."

Pushing yourself to action

Their self-talk looks more like this: "I can get a new job. I can go to couples therapy. I can do something about my relationship. I possess good qualities. I can figure this out somehow or even if I'm feeling really bad right now, I can recover from this because I'm a good person and I have resources."

So, a sense of optimism really makes a difference. And again, even if it's delusional, optimism seems to make a difference.

"... If people have an orientation of hope towards a future, it makes a big difference."

Sherry Lewis, who was dealing with cancer at the time said, "If you're hopeful, of course, you can take action. The miracle occurs when you don't feel much hope, yet you push yourself into action anyway. Perhaps it is the brain stimulated by the action that brings you back to hope. I don't know why it works. I just know that it does."

Orientation of Hope and Looking Toward the Future

When we work with people to rehabilitate or restore their sense of hope, it's important to connect them to a positive and compellingly hopeful future. Martin Luther said, "Everything that's done in the world is done by hope."

Recently, I was reading a family therapy journal that came out of Australia and in it was an interview with an English psychiatrist, a woman named Elspeth McAdam. When asked how she

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works, she said, “Oh, I don’t work in the present or the past like most psychiatrists, I work from the future back.”

I was so moved by her explanation, that I'd like to relate her story to you now.

A young girl I was working with had experienced abuse. She walked into my office...a very large girl with shaved hair, tattoos on her head and I don't think she'd showered in a week. I'd been asked to see her because she was so angry. She clearly didn't want to come and see an expletive-expletive shrink.

She'd been to a bunch of therapists before, social workers, psychologists and school counselors. I just said, “You've talked to everybody about your past; let's talk about your dreams for the future.” And her whole face just lit up when she said her dream was to become a princess.

In my mind, I couldn't think of two more opposite visions, but I took it very seriously. I asked her about what the concept of princess meant to her. She started talking about being a people's princess who would do things for others, who would be caring and generous and a beautiful ambassador. And she described the princess as slender and well dressed.

Over the next few months, we started talking about what this princess would be doing. I discovered that while this girl was 14, she hadn't been attending school for two to three years. She'd refused to go.

The princess she described was a social worker. So I said, “Okay, it's now ten year's time and you've trained as a social worker. What university did you go to?” She mentioned one to the North of England and I asked, “What books did you read... what did you study there?”

She said, “I don't know, Psychology and Sociology and a few other things like that.” Then I said, “Remember when you were 14? You've been out of school for two or three years. Remember how you got back in school.”

She said, “I had this psychiatrist who helped me.” And then I asked the important question: “How did she help you?”

And she started talking about how she made a phone call to the school and I followed-up: “Who spoke? Did you or she?”

She replied, “The psychiatrist spoke, but she arranged a meeting for us to go to the school.”

“Do you remember how you shook hands with that teacher when you went in? And how you looked and what you wore?”

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We went into these minute details about what that particular meeting was like, looking from the future back. She was able to describe the conversations they'd had, how confident she had been, and how well she had spoken.

About a month after this conversation, she said to me, "I think it's about time we went to school, don't you? Can you ring and make an appointment?"

I asked her if she needed to talk about it anymore and she said, "No." She knew how to behave. When we went to the school, she was just brilliant.

I first met that girl about ten years ago. Now she's a qualified social worker. She fulfilled her dream, even though she attended a university different from the one she envisioned.

"In coming back from a future, you pull yourself forward in the present."

Isn't this a great story? And it's one we can bring into our work. We've learned from the research that if people have an orientation of hope towards a future, it can make such a difference in their present.

That's what made a difference in my own life. Once I discovered a compelling future possibility, I was no longer suicidal. I had hope.

And there are so many more stories that show how a vision of a compelling future can work in our lives: in coming back from the future, you can pull yourself forward in the present. It's a most empowering, future mindedness technique to imagine the future in such a way that it helps you deal with the present.

When we're communicating hope to our patients, we can have them write a letter from their future self to their present self. When they hear about their troubles from a better place in their lives or when the future self can give advice, we lay the groundwork for crucial change moments that can get them moving through their present. And this is what makes **Optimism** so important.

THE ROLE OF APPRECIATION: Make It a Life-Long Habit

So far we've talked about **Social Connections** and **Optimism**. Let's now talk about **Appreciation**.

There are two ways to think about appreciation. First, you can just note to yourself what you're grateful for. And it turns out, as I just read in Robert Biswas-Diener's book, that it's better to do it weekly. I know, you've probably heard Oprah talk about writing in your gratitude journal everyday.

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But the research says weekly seems to be somewhat better. Maybe that's because in doing it everyday, it becomes a routine...you get used to it and over time, it doesn't have quite the impact. Researchers have found that asking people, once a week, to review who they were grateful for in that past week, or what they appreciated in their lives, seems to work a little better to increase their overall happiness levels.

Secondly, it's important to express appreciation to others and actually tell them what you value about them, what you were grateful for or how you appreciated something they did.

From the research that measures happiness levels, we find that expressing gratitude has a really short term effect, only several weeks. But amazingly, the research also shows that those who are typically or habitually grateful are happier than those who don't make a habit of expressing their gratitude.

"If you develop a habit of appreciation and gratitude, it can make a longer-term difference in your sense of happiness or life satisfaction."

So let's look at how this research was set up, and interestingly, what follows is a daily, rather than weekly, experiment. Participants were asked, at the end of the day, after dinner, or before going to sleep, to write down three things that went well during the day. And they were to do this every night for a week.

The three things they listed could be relatively small or large in importance. After each positive event on their list, they were to answer in their own words the question, "Why did this good thing happen?" This exercise was found to increase happiness levels up to six months and decreased depression up to six months.

So I thought, "Wait a minute, we've done these experiments before and they only lasted a couple of weeks, why did this one have an impact lasting six months?"

When the researchers went back and surveyed the participants, 60% of them still carried on the habit of expressing gratitude in this way. So that means: if you develop a habit of appreciation and gratitude, it can make a longer-term difference in your sense of happiness or life satisfaction.

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A PURPOSE GREATER THAN ONE'S SELF: It's Not All About You!

Now, we're on to the P of the SOAP, a Purpose greater than one's self.

" Several studies with older Americans find that one of the best predictions for happiness is whether or not the person thinks his or her life has a purpose."

There's a nice line in Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. In one of the chapters, he opens with this line, "It's not about you." And I think that's what we're really talking about here. When you have a life purpose, if that purpose is not about you, it seems to have a bigger impact on your happiness levels.

A study by Tim Kasser at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois found that young adults who have focused on money, image and fame turned out to be more depressed, less enthusiastic, and suffered more physical symptoms (i.e. headaches and sore throats) than those whose lives were other focused (from *The High Price of Materialism*).

Several studies with older Americans find that one of the best predictors for happiness is whether or not the person thinks his or her life has a purpose. If they had no sense of purpose, seven out of ten people studied felt unsettled about their lives. If they had a sense of purpose, the same proportion felt satisfied.

We even find this among college students. Those who enjoy their studies, as compared to those who don't, were happier and have an underlying sense of purpose.

Studies have also shown that life satisfaction increases by 24% when people engage in altruistic activity.

Stephanie Brown, in a five year study with 423 older couples, found that couples who reported being unpaid for helping somebody, even as infrequently as once a year were between 40 to 60% less likely to die than those who reported not helping anyone. And their acts of altruism were pretty straight-forward: volunteering, baby sitting for grandchildren, or assisting family members.

From a number of studies, we know that volunteering can improve self esteem, reduce heart rates and blood pressure, increase endorphin production, enhance immune systems, and buffer the impact of stress.

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And a quote from George Bernard Shaw, one of my favorite playwrights, an Irish playwright, tells it best in his play, Man and Superman.

“This is the true joy in life, the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of alienation and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I’m of the opinion that my life belongs to the community and as long as I live, it’s my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It’s sort of a splendid torch, which I got hold of for the moment. I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

This, I think, truly captures the spirit of a purpose greater than one’s self. And I'd like to tell a couple more stories to illustrate this point.

The first is quite short...It's about a man on tour in Israel where he discovers that the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee are both fed by the same water source, but the Dead Sea is totally dead while the Sea of Galilee is full of life.

The tour guide, noticing his puzzlement, tells him the following: “Well, the difference is this: in the Dead Sea, the water flows in, but there’s no outlet. And in the Sea of Galilee, the water can flow out. And when the water flows through, it supports life.” And being a thoughtful traveler, the man came away thinking, "That's a great metaphor for being of service to others."

And for me, it easily translates into: a purpose greater than one’s self.

The African Violet Way of Thinking

And this brings us to Mitzvah Therapy. As I said earlier, I was influenced by Milton Erickson, and he once told me the story that I’m going to relate to you now that touched me. It hit me like a billiard ball and sent my therapy off in a direction that continues to inspire my practice today.

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One of his patients said, "Doctor Erickson, you've helped me so much. I know you're going on a lecture tour in the Mid-West and you're going to stop in Milwaukee. I wonder if when you're there, you could stop and see my aunt. I talk to her every week on the phone and we have a really close relationship, but recently, she's become more and more depressed. She's had an illness for the last couple of years and she's in a wheelchair."

He continued, "And the more she's withdrawn (remember this is the 1950's when there is little wheelchair accessibility), the more depressed she becomes. She has been really active in the church community, but now she doesn't go out much anymore even though she inherited the family fortune and has plenty of money.

She comfortably lives in a mansion, but she doesn't really do anything. She just seems more and more depressed each time I talk to her.

Her housekeeper called me a couple of weeks ago and said that she's talking about giving up and it's sounding suicidal. So, when you're there, could you stop and see her?"

When Erickson finished his lecture, he went to her house. Erickson had polio when he was younger and then post-polio syndrome, so he walked with a cane. They made an instant bond, she in her wheelchair, he with his cane. They both connected over what made them different from the norm.

Having heard about the great Milton Erickson from her nephew, she welcomed him into her home and immediately offered to give him a tour. With wheelchair accessibility and a little elevator, it was relatively easy for her to get around her 15-rooms. And Erickson was impressed, but he wondered about the drawn curtains.

She lived there all alone, plus she was embarrassed about being in a wheelchair. And she felt ashamed and that's why she kept the curtains closed.

Finally, she confided in him and told him how she used to be so active in her church, but now she couldn't do that anymore. Although she had someone to drive her places and a woman to cook and clean, she didn't like to get out very much.

Finally, at the end of the tour, and she saved the best for last, she showed him her pride and joy, which was the plant nursery, the green house where she spent a lot of time putting around among her plants.

Erickson had grown up on a farm, and plants were of interest to him. As he looked around the greenhouse, Erickson noticed many plants with sprouting shoots. As a matter of fact, he saw so many shelves of these plants, and he asked about them.

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She pointed to the three African violet plants that were on the potting table and she said, "Those are from those three plants. It was really hard to get cuttings going, but I'm really good at it and I have all these plants started. I will soon have a bunch of African violets. It's one of my favorite plants."

After listening to all of this, he turned to her and said, "Your nephew is worried about you."

And she replied, "Yes, I know."

"He thinks you're depressed."

"Yes, I have been rather depressed in the last few years."

"I don't think that's the problem," Erickson said.

And she brightened up, "It isn't?"

"No, I think the problem is you haven't been a very good Christian."

She was really offended by this. They'd been talking for twenty minutes, and he was already judging her, and she came from a kind of moralistic family and so she was quite sensitive to this.

He continued, "No, you have all this money, all this time on your hands, and this amazing talent with plants. I recommend that you get your church newsletter and your church membership list, and anytime you see an announcement of a birth, a death, a graduation, an engagement, a wedding...any of the happy or sad events in your congregation's life, and you select one of your plants.

You report it into an African violet gift plant and have your driver take you to deliver, in person your congratulations or condolences, whatever is appropriate, and you do all this with your Christian and human presence."

Once he explained this, she was not so offended and she agreed. Maybe she had been caught up in herself a little too much. She'd forgotten her Christian duty. It was good to be reminded. Okay, she'd try it. If that was what he suggested, she'd do it.

This was in the late 50's. I studied with Erickson in the mid 70's and he sent me to his bookshelf after he told me that story, and I read the article that was in his scrapbook. It was from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and the headline was, *African Violet Queen in Milwaukee Dies, Mourned By Thousands*.

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They couldn't fit into the church all those who wanted to come to the memorial service. She always showed up at their house when they had a need or a joy and consoled or celebrated with them. By the end of her life, she truly belonged to a community...and she had a purpose beyond herself.

Grow assets instead of weeding out the bad stuff

When Erickson told me that story, I was his work scholar student. I couldn't afford to pay him when I was in graduate school, so I worked for him as a gardener.

"It's easier to grow the African violet parts of your life than to weed out depression."

I remember a day when we were in his garden, Erickson was in his wheelchair next to me - and working up the courage, I asked, "Dr. Erickson, that story really moved me and touched me, but here I am in graduate school and they're teaching me if someone's depressed, I should send him for medication. I should be dissecting the depression and finding out about the family history. But I want to know how to get from there to this African violet way of thinking. Because that's the way I want to work."

And he said, "I looked all around her house and everything looked depressing. The only sign of life I could see was that African violet, so I thought it would be easier to grow the African violet parts of her life than to weed out the depression."

I thought, "And that's the way I'll work. I'll find the African violets in people's lives."

Mitzvah Therapy – Do something socially useful

So that led me to searching for the solutions and strengths in people's lives, and I created this whole approach to psychotherapy called Solution-Oriented Therapy, which focuses on what people do well instead of their pathologies; in short, their assets and resources rather than their deficits.

And I've spent about 15 years really working on that and going all over the world, having moved out of my own depression and into a purposeful life. And all this has pulled me out of my shyness. It certainly has increased my energy level. And now I feel as if I'm plugged in and I want to tell the world about what I'd learned.

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I was speaking at a conference, a multi-faculty conference in Colorado Springs where I told this African violet story. Actually, there were three keynotes that morning and the person who came up after me was a psychologist, Saul Gordon, who has become a friend of mine since then.

As he began his keynote, he said, "I'm so glad Bill told that African Violet's Queen story because I've thrown out the speech I was going to give. I want to tell you about something I'm more excited about, 'Mitzvah Therapy'."

And this is my last story as he told it in his keynote: "I have this client who was referred to me. She lives in North Carolina, and she was referred to me because I'm an expert in human sexuality. She'd been through psychotherapy for her sexual abuse and she was miserable. She was a research scientist in a research triangle here in North Carolina.

She'd loved her work but she hated her life outside of work. She felt old, she was unhappy, and she didn't do anything else except work. She'd been in therapy, five years with one therapist, four years with another therapist and no progress.

Finally, she decided to try a different approach. Somebody referred her to me. And I just looked at her and said, "I don't think psychotherapy can help you."

"What do you mean? You don't think there's any help for me?"

I said, "No, I didn't say there's no help for you. I think what's better for you is Mitzvah Therapy."

Not being Jewish, she wasn't sure of my meaning. Mitzvah actually means commandments of the law, but it also means doing a good deed for someone without expecting anything back. You do a mitzvah for people. It's like a blessing or a good deed.

And so he said, "Instead of psychotherapy, I want to meet with you once a month. Between the times we meet, I would like you to find a place, a residential treatment center for abused and neglected children and I want you to volunteer there in your off hours.

You're not doing anything, anyway. You're just eating and making yourself miserable, so, volunteer there. They're always understaffed, under funded and overwhelmed with the needs of these kids. File records for them, work in their garden, do whatever they need. And come back and see me in a month and tell me how Mitzvah Therapy went."

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She came back in a month. “Dr. Gordon, you were right. Nine years in psychotherapy has not affected me this much. I went and found such a place. They were overwhelmed. You were right.”

All they needed was for me to come in and hang out with the kids for a little while...just be with the kids, pay attention to them, entertain them so phone calls could be made and paper-work done.

And now, when I arrive at the front door of this treatment center, those kids -whoosh- they're on me! It's like I'm a magnet. And I love it.

All I'm supposed to do is just love them and pay attention to them, and I have so much love to give and they have so much love to receive. Well, of course, what they don't realize is I've gotten a thousand times more love back than I've given. You were right. This Mitzvah Therapy is what I needed.”

He said, “Okay, continue with Mitzvah Therapy and come back to see me in another month.”

A month later she said, “If you thought it was good last month, Dr. Gordon, you won't believe what happened this month.”

“Tell me,” he said.

“There's a guy there I, sort of, had my eye on, Henry. He's so sweet and patient with the kids. He's one of the staff members. And you should see him with these kids; his heart is so pure.

To tell you the truth, he's not very good-looking and he's kind of skinny and here I am, I'm kind of big and I'm not very good-looking and I thought he'd never have any interest in me.

But weirdly, he told me after he asked me out on a date, that he was touched by how sweet I was with the kids. We've been on in three dates. We're falling in love. This Mitzvah Therapy is very good stuff.”

Saul Gordon's story made me think of that African Violet's Queen story in a whole new light. I used to emphasize the part 'find the African violet parts in peoples' lives'. But Erickson did more than that. He sent people out to do something socially useful as part of their therapy.

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He wasn't a person who found therapy in a therapy room or looked at therapy as self-examination, or your life history and background. Erickson was a very socially oriented therapist and that had an influence on me, and so did Saul Gordon's story. And as a result, I've started to invite some of my clients to do some of this socially useful therapy.

I heard about Candy Lightener, whose daughter was killed by a repeat drunk driver, and she was down for the count with grief. And her anger spoke: "No mother should have to go through what I'm going through." She got up and founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving. And MADD has changed DWI laws and enforcement. And more than that, she dealt with her grief and pain.

It's all about others

"When a man is wrapped up in the self," says John Ruskin, "he makes a pretty small package."

Albert Schweitzer: "You must give something to your fellowmen even if it's a little thing. Do something for those who have need of help, something for which you get no pay but the privilege of giving. The only ones among you who are really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Martin Luther King says, "Life's most persistent and urging question is 'What are you doing for others?'"

Gandhi says, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

The Talmud says, "The highest form of wisdom is kindness. Deeds of kindness are equal in a way to all the commandments."

"People who want to live a more fulfilling life," says Laura King of the University of Missouri, "should quit reading self-help books and start helping others." It's pretty good advice.

W.H. Auden says, "We're here on earth to help others. What on earth the others are here for? I don't know."

Daniel Dennett, who's a consciousness researcher says, "Do you want to know the secret of happiness? Here's the secret of happiness: Find something more important than yourself and dedicate your life to it."

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And here's what Chinese wisdom has to say: If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a month, get married. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help others."

CONCLUSION: The SOAP of Happiness

This has been a whirlwind tour, but here's the best advice based on the stories and research:

- Have lots of good social interactions and relationships.
- Develop an optimistic thinking style.
- Practice appreciation and gratitude.
- Engage in meaningful service beyond yourself.

All you have to do is set your course on a future that gives you hope and gets you into action. Maybe what I've said here reminds you of something you already know. Maybe I've tweaked your understandings, moved you forward, or helped you to consolidate an idea you'd like to use with patients, clients, or even in regard to yourself.

But whatever your direction, make your quest one that increases happiness and lifts levels of life satisfaction.

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About the Author

Bill O'Hanlon, MS, LMFT, has authored or co-authored 29 books and has published 54 articles or book chapters. His books have been translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Finnish, German, Chinese, Bulgarian, Turkish, Korean and Indonesian, Italian, Croatian, Arabic and Japanese. He has appeared on Oprah (with his book *Do One Thing Different*), *The Today Show*, and a variety of other television and radio programs.

Bill is a Licensed Mental Health Professional, Certified Professional Counselor, and a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Bill is a clinical member of AAMFT (and winner of the 2003 New Mexico AMFT Distinguished Service Award), and certified by the National Board of Certified Clinical Hypnotherapists and a Fellow and a Board Member of the American Psychotherapy Association.

He teaches three very popular distance learning courses for NICABM

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