



# Dr Bruce Wells

**the happiness expert**

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## FLOURISH

### **What the Book is about in a Nutshell**

Martin Seligman, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the guru of the positive psychology movement, examines how individuals might achieve a richer and more fulfilling life, that is, a life of well-being. He identifies five factors that can help individuals thrive: positive emotion, engagement with what one is doing, good relationships, meaning, and a sense of accomplishment – or PERMA.

The book is made up of 2 parts. In part 1 the reader learns about the background of a new positive psychology, while part 2 explores various ways that an individual can flourish.

### **Chapter 1: What is Well-Being?**

Well-being theory has five elements. The five elements are positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment, or PERMA. The first is positive emotion; what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like. The second element, engagement, is about flow: being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity. A third element of happiness is meaning. Human beings want meaning and purpose in life. The fourth element is accomplishment in its momentary form, and the “achieving life” is a life dedicated to accomplishment for the sake of accomplishment. And the last element is positive relationships. When asked what, in two words or fewer, positive psychology is about, Christopher Peterson, one of its founders, replied, “Other people.” Very little that is positive is solitary.

In well-being theory, the twenty-four strengths underpin all five elements, not just engagement: deploying your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships. The way we choose our course in life is to maximize all five of these elements. The goal of positive psychology in well-being theory is to increase the amount of flourishing in your own life and on the planet.

### **Chapter 2: Creating your Happiness – Positive Psychology Exercises that Work**

#### **1. The Gratitude Visit**

Your task is to write a letter of gratitude to an individual who had a positive impact on your life and deliver it in person. The letter should be concrete and about three hundred words: be specific about what she did for you and how it affected your life. Let her know what you are doing now, and mention how you often remember what she did.

#### **2. What-Went-Well Exercise (3 Blessings)**

Every night for the next week, set aside ten minutes before you go to sleep. Write down three things that went well today and why they went well. The idea is to focus on what went well in your life, rather than what went badly which sets you up for anxiety and depression. Next to each positive event, answer the question “Why did this happen?” For example, if you wrote that your husband picked up ice cream, write “because my husband is really thoughtful sometimes” or “because I remembered to call him from work and remind him to stop by the grocery store.”

### **3. Signature Strengths Exercise**

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage you to own your signature strengths by finding new and more frequent uses for them. A signature strength has the following hallmarks:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity (“ This is the real me”)
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced
- A sense of yearning to find new ways to use it
- A feeling of inevitability in using the strength (“ Try to stop me”)
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion while using the strength
- The creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around it
- Joy, zest, enthusiasm, even ecstasy while using it

First, take the Strengths survey at the back of the book. Then, perform the following exercise: create a designated time in your schedule when you will exercise one or more of your signature strengths in a new way either at work or at home or in leisure— just make sure that you create a clearly defined opportunity to use it. For example, if your signature strength is creativity, you may choose to set aside two hours one evening to begin working on a screenplay. If you claim self-control as a strength, you might choose to work out at the gym rather than watch TV one evening. If your strength is an appreciation of beauty and excellence, you might take a longer, more beautiful route to and from work, even though it adds twenty minutes more to your commute.

### **4. Positive Psychotherapy**

Seligman first conducted a careful assessment of the client’s depressive symptoms and the well-being scores from [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org). He then discusses how depressive symptoms are potentially explained by lack of well-being: lack of positive emotion, engagement, and meaning in life. Thirteen more sessions follow in which he tailors positive psychology exercises to the client. The details can be found in Seligman’s book *Positive Psychotherapy: A Treatment Manual* co-authored with Dr Rashid in 2011.

## **Chapter 3: The Dirty Little Secret of Drugs and Therapy**

**Cure versus symptom relief.** The first dirty little secret of biological psychiatry and of clinical psychology is that they both have given up the notion of cure. Cure takes too long if it can be done at all, and only brief treatment is reimbursed by insurance companies. So therapy and drugs are now entirely about short-term crisis management and about dispensing cosmetic treatments.

**The 65% barrier.** Almost always, the effects are what is technically called “small.” Depression is typical. Consider two treatments that are certified by vast literatures to “work”: cognitive therapy for depression (which changes how you think about bad events) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs, such as Prozac, Zoloft, Lexapro, to name a few). Taking an average over the entire huge literature, for each you get a 65 percent relief

rate. In general, talk therapy techniques all share the property of being difficult to do, no fun at all, and difficult to incorporate into your life.

**Active constructive responding.** How you celebrate is more predictive of strong relations than how you fight. Listen carefully each time someone you care about tells you about something good that happened to them. Go out of your way to respond actively and constructively. Ask the person to relive the event with you; the more time he or she spends reliving, the better. Spend lots of time responding.

#### **Chapter 4: Teaching Well-Being – The Magic of MAPP**

Some of the key ingredients of the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology course include:

**Barbara Fredrickson’s “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotion.** Unlike the negative, firefighting emotions, which identify, isolate, and combat external irritants, the positive emotions broaden and build abiding psychological resources that we can call on later in life. Companies with better than a 2.9: 1 ratio for positive to negative statements are flourishing. In contrast, a negative Losada ratio might make an effective lawyer but it may have a huge personal cost. Law is the profession with the highest depression, suicide, and divorce rates. If your colleagues take that office ratio home, they are in trouble. In relationships, a 2.9: 1 ratio means you are headed for a divorce. You need a 5: 1 ratio to predict a strong and loving marriage— five positive statements for every critical statement you make of your spouse.

**Sociologists distinguish among a job, a career, and a calling.** You do a job for the money, and when the money stops, you stop working. You pursue a career for the promotions, and when the promotions stop, topped out, you quit or become a time-serving husk. A calling, in contrast, is done for its own sake. You would do it anyway, with no pay and no promotions.

#### **Chapter 5: Positive Education – Teaching Well-Being to Young People**

By some estimates, depression is about ten times more common now than it was fifty years ago. Depression now ravages teenagers: fifty years ago, the average age of first onset was about thirty. Now the first onset is below age fifteen. Also, the average American, Japanese, and Australian is no more satisfied with life than fifty years ago, and the average Brit and German is less satisfied. Two good reasons that well-being should be taught in schools are the current flood of depression and the nominal increase in happiness over the last two generations. A third good reason is that greater well-being enhances learning, the traditional goal of education.

**The Penn Resiliency Program.** Its major goal is to increase students’ ability to handle day-to-day problems that are common during adolescence. PRP promotes optimism by teaching students to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter. PRP also teaches assertiveness, creative brainstorming, decision making, relaxation, and several other coping skills. PRP is the most widely researched depression-prevention program in the world. It reduces symptoms of depression, reduces hopelessness, prevents clinical levels of depression and anxiety, reduces conduct problems, and improves health-related behaviours.

**Geelong Grammar School Project.** In a nine-day course, teachers were taught how to use the skills in their own lives— personally and professionally— and then were showed how to teach them to children. Each year-10 student attended a positive education class taught

twice weekly by the heads of each of the ten boardin ghouses. Students heard several lectures by the visiting scholars, but the backbone of the course was discovering and using their own signature strengths. During the first lesson, prior to taking the VIA Signature Strengths test, students wrote stories about when they were at their very best. The next series of lessons focused on how to build more positive emotion. Students wrote gratitude letters to their parents, learned how to savour good memories, how to overcome negativity bias, and how gratifying kindness is to the giver. They also kept a blessings journal, in which students kept track nightly of what went well (WWW) that day. Ninth-grade students learned the ABC model: how beliefs about an adversity — and not the adversity itself — cause the consequent feelings. Then students learn how to slow down this ABC process through more flexible and more accurate thinking. After resilience, the next lessons address active-constructive responding (ACR) with a friend and the importance of a 3: 1 Losada positive-to-negative ratio.

### **Chapter 6: GRIT, Character and Achievement**

If we want to maximize the achievement of children, we need to promote self-discipline. An extreme trait of self-discipline is called GRIT. This is the underlying rationale for GRIT, the never-yielding form of self-discipline. Very high effort is caused by a personality characteristic of extreme persistence. The more GRIT you have, the more time you spend on the task, and all those hours don't just add to whatever innate skill you have; they multiply your progress to the goal. Research has found that high GRIT predicts: higher grades in students, retention in the army, sales in real estate, success at Spelling Bee contests.

### **Chapter 7: Army Strong – Comprehensive Soldier Fitness**

Seligman and others created the Global Assessment Tool, a self-report questionnaire designed to measure the psychosocial well-being of soldiers of all ranks in four domains: emotional fitness, social fitness, family fitness, and spiritual fitness. The GAT will be used to direct soldiers into different training programs— basic or advanced— as well as a way of evaluating the success of these programs. It will also provide a gauge of the psychosocial fitness of the army as a whole. Unlike many psychological tests, the GAT probes for the strengths as well as the weaknesses, the heights as well as the problems, the positives as well as the negatives.

### **Chapter 8: Turning Trauma into Growth**

A substantial number of people also show intense depression and anxiety after extreme adversity, often to the level of PTSD, but then they grow. In the long run, they arrive at a higher level of psychological functioning than before. “What does not kill me makes me stronger,” said Nietzsche.

**Post-Traumatic Growth Course.** A module teaches soldiers interactively about five elements that are known to contribute to post-traumatic growth. The first element is to understand the response to trauma itself: shattered beliefs about the self, others, and the future. This is the normal response to trauma. The second element is anxiety reduction, which consists of techniques for controlling intrusive thoughts and images. The third element is constructive self-disclosure. Bottling up trauma likely leads to a worsening of physical and psychological symptoms, so soldiers are encouraged to tell the story of the trauma. This leads to the fourth element: creating a trauma narrative. The narrative is guided, with the trauma seen as a fork in the road that enhances the appreciation of paradox. Loss and gain both happen.

Grief and gratitude both happen. Vulnerability and strength both happen. Finally, overarching life principles and stances that are more robust to challenge are articulated. These include new ways to be altruistic, accepting growth without survivor guilt, and crafting a new identity as a trauma survivor or a newly compassionate person.

**Master Resilience Training.** The content of the training consisted of three parts: building mental toughness, building strengths, and building strong relationships. Building mental toughness is all about learning the skills of resilience. First, is Albert Ellis's ABCDE model: C (the emotional consequences) do not stem directly from A (the adversity) but from B (your beliefs about the adversity). Second, are thinking traps such as overgeneralising. Third, are "icebergs," deeply held beliefs that often lead to out-of-kilter emotional reactions. Next, are methods for dealing with how to minimize catastrophic thinking. Building strengths involves having sergeants complete the strengths survey and then how to use their strengths to overcome challenges. The final part focuses on providing practical tools that build relationships and to challenge beliefs that interfere with positive communication such as responding actively and constructively, how to give effective praise, and assertive communication.

### **Chapter 9: Positive Physical Health**

The takeaway lesson from positive psychology is that positive mental health is not just the absence of mental illness. Positive mental health is a presence: the presence of positive emotion, the presence of engagement, the presence of meaning, the presence of good relationships, and the presence of accomplishment. Being in a state of mental health is not merely being disorder free; rather it is the presence of flourishing.

**Optimists vs pessimists.** When assailed with inescapable noise in the laboratory or with rejection in love, they think, "It's going away quickly, I can do something about it, and it's just this one situation." They bounce back quickly from setbacks, and they do not take a setback at work home. We call them optimists. Conversely, people who habitually think, "It's going to last forever, it's going to undermine everything, and there's nothing I can do about it", become helpless readily in the laboratory. They do not bounce back from defeat, and they take their marital problems into their jobs. We call them pessimists.

**Cardiovascular Disease and optimism.** All studies of optimism and CVD converge on the conclusion that optimism is strongly related to protection from cardiovascular disease. This holds even correcting for all the traditional risk factors such as obesity, smoking, excessive alcohol use, high cholesterol, and hypertension. It even holds correcting for depression, correcting for perceived stress, and correcting for momentary positive emotions.

**Infectious illness and optimism.** In experimental studies, people with high positive emotion before they are exposed to rhinovirus develop fewer colds than people with average positive emotion. And they, in turn, get fewer colds than people with low positive emotion. Cancer and optimism. More optimistic people have better cancer outcomes, and pessimism and cynical hostility have been shown to be both significant predictors of cancer.

**Why optimists are less vulnerable to disease.** *Optimists take action and have healthier lifestyles.* Optimists believe that their actions matter, whereas pessimists believe they are

helpless and nothing they do will matter. Optimists try, while pessimists lapse into passive helplessness. Optimists therefore act on medical advice readily. People with high life satisfaction (which correlates highly with optimism) are much more likely to diet, not to smoke, and to exercise regularly than people with lower life satisfaction. *Social support.* The more friends and the more love in your life, the less illness. *Biological mechanisms.* There are a variety of plausible biological paths including the immune system, common genetics, repeated stress where pessimists give up and suffer more stress whereas optimists cope better with stress, excessive production by the liver of fibrinogen, and heart rate variability.

**Fitness vs fatness.** There is a huge literature that shows that fat people die of cardiovascular disease more than thin people. The fit, but fat, individual has almost half the risk of death of the unfit, fat individual. Most dieting is a scam, a \$ 59 billion scam last year in America. You can take off 5% of your weight in one month by following any diet on the best-seller list. The problem is that 80-95% of people will regain all that weight or more over the next three to five years. Dieting can make you thinner, but it is usually only temporary. It does not make you healthier, however, because for most people, dieting does not stick. Exercise, in contrast, is not a scam. A much higher percentage of people who take up exercise stick with it and become permanently fit. Exercise is sticky and self-maintaining, dieting is usually not.

#### **Chapter 10: The Politics and Economics of Well-Being**

Life satisfaction in the United States has been flat for fifty years even though GDP has tripled. Even scarier, measures of ill-being have not declined as gross domestic product has increased; they have gotten much worse. Depression rates have increased tenfold over the last fifty years in the United States. This is true of every wealthy nation, and, importantly, it is not true of poor nations. Rates of anxiety have also risen. Social connectedness in our nation has dropped, with declining levels of trust in other people and in governmental institutions, and trust is a major predictor of well-being.

**Wealth and happiness.** If your income is \$ 10,000, and giving up six weekends next year to take a second job will make you an additional \$ 10,000, your net happiness will go up dramatically. If your income is \$ 100,000, and giving up six weekends a year will earn an additional \$ 10,000, your net happiness increase will actually decrease, since the happiness you lose by giving up all that time with family, friends, and pastimes will overwhelm the tiny increment that an additional \$ 10,000 (or even \$ 50,000) would bring.



Dr Bruce Wells is a happiness expert and professional speaker with a PhD in psychology and degrees in health promotion and physical education.

He has over 20 years' experience in the health and wellness industry in Australia, Asia, and the Middle East. He is a former school teacher, university professor, international tour guide, personal fitness trainer, and is the author of *Happiness Anywhere Anytime*.

Bruce regularly appears on Channel 9's Today show, various radio programs and regularly contributes articles to syndicated papers across the country. He is also a professional speaker delivering presentations to corporate and community health groups. For further details of his programs go to [www.brucewells.com.au](http://www.brucewells.com.au)