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Commentary on Cultivating Positive Emotions to Optimize Health and Well-Being

Feeling Good About Fredrickson's Positive Emotions

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ABSTRACT

In the following article, the author concurs with Frederickson (2000): Emotions do have positive spin-offs. Support is offered for the notion that positive behaviors can help displace negative emotions with positive emotions. Further, the author agrees that finding positive meaning amid adversity can be adaptive.

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I can affirm several points made by Barbara Fredrickson (2000) in her interesting and useful article. First, she contends that positive emotions have positive spin-offs. They "optimize health, subjective well-being, and psychological resilience" (¶ 4). Indeed, consider the traits and behaviors associated with happiness (Myers, 1992; Veenhoven, 1988). Self reports, behaviors, and peer ratings reveal that it is not happy people who are intensely self-focused, but those who are bereaved or depressed. Depressed people tend to be lethargic, brooding, socially withdrawn, and sometimes hostile. In presuming that other people are rejecting them, they are not entirely wrong; depressed people are no joy to be around. Company does not love misery.

Happy people — those who report their lives as marked by positive emotions — are, by contrast, strikingly energetic, decisive, creative, and sociable. Compared to unhappy people, they are more trusting, loving, and responsive. When playing the role of interviewers, happy people recall more of the positive behaviors of job applicants and rate them more highly

than do unhappy interviewers. If made temporarily happy by receiving a small gift while shopping, a few moments later on an unrelated survey, happy people will report that their cars and television sets are working beautifully — better, if you take their word for it — than those belonging to people who did not receive a gift (Myers, 1992; Veenhoven, 1988).

Happy people tolerate more frustration. They are less often abusive and more often lenient, loving, and forgiving. They are less likely to exaggerate or overinterpret slight criticism. They are more likely to forego immediate small pleasures for long-term rewards. Given a chance to look at happy pictures (e.g., people laughing and playing) and sad pictures (e.g., funerals, disasters), happy people spend more time looking at the brighter side. They also prefer more upbeat people, stories, movies, and music.

Moreover, in many experiments, happy people have been more willing to help those in need. Social psychologists know this as the "feel-good, do-good phenomenon": Those made to feel successful are more likely to volunteer as a tutor; those who have just found money in a phone booth are more likely to help someone pick up dropped papers; those whose mood has just been boosted by listening to a comedy album are more willing to loan someone money. Robert Browning (1868/1927) had the idea: "Oh, make us happy and you make us good!"

So, yes, positive emotions are both an end — better to live fulfilled, with joy — and a means to a more caring and healthy society. As Helen Keller (quoted in Belck, n.d.) wrote, "Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow." That being so, I applaud Fredrickson's pondering the roots and fruits of positive emotions.

I am also intrigued by Fredrickson's (2000) suggestion that one might alleviate negative emotions not just by treating disorders, but also by replacing them with counteracting positive emotions that broaden thinking beyond the narrowly preoccupied depressed state. Many a parent has intuitively harnessed this strategy, as when using humor to flip a child's sadness or anger into delight. Fredrickson contends that relaxation training, finding positive meaning, invoking empathy, and interest can similarly replace negative emotions with positive ones. As Fredrickson notes, the "facial feedback" studies of Paul Ekman, James Laird, and others are one strategy for manipulating positive emotions via behavior induction.

The phenomenon is delightfully subtle. Saying the phonemes *e* and *ah*, which activate smiling muscles, puts people in a better mood than saying the German *ü*, which activates muscles associated with negative emotions (Zajonc, Murphy, & Inglehart, 1989). Simply activating one of the smiling muscles by holding a pen in the teeth (rather than with the lips, which activates a frowning muscle) is enough to make cartoons seem more amusing (Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988). A heartier smile, made not just with the mouth but with raised cheeks as well, works even better (Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990). Smile warmly on the outside, and you feel better on the inside. Scowl, and the whole world seems to scowl back. It works with posture, too. Sara Snodgrass and her associates (Snodgrass, Higgins, & Todisco, 1986) observed the behavior feedback phenomenon with walking behavior. When taking long strides, with arms swinging and eyes straight ahead, people feel happier than when taking short, shuffling steps, with eyes downcast.

The ability to "find positive meaning" when facing adversity may be one reason why actively religious people more often report themselves "very happy" (Myers, 2000) and cope relatively well with crises. Compared to religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives (Harvey, Barnes, & Greenwood,

1987; McGloshen & O' Bryant, 1988; Siegel & Kuykendall, 1990). Among mothers of developmentally challenged children, those with a deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression (Friedrich, Cohen, & Wiltturner, 1988). People of faith have also tended to retain or recover greater happiness after suffering divorce, unemployment, serious illness, or bereavement (Ellison, 1991; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993).

The 19th-century Polish poet Cyprian Norwid wrote, "To be what is called happy, one should have (1) something to live on, (2) something to live for, (3) something to die for. The lack of one of these results in drama. The lack of two results in tragedy." Consistent with Norwid's presumption are reports of lowered apathy and death rates among fellow Nazi concentration camp inmates who retained a sense of meaning — a purpose for which to live, or even to die (Frankl, 1962; Marcus & Rosenberg, 1989). Many of these Holocaust survivors were devout people whose faith provided a deeply internalized purpose that gave them a reason for living and resisting their oppressors.

So, yes, positive emotions do have positive spin-offs. Yes, positive behaviors can help displace negative with positive emotions. And, yes, "finding positive meaning" amid adversity can be adaptive.

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