

The Pursuit of Happiness Using Positive Psychology

>> Okay. Well, we do have our speaker, so let me go ahead and start the recording. Okay. So the recording has started and Maureen, if you would like to begin, we can go ahead and then we'll jump in as needed.

>> MAUREEN: Okay. Sounds good. Well, thank you so much for having me today. I'm excited to spend some time with all of you today talking about the Pursuit of Happiness Using Positive Psychology. I am a National Board Certified Coach with more than 18 years experience. And so one of the things that I use quite a bit is positive psychology. So I've been wanting to do this talk on happiness, you know, using positive psychology for quite some time.

And after almost two decades of coaching thousands and thousands of clients on all different topics, setting goals to ultimately improve their well-being, and be happier, I've had the opportunity and honor of learning so much about the human experience and the pursuit of happiness in my work and I wanted to share some of what I found so useful in coaching clients with you today.

And just that maybe all you can take is just one piece of what you hear today and bring it with you to improve your own happiness, even if that is by 1%, then I feel good about that. All right. So let's move to the next slide, please. Thank you. All right. So when clients come to me, they're trying to figure out how to thrive by setting goals, making changes in their lives and their behaviors, really how to cultivate happiness.

Maybe they want to lose weight. Maybe it's they want to get a promotion. Maybe they want to reduce their stress. Maybe they want to repair a relationship with a family member. Just all different types of issues. But how do I help them as their coach do that? One of the backbones to my coaching is I use this positive psychology.

(Technical issues)

>> MAUREEN: You're welcome. All right. So, when clients come to me as a health and wellness coach, they are trying to figure out how to thrive by setting goals, making changes in their lives and behavior and how to cultivate happiness. And maybe they want to lose weight, get a promotion, reduce stress, repair a relationship with a family member. How do I help them as their coach do that?

One of the backbones to my coaching is that I use positive psychology. I wanted to share some of that with you today. My role as their health and well-being coach is to support them in figuring out what they want, defining that, and having them talk about it. Then I help them identify barriers to obtaining the life they want and help them lay out how to put key strategies into practice.

It's very important to me for my clients to understand their "why." We'll often discuss their values, priorities, their purpose. And I also help show them that they have the resiliency and coping skills within them, they just need to find that again. Another key part of my coaching is helping clients take personal responsibility -- not blaming others for their unhappiness, because we cannot control other people no matter how hard we try.

When we can control is ourselves and how we respond to others. I've found that once someone really accepts that and grasps that their level of happiness goes up. Is it perfect? No. It's never going to be. And that's an important point. Happiness is not about being perfect, but what we have within us is the ability to control our emotional responses to events. Once we can do that, happiness levels go up.

I see this day in and day out with my clients. I want to share with you more about positive psychology so you can use it yourself. I find it a fascinating subject of psychology. It's not --

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>> MAUREEN: Okay. Great. Well, I wanted to do a poll if that's okay, before we move on to the next slide. I wanted to just know from the audience, what defines happiness for you? What comes to mind when you think about your pursuit of happiness? I just wanted to get an idea of what you all feel is

happiness for you. And these are anonymous of course, but we can see what everybody is putting and I love it.

Bright future, content, retirement, family and friends. These are great answers. -- on slide 3 -- happiness is different things to different people. It is relative to the people experiencing it. You're the best judge, but defining this for yourself, it's really important. If you weren't able to do it oohed for this poll on the spot, think about it. Write it down later.

If you don't define it, you won't necessarily know what you're working towards. But scientists define happiness as the experience of positive emotions -- pleasure, but combining that with a deeper feeling of meaning and purpose. Happiness implies a positive mood in the present but also a positive Outlook on the future. And for me, to really articulate that, it's really important, because yeah, we can have instant gratification and be happy, but that doesn't bring us further along.

Another way to put it is human flourishing. Happiness is not about unicorns, it's the joy we're striving for with our potential. And the pursuit of happiness is really part of our unique humanity. What is also unique is that it's a continual process. We're able to think about the future and do things in the present, like saving for retirement or taking care of our health.

And happiness is not an end state. It's something that we work towards our whole life. Happiness is not necessarily a state of no problems and everything being perfect. We do have to give ourselves permission to be human and experience a full range of emotion and accept those emotions. The key is we want to build resilience within ourselves. The expectation of constantly feeling good and everything going well really is unreasonable and sets us up for disappointment.

I think of happiness as an acceptance of what it is. And when you're content with the present, you're letting go of painful cravings for what you can't have. And as a result, acceptance settles in. So if you can accept your situation, you're allowing yourself to be happy. And being grateful for everything you have instead of spending most of your time thinking about what you can't have may make life more beautiful.

So I'm curious. I want to do a poll again. Right now in this present moment, how would you rate your happiness on a scale of one to ten, with one being the low end, ten being the most happiness you can imagine. I'm just curious where everybody falls in that scale. And you should all be able to see the results. >> If you click the radio button next to your response, there's a one to ten scale. Click the one that answers where you are in the present moment.

>> MAUREEN: Perfect.

>> MELANIE: There's a tie between seven and eight.

>> MAUREEN: Yes. And I'm actually -- it's actually better than expected. We've got a happy bunch here. You can be even happier tomorrow with intentionality and using strategies from positive psychology. Thank you so much for participating in that. You can move on to the next slide, please.

So let's get more into the meat of positive psychology. After working with clients for a few years, I started learning more about this subset of psychology, trying to get my hands on books and research. And I --

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>> MAUREEN: Let's get more in the meat of this. And talking about Dr. Martin. And he really wanted to define positive psychology. And he found that it really constitutes the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life. And it became so popular. And it was really truly started influencing how we approach therapy, coaching, and behavior change. And he started his research by studying learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness occurs when an individual is conditioned to believe they cannot change or escape a negative situation. And he discovered that learned helplessness is closely associated with depression. He noted that the most earlier approaches in the field of psychology focused on the negative aspects of the human personality such as negative emotion, and personality weakness. So his aim was to really advance an alternative school of thought focusing on what is good about people.

His work asked what are the conditions that make humans flourish and he identified a number of factors that contribute to happiness. And those include positive emotion, engagement in life, relationships, meaning, and achievement. So really, the underlying premise of positive psychology is you can actually learn to be happier, like you can learn a foreign language, which is fascinating.

And the positive psychology research indicates your capacity for happiness is set by your genetics, which is about 50% determination, which you can't control, your circumstances, your gender, income, education, geography is about 10% they've found. And the 40% left over is your intentional activity, your behavior, your choices, your thinking patterns. And so this is where we're focusing. This is what I'm focusing on with coaching clients, what you have control over.

So after learning so much about this, I really started pulling more of the pillars of positive psychology into my coaching. And I noticed that when I did this I had better engagement, my clients understood themselves better and had more hope. Next slide, please. Our thoughts are constantly shaping and reshaping neural pathways in our brain. Happiness is dependent on our state of mind, not our status in life or bank accounts.

And barring extreme circumstances, our level of well-being is determined by what we choose to focus on and by our interpretation of external events. And by using some of the concepts of positive psychology, research shows it improves mood. It cultivates positive emotion and creates more energy, which we all could use, mental and physical. And what's so cool is that we can literally rewire our brains with this approach.

The brain is moldable at any stage of life, not only when we are young, but for as long as we live. And there's research in the area of neural plasticity that shows that changes in behavior that are positive can actually cause radical and lasting changes in different parts of your brain. Visualize your brain as Play-Doh that you can shape by reframing your thoughts, which is a lot of what positive psychology is.

Positive psychology also is focusing on your strengths rather than your weaknesses and aims to lift you up from the neutral mediocrity to a higher, more fulfilling state of living. Happiness is not about being perfect. And that is the hard part. We have to find a balance between fixing the problems and developing building blocks of a fulfilling life. We can't ignore the elephant in the room.

There's many barriers to happiness. So I'm curious from all of you, another poll question here. What are your barriers to happiness in your own life? What gets in your way at times, or all the time? And these are anonymous. I'm just curious where you struggle. Teenager. I can relate. Family, overthinking, negative thoughts. Perfectionism, that's huge. Unknowns. That is one of the biggest issues, not knowing what's going to happen and accepting that. Next slide, please.

Thank you for those responses. I think this shows that we all have struggles and there are lots of things to overcome. The great news is we can consider putting positive psychology into practice to overcome some of these. Expecting perfection, all or nothing thinking, distorted thought pattern, that sets us up for disappointment. We are imperfect beings. Social media, comparison. Let's get off Facebook. Let's get off Instagram and thinking that we need to be looking or doing what others are doing.

And then when we focus on what others or ourselves are doing wrong, that keeps us in a negative, pessimistic frame of mind. Instead of looking for solutions, you're lingering on problems. Negativity, it's so contagious. Think about if your boss walks into a meeting and is in a bad mood. What does that do to the rest of the room? So we have to take responsibility for our own actions.

People that blame others are more unhappy. They have no control in their eyes. So that's another part of positive psychology, is taking responsibility for yourself and your own happiness. Also, catastrophic thinking. Another one of the irrational, distorted thoughts, thinking of the worst possible scenario. We all can go down this rabbit hole, but what if we thought about the best possible scenario?

And that's not necessarily the normal way that we all think, but you can almost train yourself to start doing that versus the other extreme. And hey, when we're negatively self-focused, which can include ruminating on our deficits and our weaknesses, we are more likely to experience distress. So these are

real barriers. But using some of the strategies that I've already tried to introduce and then I'm going to talk a little bit more about in a minute hopefully will help.

Next slide, please. So, can you really train yourself to be happier, I mean, really? But, yes. Obviously I wouldn't be here if that wasn't the case. Positive psychology says yes. One of the strategies to use to enhance and cultivate happiness is scanning your world for positivity. This can help us reinterpret failures as opportunities or growth. Pay attention to what's going on. Somebody gets on your nerves, think about the person with power that you have that is not controlled by that person.

Or when a tragic event occurs, think about the improved responses to tragic events that were not available for tragedies in past history. We didn't have the same types of, say, first responders that we did 50 years ago. And this exercise --

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>> MAUREEN: Great. All right. Then I'm going to continue here. So we were talking about the strategy from the positive psychology and just thinking about different ways to train ourselves to be happier. Another way that positive psychology can improve happiness is by doing random acts of kindness. We hear that in the line at Starbucks or what have you, but acts of kindness are proven to release happy hormones that boost your mood.

Or give an unexpected compliment, or show down so someone can merge in front of you in traffic. Doing good deeds triggers a high in the brain releasing feel-good chemicals. Also infuse positivity into your surrounding. If you're running a meeting, start with recognitions instead of diving right into all that's not going well. It can make a difference, it just takes a couple minutes.

The other thing, recording your positive experiences -- journaling. Researchers find that if we just write down, just take two minutes to write down three good things that happened that day, if you do that for a week that can increase your happiness significantly. It's training your brain versus just saying oh, I'm going to be happier. next slide, please.

Positive psychology has a big focus on the mind-body connection. It can be the equivalent to powerful medications. Exercise can also help in the recovery from mild depression, but more importantly, it can help you become more resilient to depression prevention. Aerobic forms of exercise like quick walking or cycling appear to be more effective in this role. And even short bursts of physical activity can have a positive impact on anxiety.

Effects can be magnified if you follow a regimented, continuous structure for several months. Spend money on experiences versus things. Experiences provokes more happiness and satisfaction, even though people typically spend more time using their material possessions. Researchers say a possible explanation is the endurance of experiences in people's memories., while the value of material goods weakness over time.

Experiences increase happiness by facilitating connection with others. We're social creatures. Meaningful interactions and relationships with other humans are crucial to our happiness and well-being -- going to concerts, fairs, ballgames, vacations. Those are all social events that often involve family, friends, or those you can share interest with. And even after the events, reflecting on those experiences makes us feel closer to others.

It can provide us stories for conversations. Who wants to hear about your new car? People would rather hear that you went on a fishing trip or to a new restaurant. The other big piece of positive psychology is awareness of your strengths and using them. Many of us don't know what our strengths are. Something that you're good at that comes easily to you, which is what we often take for granted.

And if you don't know, ask friends or family what they think your strengths are, or fill out a formal strengths survey. There's tons of them online. Once you figure out a strength, be intentional about using it throughout the week. If collaboration is a strength, think about how you could invite others into a problem you're struggling with. Perhaps you're a good writer but rarely get a chance to use that because that's not your job.

Maybe you could volunteer to use this skill to solve a certain problem. The other thing that positive psychology talks a lot about that I encourage clients to use is meditation. And meditation is the strongest mental practice that has the power to really reset our happiness set point. And studies show that meditation shrinks the portion of your brain called the amygdala, which controls fearfulness and anxiety.

Meditation has the power to instill a deep sense of calm and serenity in the innermost part of your brain. With practice, it doesn't matter if you believe in the happiness set point or not. Have you known anyone who meditates often and seems unhappy? I haven't. (Laughing) And a few more strategies -- you can go to the next slide. Is resilience. Having that ability to cope with what life throws at you. It's going to throw us lots of curveballs.

Working through those challenges by using your strengths like hope and optimism and self-efficacy and placing your situation in a bigger context can be helpful. One visualization technique that I use with clients is to imagine the place you currently exist. Say it's your room, and zoom out of yourself. Zoom out of the city you're in, the state, even the continent, then into space. You can see the earth.

Think about your problem. What does it look like from that angle? It just gives you a different perspective. So rather than viewing failure as a final outcome, we have to reframe it. We have to. As an opportunity for growth and learning. Setbacks provide valuable insights that contribute to future success. Research found support to the view that failure is necessary for success is astronomical. The other part is social connection. We touched on this before. These days we're constantly connected to the internet, to others on Instagram and Facebook, but there's even more lonely people since COVID. (Technical issues)

>> MAUREEN: Absolutely. All right. So we're back to talking about social connection. There's more loneliness than ever. You may have come across this statistic but there is a huge study that showed that the lack of social connection is actually a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure, as well as our mental health. So it's super important to try to develop social connection.

And when we have those strong connections it helps you recover from disease faster, but it can improve your happiness. Social connections can impact your health and well-being. And that may be sharing a meal. It doesn't have to be anything extravagant. Positive psychology research explores the role of social networks in shaping human behavior as well. That research proves that our behavior is contagious. Our influence extends to people within three degrees.

When you make a positive change in your own life, you are shaping the behavior of an incredible number of people. I had to know. There are a thousand people within 3° of most of us. Everything that we do or say tends to impact our friends, our family. Think of a friend of a friend's friend. Think about how your mood affects your child, spouse, or coworker. It is fascinating.

I encourage you to consider using one of these strategies. I know it's been choppy today. But hopefully again you got something out of this and try to be more intentional. It will be interesting to see what kind of effect it could have, even if it's 1% or 5%. Positive psychology is not used for serious mental health issues, like severe clinical depression or bipolar disorder. Those are treated differently. I just wanted to mention that.

Positive psychology is huge, though, in the coaching world and with -- the diagnosis of -- behavioral health. Lastly, one more poll question. Hopefully you heard a few things that you could consider doing to increase your happiness by 5%, or 1% even using some strategies from positive psychology. It's so amazing. Train your brain. Thank you all for your responses and being so patient. I wish you all the happiness in the world and more realistic and positive thoughts moving forward.

I appreciate spending part of the afternoon with me. I feel honored and I encourage you all to take good care of yourselves. Thank you, Melanie.

>> MELANIE: Thank you so much, Maureen. And I do truly appreciate every one of you who stood by and hung around as we went through these technical issues that were really tough at times. So I think it shows that you really wanted to hear this information and we truly appreciate you being here. I just

want to remind you of your benefit program that you have. I'm going to share a link here and this is how you can find out your information about your program so that you can get more information on this topic or other health and wellness topics. And you may have coaching services available to you.

(End of captioning)