Chapter 1

An Introduction to Positive Psychology

Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within us.
MARTIN E. P. SELIGMAN

WELCOME TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

In 1998 Martin E. P. Seligman, then-president of the American Psychological Association, urged psychologists to remember psychology's forgotten mission: to build human strength and to nurture genius. In order to remedy this omission in the field of psychology, Seligman set out, quite deliberately, to create a new direction and a new orientation for psychology. The name for this new discipline is **positive psychology**. Its challenge to increase research on psychological well-being and areas of human strength has been heralded as a welcome development by many psychologists.

In the most general terms, positive psychology is concerned with the use of psychological theory, research, and intervention techniques to understand the positive, adaptive, creative, and emotionally fulfilling aspects of human behavior.

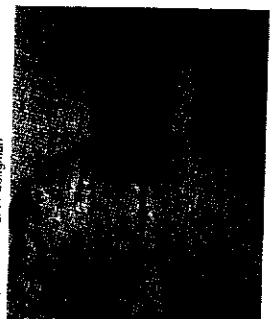
In their introduction to a special edition of the *American Psychologist* on positive psychology, Kennon Sheldon and Laura King (2001) described the new area as follows:

> What is positive psychology? It is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology revisits "the average person" with an interest in finding out what works, what's right, and what's improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the efficiently functioning human being, successfully applying evolved adaptations and learned skills? And how can psychologists explain the fact that despite all the difficulties, the majority of people manage to live lives of dignity and purpose?" ... Positive psychology is thus an attempt to urge psychologists to adopt a more open and appreciative perspective regarding human potentials, motives, and capacities (p. 216).

In sum, positive psychology investigates the potential for doing what is right that people have access to and that, with a little help, they can actualize in their lives. "Positive psychology is the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive" (International Positive Psychology Association, 2009), according to the mission statement of the International Positive Psychology Association. In studying what people do right and how it is that they manage to do it, positive psychology underscores what they do for themselves, for their families, and for their communities.

THE DIMENSIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Although the range of interests in positive psychology is quite large, its dimensions encompass human life in its positive aspects. In order to nurture talent and make life more fulfilling, it focuses on three broad areas of human experience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) that reflect its positive perspective.



Courtesy of Martin E. P. Seligman

Martin E. P. Seligman

1. At the subjective level, positive psychology looks at POSITIVE SUBJECTIVE STATES, or positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction with life, relaxation, love, intimacy, and contentment. Positive subjective states also include constructive thoughts about the self and the future, such as optimism and hope, as well as feelings of energy, vitality, and confidence and the effects of positive emotions such as laughter.
2. At the individual level, positive psychology focuses on POSITIVE INDIVIDUAL TRAITS, or the more positive behavioral patterns seen in people over time, such as manifestations of courage, persistence, honesty, and wisdom. It can also include the ability to develop aesthetic sensibility or to tap into creative potential as well as the drive to pursue excellence. That is, positive psychology includes the study of positive behaviors and traits that in the past were understood in the language of *character strengths* and *virtues*.
3. Last, at the group or societal level, positive psychology focuses on the development, creation, and maintenance of POSITIVE INSTITUTIONS. In this regard, it addresses issues such as the development of civic virtues, the creation of healthy families, and the study of healthy work environments. It investigates how institutions can work better to support and nurture all of the citizens they impact.

Positive psychology, then, is the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

THE SCOPE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

A comprehensive list of topics that may be studied by a positive psychologist would, of course, be quite exhaustive. Evidently, people seem to be quite good at doing things well. In fact, the ways in which persons excel is much more extensive than has been recognized in psychology.

Even a partial list of areas of interest for positive psychology runs the gamut from *A* to *Z*: altruism, empathy, the building of enriching communities, creativity, forgiveness, compassion, the study of positive emotions in job satisfaction, the enhancement of our immune system functioning, models of positive personality development throughout the lifespan, psychotherapeutic emphasis on accomplishments and positive traits, the savoring of each fleeting moment of life, the strengthening of virtues as way to increase authentic happiness, and the psychological benefits of Zen meditation (Lopez & Snyder,

2009). Encouraging psychologists to pay attention to what people do right was an early accomplishment of positive psychology. Once psychologists began to notice the many ways that human beings succeed in life, these neglected characteristics and behaviors became the focus of theory, research, and psychological intervention strategies.

A discussion of why the perspective of positive psychology is relevant today follows. This will entail a deeper examination of just what we consider to be *the good life*.

BASIC THEMES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The Good Life

Positive psychology is concerned essentially with the elements of and predictors of *the good life*. This term might be only somewhat familiar to students of psychology, having popular associations with the possession of extreme wealth, power, prestige, and beauty. Such popular usage is quite loose, for in fact the term comes to us from philosophy.

The idea of the good life derives from speculation about what holds the greatest value in life—that is, what is the nature of the highest or most important *good*. When this idea is applied to human life, *the good* refers to the factors that contribute most to a well-lived and fulfilling life. Honderich (1995) stated:

> Things that are good may also be considered from the point of view of how they will contribute to a well-spent or happy human life. The idea of a complete good is that which will wholly satisfy the complete need and destiny of humans, the *summum bonum* (p. 322).

Qualities that help define the good life are those that enrich our lives, make life worth living, and foster strong character. Martin Seligman (2002), the founder of positive psychology, defined the good life as "using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification" (p. 13).

In positive psychology, the good life is seen as involving a combination of three elements: connections to others, positive individual traits, and life regulation qualities. Aspects of our behavior that contribute to forging *positive connections to others* include the ability to love, the presence of altruistic concerns, the ability to forgive, and the presence of spiritual connections to help create a sense of deeper meaning and purpose in life. *Positive individual traits* include such elements as a sense of integrity; the ability to play and to be creative; and the presence of virtues like courage and humility. Finally, *life regulation qualities* allow us to regulate our day-to-day behavior so that we can accomplish our goals while helping to enrich the people and institutions we encounter along the way. These qualities include a sense of individuality or autonomy; a high degree of healthy self-control; and the presence of wisdom as a guide to behavior.

In short, positive psychology's concern with living the good life entails the consideration of factors that lead to the greatest sense of well-being, satisfaction, or contentment. Note, however, that the good life is not to be understood here in the sense of individual achievement removed from its social context. On the contrary, if it is to be a worthwhile determination, the good life must include relationships with other people and with society as a whole.

Although the definition of the good life has so far been rather broad and abstract, future chapters will address the finer points involved.

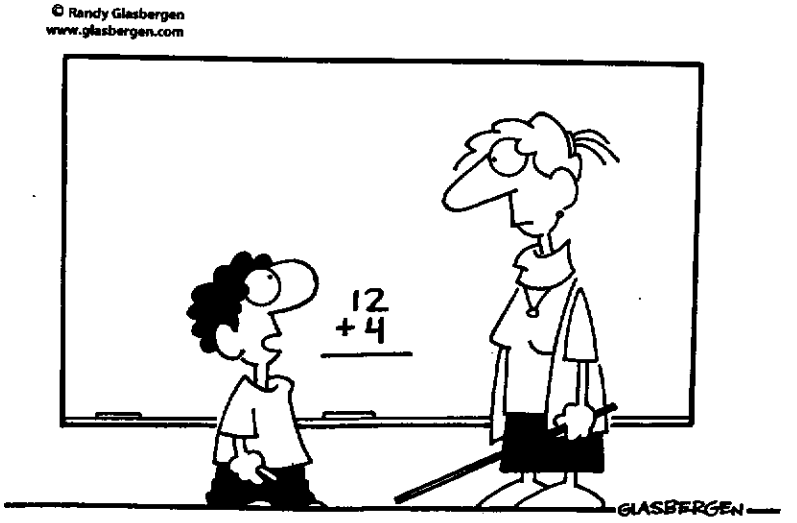
Positive Emotions Are Important

In the past 30 years, scientific research has revealed how important positive emotions and adaptive behaviors are to living a satisfying and productive life. For much of the twentieth century, many scientists assumed that the study of positive emotions was somewhat frivolous at best, and probably unnecessary. Many assumed that psychology should focus on more pressing social problems, such as drug abuse, criminal behavior, and the treatment of serious psychological disorders like depression. This assumption is only partially correct. It is quite

true that psychology does need to study serious social and psychological problems. In fact, positive psychologists do not reject the need to study and attempt to eliminate the terrible social and personal costs of such problems. Recent research, however, suggests that the study of positive emotions can actually help to fight these problems.

For instance, an awareness of their psychological strengths can help people recover from psychological problems (Huta & Hawley, 2010). In addition, a lack of well-being in the present can set the stage for the development of depression up to 10 years later (Joseph & Wood, 2010). Newer forms of psychotherapy focus on the development of positive emotions and adaptive coping strategies rather than on negative emotions, internal conflicts, and anxieties formed in childhood. Positive psychology researchers have found that positive forms of therapy can be as useful as older therapies that focus on eliminating negative emotions (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Rashid, 2009). In an interesting twist, psychoanalyst Volney Gay (2001) argued that adult distress actually occurs because people cannot recollect joy, which in turn leads to a retreat from active participation in life. In practice, positive forms of psychotherapy can be useful adjuncts to more traditional forms of psychotherapy and even quite successful in helping people emerge from debilitating psychological problems (Stalikas & Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Recent studies also support the important influence that positive emotions and adaptive behavior have on several positive outcomes in life. Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener (2005) completed a somewhat voluminous review of 225 studies on happiness and well-being. They concluded that people who experience more positive emotions tend to have greater success in numerous areas of life than those more negatively oriented. For instance, people who experience and express positive emotions more often than those who do not are more likely to be satisfied with their lives, have more rewarding interpersonal relationships, be more productive and satisfied at their job, be more helpful to other people, and be more likely to reach desired goals in life. Interestingly,



"Do I get partial credit for simply having the courage to get out of bed and face the world again today?"

people who experience and express positive emotions more often than those less positive are also more likely to be physically healthier, be more resistant to illness, and even live longer. The authors also conclude that while being successful can make one feel happier, the converse is also true: being happier can lead to greater success later in life! By helping people both to reach their potential and to eliminate negative emotions and problematic behaviors, the study of positive emotions and adaptive behavior can thereby offer beneficiaries more fulfilling lives.

People Can Flourish and Thrive

Positive psychology investigates what people do correctly in life. As Sheldon and King (2001) noted earlier, positive psychology recognizes that many people adapt and adjust to life in highly creative ways that allow them, and those they come in contact with, to feel good about life. All too often psychological research has displayed a blatant bias toward assumptions that people are unwitting pawns of their biology, their childhood, and their unconscious. Previous psychological theories have often argued that human beings are determined by their past; by their biology, their cultural conditioning and unconscious motives. Positive psychology takes the position that despite the very real difficulties of life, it must be acknowledged that most people adjust quite well to life's ups and downs. Most people at least try to be good parents, to treat others with some degree of respect, to love those close to them, to find ways to contribute to society and the welfare of others, and to live their lives with integrity and honesty. These achievements should be celebrated rather than explained away as "nothing but" biological urges or unconscious attempts to ward off anxiety and fear. Therefore, a basic premise of positive psychology is that "human beings are often, perhaps more often, drawn by the future than they are driven by the past" (Seligman, 2011, p. 106).

In addition, in the past psychology has paid even less attention to how people move beyond basic adjustment to life to actually flourish and thrive in the face of change. That is, some people don't just adapt to life—they adapt extraordinarily well. Some adapt so well that they serve as role models of incredible resiliency, perseverance, and fortitude. One of the goals of positive psychology is to understand how those people manage to accomplish such high levels of thriving.

Corey L. M. Keyes and Shane Lopez (2002) created a classification system that has yielded some basic terms in positive psychology. In their fourfold typology of mental health functioning, people who score high on well-being and low on mental illness are *flourishing*. As we will see, the term **flourishing** is used in many areas of positive psychology to describe high levels of well-being. In contrast, someone who exhibits both high well-being and high mental illness is *struggling*. This refers to a person who is generally doing quite well in life but is currently experiencing significant distress about some issue. People who register low on well-being but high on mental illness symptoms are *floundering*. Obviously, floundering describes a difficult situation. When someone shows signs of low well-being but also scores low on mental illness, they are *languishing*. This would describe someone who has no significant mental health issues but is nevertheless very dissatisfied or unfulfilled in life.

Keyes and Lopez take their system a bit farther to look at how well-being has been defined in the past. They believe that other systems of classifying mental health and well-being are incomplete because they focus on only a portion of what it means to be mentally healthy. Instead, they suggest that **complete mental health** is a combination of high emotional well-being, high psychological well-being, and high social well-being, along with low mental illness.

High *emotional well-being* or emotional vitality is present when people are happy and satisfied with their lives. High *psychological well-being* is found when people feel competent, autonomous, self-accepting, have a purpose in life, exhibit personal growth, and have positive relationships with others. High *social well-being* is found when people have

positive attitudes toward others, believe that social change is possible, try to make a contribution to society, believe the social world is understandable, and feel part of a larger social community (see chapter 11). High social well-being is further measured in five dimensions: social acceptance; social actualization; social contribution; social coherence; and social integration.

When the psychological assessments of flourishing, struggling, languishing, and floundering are applied across each of the three levels of well-being—emotional, psychological, and social—twelve classifications of mental health result. Figure 1.1 below depicts the complete mental health model of Keyes and Lopez.

Keyes (2005, 2009) investigated certain parts of this model in a large sample of U.S. residents aged 25–74 years. First, he found that high mental illness tended to decrease mental health, as would be expected. However, it was also possible to be relatively high in both mental illness and mental health at the same time (that is, to be struggling). Second, he found that 18% of the sample was flourishing since they scored high on at least one measure of well-being and at least six measures of positive functioning. Because Keyes required increasing measures of positive well-being to indicate flourishing, the percentage in this category dropped until less than 10% of the sample showed high-level mental health (that is, by scoring high on almost all measures of well-being and positive functioning). One conclusion of the study is that therapeutic interventions to eliminate mental illness do not automatically enhance well-being. Efforts to improve well-being may need different types of interventions.

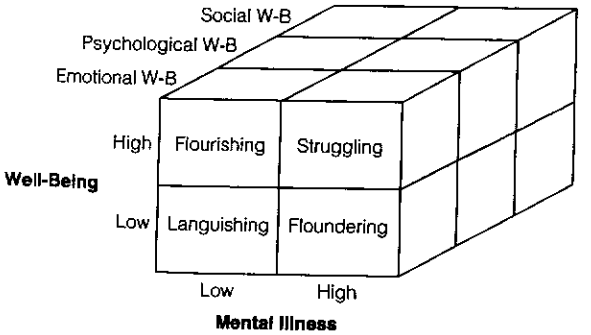


FIGURE 1.1 Model of Complete Mental health

Compassion and Empathy Are Important

For several years much research in psychology was based on the assumption that human beings are driven by base motivations such as aggression, egoistic self-interest, and the pursuit of simple pleasures. Since many psychologists began with that assumption, they inadvertently designed research studies that supported their own presuppositions. Consequently, the view of humanity that prevailed in psychology was that of a species barely keeping its aggressive tendencies in check and managing to live in social groups more out of motivated self-interest than out of a genuine affinity for others or a true sense of community. Both Sigmund Freud and the early behaviorists led by John B. Watson believed that humans were motivated primarily by selfish drives. From that perspective, social interaction is possible only by exerting control over those baser emotions and, therefore, it is always vulnerable to eruptions of violence, greed, and selfishness. The fact that humans actually live together in social groups has traditionally been seen as a tenuous arrangement that is always just one step away from violence.

It should be noted, however, that some early theorists did see potentials in human beings for cooperation, caring, and empathy. Two of Freud's earliest colleagues, Alfred Adler and Carl Jung, both believed that certain positive traits were innate. Other researchers also saw potential for prosocial behaviors in people. Nonetheless, a distinct trend in much psychological research was toward a fairly negative view of why people behave the way they do. Even positive behaviors, such as altruism, were seen as essentially the result of self-centered motives.

In contrast, a new vision of human beings has been emerging from recent psychological research that sees human socialization and the ability to live in groups as a highly adaptable trait (Buss, 2000).

In fact, a newer perspective holds that the need to cooperate and the desire to help others may be biologically based and innate (Keltner, 2009; Tomasello, 2009). We now know that animals demonstrate empathy for others and compassion for those in pain as well as show cooperation and a sense of social connectedness. Studies have also found that across the lifespan a greater capacity for empathy is associated with higher life satisfaction and more positive relationships (Gruhn, Diehl, Rebucal, Lumley, & Labouvie-Vief, 2008). Another study has discovered that people can be motivated to overcome their low self-esteem if they feel their efforts would also help others (Grant & Sannentag, 2010). It may be that doing good can buffer the effects of feeling bad. Even 21-month-old toddlers were found to appreciate when someone was helpful to them (Kuhlmeier & Dunfield, 2010). The toddlers studied were also more likely to help someone who made an effort to help them by returning the favor.

People Need Positive Social Relationships

A corollary to the assumption above is that people exist in social contexts and that well-being is not just an individual pursuit. As Christopher Peterson (2006) put it, "Other people matter." Of course, positive psychology is not alone in recognizing the importance of the social context for human behavior. What positive psychology has done is to embrace ideas about positive social environments, such as social well-being and empowerment. Many of these ideas were initiated by community psychologists (see chapter 11), but many positive psychologists have welcomed them.

Related to this idea is a recognition that differences exist in how cultures conceptualize, encourage, and teach their children about the nature of happiness and the good life (see Matsumoto, 1994). In general, the search for happiness appears to be a universal quest. Nonetheless, there is a fascinating variety of ideas among cultures of the world about the specific nature of happiness. One of the more prominent distinctions is between cultures that view happiness as an emotion achieved by individuals through their own unique efforts and those that consider happiness a more collective experience—that is, as a joint product of persons and their immediate family environments. (These distinctions will be covered in more detail later in chapter 11.) Positive psychology, like other schools of psychology, is beginning to explore cross-cultural comparisons that enhance our understanding of how people throughout the world experience psychological well-being.

Strengths and Virtues Are Important

In positive psychology any discussion of what constitutes the good life must inevitably touch on virtues, values, and character development (Fowers, 2005). It is not possible to consider the dimensions of an admirable and fulfilling life without introducing discussions of virtues such as honesty, fidelity, or courage. This is not to say that positive psychologists advocate certain virtues and values simply because they personally admire them. Science cannot address in any ultimate or absolute sense which values a person *must* believe in or practice in her or his life. Science will never be able to declare, for instance, that everyone *should* value happiness as the ultimate goal of life. However, a science of positive psychology does have a role in any investigation of values.

Over 40 years ago, M. Brewster Smith (1969) cautioned that the science of psychology can never dictate which values are "best." What psychology can do is use scientific methods to investigate the consequences of living a life based on the values of honesty, integrity, tolerance, and self-control. Likewise, Maslow (1970, p. 20) argued that psychology had gained the ability to indicate "what makes [people] healthier, wiser, more virtuous, happier, more fulfilled." In addition, scientific methods can be applied in any cultural setting or in any society around the world to discover which values tend to enhance the quality of life for everyone in a community. Therefore, the consequences of holding certain social values can be investigated within

that specific culture. Scientific methods can be used to investigate the possibility that certain values are found almost universally and, as such, represent a common core of virtues that have grounded many cultures over time.

Independence of Positive and Negative Emotions

Another basic theme in positive psychology concerns the relationship between positive emotional states and well-being. For some time, psychologists assumed that if a person could eliminate his or her negative emotions, then positive emotions would automatically take their place. For instance, many people who hope to win large sums of money in the lottery are driven by this assumption. They assume that money will eliminate negative emotions such as worry and then they will be happy. That is, these people assume that positive and negative emotions exist in a dependent relationship such that if negative emotions go down, then positive emotions must go up.

However, Ulrich Schimmack (2008) reviewed several research studies that examined this notion and found that positive and negative emotions are relatively independent. He discovered that they tend to have distinct causes and can even occur together at the same time. For instance, a mother can easily feel both some degree of sadness and considerable joy at the wedding of her only daughter. Physiological studies have also found that positive and negative emotions are associated with different biological markers (Ryff, Love, Urry, et al., 2006). Of interest to applied positive psychologists is Schimmack's additional conclusion that interventions to influence one type of emotionality may have no effect or even an opposing impact on another type of emotionality. Therefore, efforts to increase positive emotionality need not impact negative emotionality. Corey Keyes (2007) has argued for a *two-continua model* of mental health and illness that recognizes that the predictors of mental health and illness are often unique and somewhat independent.

To illustrate this point, Argyle (1987) noted that the probability of experiencing negative emotionality is predicted by several factors, such as unemployment, high stress, and low-economic status. It should be quite apparent to most people, however, that happiness and psychological well-being are not automatically achieved when a person has a job, is subject to normal stress levels, and is middle-class. By comparison with someone undergoing greater stresses, a person feels better but is not necessarily as happy as he or she could be. Just eliminating one's negative feelings does not automatically create human strengths, virtues, and the capacity to thrive and flourish. Just because someone is relatively free of anxiety, depression, and worry doesn't mean that he or she automatically exhibits inspiring instances of courage, self-sacrifice, honesty, and integrity. Similarly, Peterson and Steen (2002) found that optimism and pessimism had differential effects on a person's self-reported well-being.

So while some of the predictors of positive emotionality and negative emotions are similar, they are not identical. There are unique psychological processes that help a person move from feeling negative emotions such as anxiety and depression to a position of neutral emotionality (for example, decreasing the amount of negative self-talk). At the same time, there are other equally unique psychological processes that help someone move from neutral emotionality to greater happiness, life satisfaction, and joy in life (for example, creating a sense of vibrant engagement in life). Many of these positive psychological processes will be the subjects of the chapters to follow.

Negative Emotions Are Still Important

At this point, it should be emphasized again that positive psychologists do not wish to limit the topics of study but rather to expand them to include aspects of human flourishing. Positive psychology does not deny that there are many problems in the world that need attention. It is also obvious that negative emotions can be necessary for survival at times. We would be far too vulnerable if we completely eliminated fear, anxiety, or skepticism from our lives. The recognition of and expression of negative emotions are also vital to

self-understanding and personal growth (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Chow, 2011; Lambert & Erekson, 2008; Shmotkin, 2005). Positive psychology is not simply "happiology" (Seligman, 2011). In addition, positive psychology also recognizes that the tragic elements in life can enrich our experience of being human (Woolfolk, 2002). Kirk Warren Brown and Melissa Holt (2011) argued that positive psychology should be "founded upon an accounting of the full range of human cognitive and emotional experience" (p. 147). There must be a reason why people throughout history have been drawn to plays, paintings, poetry, and even music that express sadness, tragedy, and defeat. It may be that in order to appreciate the positive in life we must also know something of the negative. Further, positive psychology does not deny that every effort should be made to help eliminate problems associated with social injustice and social inequality.

Having recognized a place for negative emotions, however, it also may be true that the desire to be happier and more satisfied with life is universally human. In most cases, people simply operate better within the world, whatever world they live in, if they are more optimistic, hopeful, and can rely on solid supportive relationships. Interestingly, some of the findings of positive psychology may approach universal applicability. For instance, Ed Diener (2000, October), a leading researcher of well-being, said that the closest thing psychology has to a "general tonic" for well-being is to improve happiness. One of the best things a person can do to increase one's quality of life is to help others increase their level of happiness and life satisfaction. This applies to people at all levels of income and psychosocial adjustment.

The Science of Well-Being

One of the most distinguishing features of positive psychology is an insistence that research must follow the standards of traditional scientific investigation (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is certainly not the first attempt by psychologists to study well-being and the good life. From the very beginnings of psychology, there has been an interest in studying healthy personality development and optimal states of well-being. For example, in the early part of the twentieth century many investigations into psychological well-being and the nature of the good life began first as scholarly analyses or as in-depth case studies of clients in psychotherapy. Attempts were then made to move the results of those studies into psychological laboratories for further experimental research or into real-life situations to help people increase well-being. Unfortunately, many attempts to move results into the laboratory were difficult or even impossible.

In light of such past difficulties, positive psychologists have seen a need to reverse the direction of information flow. That is, they hope to build an experimental knowledge base in the psychological laboratory and then move those results out into real-world arenas such as schools, clinics, and the workplace. Toward this end, many of the founders of positive psychology have placed considerable emphasis on promoting and developing opportunities for experimental research on psychological well-being and on the potential for greater fulfillment in life.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WELL-BEING IN THE WESTERN WORLD

In order to understand any field, it is important to examine the history of how ideas in that field developed over time. Positive psychology is the latest effort by human beings to understand the nature of happiness and well-being, but it is by no means the first attempt to solve that particular puzzle. Therefore, this section offers a brief history of how Westerners have answered the question *What is happiness?*

For students of psychology, the study of history often seems like an intellectual abstraction with little relevance to the present. However, it is our strong belief that an exploration of history can teach valuable lessons for the study of psychological well-being. For contemporary theories of happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being actually derive