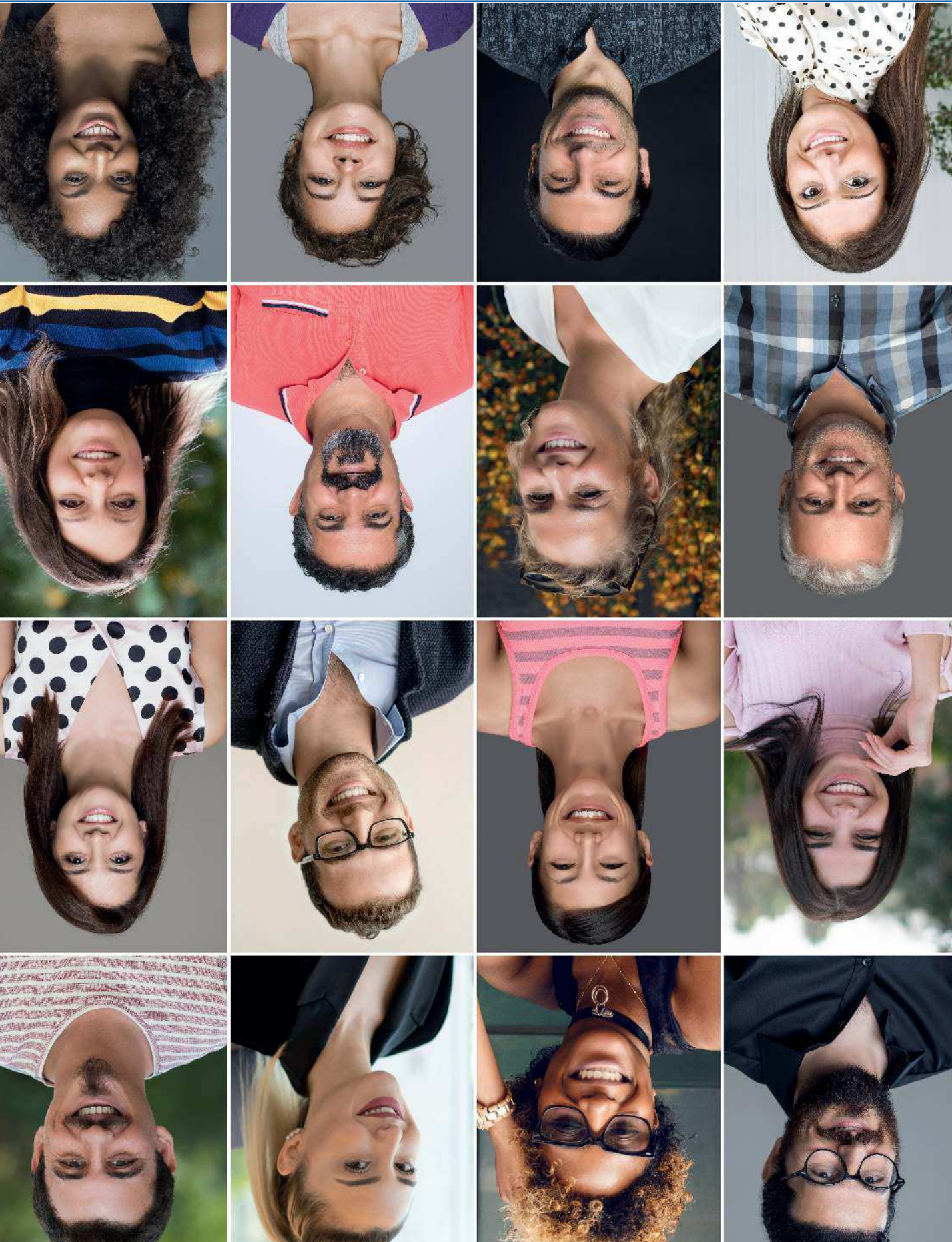


PART I

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47297-5 — The Science and Application of Positive Psychology
Jennifer S. Cheavens, David B. Feldman
Excerpt
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CHAPTER 1

What Is Positive Psychology and Why Do We Need It?

If someone asked you to explain what psychology is and what psychologists do, what would you say? If your answer would include words like “therapy,” “counseling,” and “mental illness,” you’re not alone. In an attempt to understand the general public’s view of psychology, the American Psychological Association (APA) occasionally does national surveys. In one such poll, the words most commonly used to describe the field were associated with illness and treatment (Breckler, 2012). Very rarely did people mention anything about conducting research on the mind, brain, or behavior.

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That, however, is exactly what psychologists do: Study the mind, brain, and behavior. As part of this endeavor, psychologists certainly research mental illness and treatment. But they also study life-span development, relationships, leadership styles, learning, memory, sensation and perception, and neuroscience, among many other topics. In other words, people often miss the breadth of psychology.

People also frequently assume that psychology is all about studying the problems and difficulties that human beings experience – depression, anxiety, anger, relationship discord, and trauma. But aren’t happiness, hope, gratitude, love, and resilience just as much a part of the human experience? Don’t they also deserve our attention? Even though the first thing that came to your mind about psychology may have been mental illness and treatment, in an average day, we’d bet you spend less time thinking about those topics and more time thinking about the activities you enjoy, people you love, and beliefs you cherish.

Understanding these is the mission of positive psychology.

A New Science with a Long History

Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning. Many trace the origins of this relatively new science to 1996, when Martin E. P. Seligman was elected president of the APA. As is customary, Seligman had the opportunity to choose a theme for his term in office – a tall order, given that his choice could direct the course of the field. He wasn’t sure, however, what to choose.

Then, one day, Seligman was weeding the garden with his 5-year-old daughter, Nikki. Being a naturally goal-oriented person, he was understandably in a hurry to finish the task. As he dutifully uprooted weeds, Nikki was having a ball throwing soil in the air, dancing, and singing. Frustrated, Seligman yelled at her. After momentarily recoiling, she quickly recomposed herself.

“Daddy, I want to talk to you,” Nikki said. “Do you remember before my fifth birthday? From the time I was three to the time I was five, I was a whiner. When I turned five, I decided not to whine any more. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being a grouch” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6).

Seligman was floored. “This was for me an epiphany, nothing less,” he writes. “I realized that raising Nikki was not about correcting whining. Nikki did that herself. Rather, I realized that raising Nikki is about taking this marvelous strength she has – I call it ‘seeing into the soul’ – amplifying it, nurturing it. ... Raising children, I realized, is vastly more than fixing what is wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities” (Seligman, 2002b, p. 4).

In that moment, Seligman discovered the focus of his APA presidency and the rest of his career: positive psychology. Today, Seligman is widely viewed as the father of contemporary positive psychology. He deserves great credit for beginning a movement within the field of psychology that legitimized and encouraged the study of optimal human functioning.

But Seligman was hardly the first scholar to study human strengths and the factors that create good lives. As we’ll discuss in detail in Chapter 8, the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle focused much of his writing on what constituted human virtue. One could even argue that great spiritual and religious figures like Abraham, Jesus of Nazareth, Mohammad, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and the Buddha, among others, were primarily concerned with what makes a person “good” and how people can live “good” lives.

Seligman also wasn’t the first APA president to encourage the study of such topics. In his presidential address to the association in 1906, William James pondered why some individuals live to their fullest capacities and others don’t. He posed two inter-related questions: “(a) What were the limits of human energy? and (b) How could this energy be stimulated and released so it could be put to optimal use?” (Rathunde, 2001, p. 136). This perspective was consistent with the broad themes of the field of psychology before World War II. In fact, during the first half of the twentieth century, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent (Seligman, 2002b).

Then the War happened. As the United States prepared for battle in 1941, the National Research Council instructed its Emergency Committee on Psychology to explore ways of organizing the field for the national good, especially emphasizing therapy (Benjamin, 2005). They knew that young men would be returning in droves

with combat-related mental health issues, and they believed that psychology – which up to that point was almost exclusively a research discipline – could play an important role in helping them.

As a result, people began formally receiving doctorates in clinical psychology for the first time. And, shortly thereafter, the federal government called on the Veterans Administration to increase the number of mental health professionals available to treat returnees. Because medical schools were unlikely to quickly mint more psychiatrists, this effectively became a mandate for increasing the pool of these new clinical psychologists. Although plenty of psychologists continued to do basic research on the nature of mind and behavior, the focus of the field shifted squarely onto the assessment and treatment of mental illness. And it stayed there for many decades.

Some psychologists, however, sought to broaden the focus. For example, during the 1950s, humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow, Erich Fromm, and Carl Rogers renewed interest in the study of positive aspects of human nature. Maslow is even credited with coining the term *positive psychology*, which appeared in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*. The final chapter of that book, “Toward a Positive Psychology,” argued that the field of psychology lacked an understanding of human potential:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side; it has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction. (p. 354)

Humanistic psychology, which Maslow helped found in the 1950s, built on ideas from existential philosophy and psychology, concerning itself with topics like love, creativity, growth, self-actualization, and courage (Misiak & Sexton, 1966). The primary difference between humanistic psychology and positive psychology isn’t in the topics they explore, but how they choose to explore them. In the early days of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) distanced themselves from their humanistic forebears by explicitly endorsing the methods of empirical science. “Unfortunately,” they wrote, “humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base” (p. 7).

It’s not that humanistic psychologists weren’t interested in doing research, but rather that they defined research differently than do modern-day positive psychologists. Bohart and Greening (2001), for instance, write that humanistic psychology “values research, although this is defined broadly to include both positivistic and ... phenomenological methods” (p. 82).

Indeed, humanistic psychology is rooted in **phenomenology**, the study of subjective human experience. Consistent with this perspective, humanistic scholars draw much more strongly on introspection – the subjective observation of internal states – than on experimental procedures and objective measurement, which were referred to

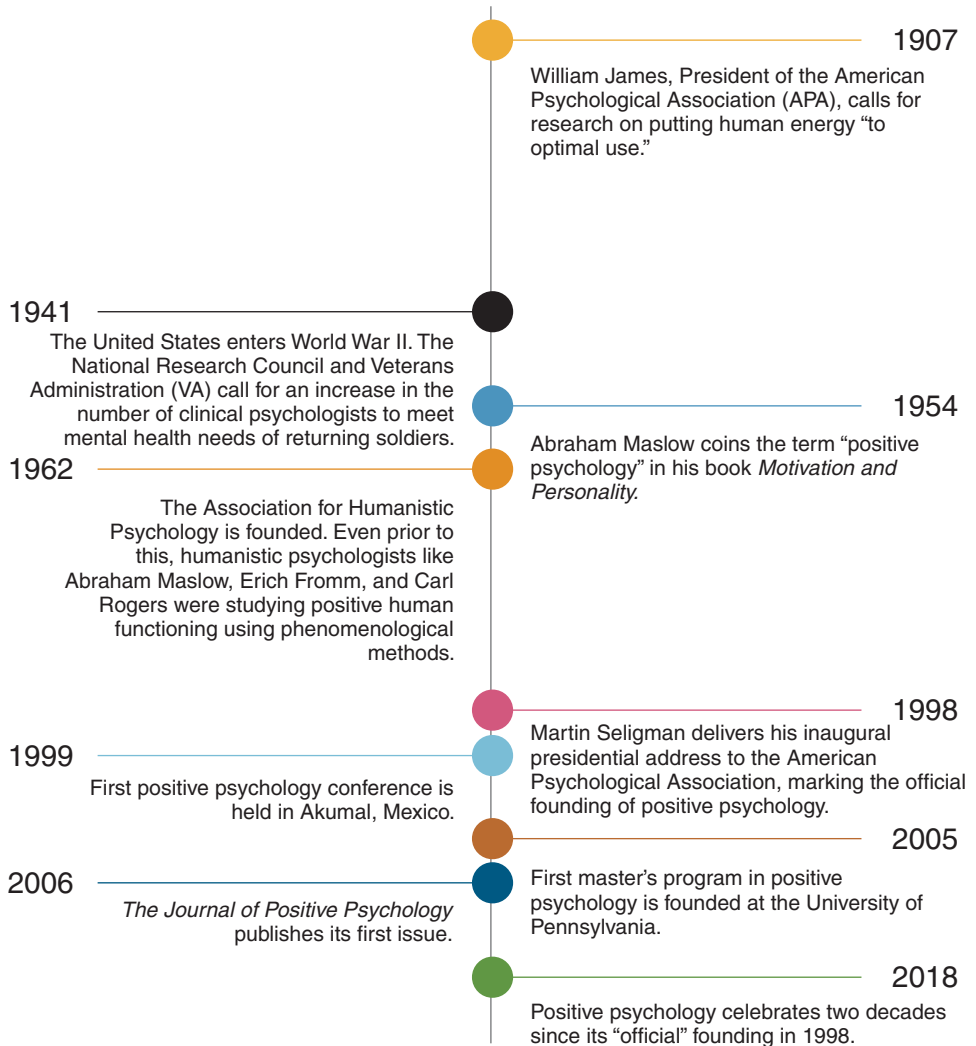


Figure 1.1 Timeline of modern positive psychology.

as “positivistic” methods in the quote above. They also tend to reject *reductionism*, the practice of understanding a phenomenon by breaking it into component parts, instead preferring to reflect on the nature of conscious experience as a whole.

In contrast to the subjective introspective methods used by humanistic psychologists, positive psychology is explicitly empirical and objective in its orientation. Today, psychologists can study topics like happiness, hope, and love without feeling they need to leave their scientific selves behind.

A major assumption of modern positive psychology is that we aren’t limited to poetic descriptions or artistic representations of what happiness, hope, and love feel like; psychologists can develop ways of measuring them – from valid and reliable self-report measures to behavioral-observation and brain-imaging techniques. The

basic idea is this: If you can describe how it feels to be in love, someone can measure it. After all, a description is a type of measurement, just perhaps a little less precise than we'd like it to be. So, although many of the concepts falling under the umbrella of this textbook may at first blush seem like they can't be measured, our job is to show how they can. Check out Chapter 2 for more details about exactly what makes positive psychology a science.

Since Seligman's election to the presidency of the APA in 1996, the influence of positive psychology has steadily grown (Seligman, 2019). The year 1999 marked the first ever positive psychology conference. And in 2002, the International Positive Psychology Association held its first summit in Washington, D. C. Since the 1990s, more than 18,000 articles have been published in academic journals on topics related to positive psychology (Rusk & Waters, 2013). Several graduate programs in positive psychology now exist, including those at the University of Pennsylvania and Claremont Graduate University. Moreover, many colleges and universities offer classes on the topic, which is presumably why you're reading these words now. See Figure 1.1 for a timeline summary of the field's development.

Understanding the Scope of Positive Psychology

At a meeting held in Akumal, Mexico, in 2000, some of the first positive psychologists drafted the "positive psychology manifesto" (Sheldon et al., 2000). In it, they laid out the broad aspirations of this burgeoning science, including "to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive" (p. 1). This general set of aims can be broken down into three interrelated topics sometimes known as the *pillars of positive psychology*: positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

At base, positive psychologists are interested in *positive subjective experiences*, including happiness, satisfaction, transcendence, love, and pleasure. At the individual level, they're also interested in the *personal traits and practices* that help bring about such experiences, including strengths, interpersonal skill, forgiveness, and wisdom. At the group level, they focus on the *social institutions* that help foster those virtues, including positive work environments and governmental policies, as well as the civic virtues that contribute to those institutions, including leadership, responsibility, altruism, and work ethic.

Regardless of which of these overlapping topics we're considering, positive psychologists are interested in *supernormal human functioning*, meaning the factors that help people function particularly well. Imagine placing the subdisciplines of psychology along a bell curve of psychological functioning (see Figure 1.2). Clinical psychologists are principally concerned with the left tail of the curve, which focuses on the relatively small group of people who have significant difficulty functioning. They are primarily interested in what leads people to develop and maintain mental disorders like major depression, bipolar disorder, or obsessive-compulsive disorder,

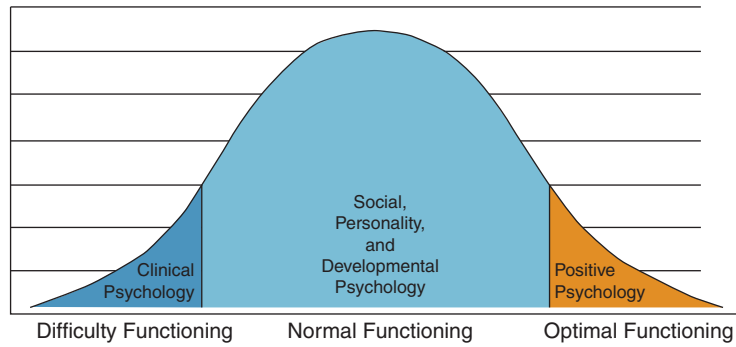


Figure 1.2 Psychology's subdisciplines and the level of human functioning they typically study.

as well as how to help these individuals return to “normal” functioning. Social, personality, and developmental psychologists (among others) are primarily concerned with the middle of the curve – that is, their focus is on the vast majority of people who function “normally.” They study, for example, how social groups form, how our personalities affect our choices, or how people change throughout the life-span. Finally, positive psychologists concentrate their efforts on the right tail of the curve – that is, their focus is on those people who function better than what might be considered typical. They are interested in why a relatively small number of people are particularly happy, forgiving, successful, or resilient, for example.

Although this bell curve offers a useful and intuitive way of understanding how positive psychology relates to other disciplines within psychology, it's not perfect. That's because psychologists from all of these subdisciplines often bring their particular perspectives to studying optimal human functioning. Consider, for example, how individuals from various disciplines might study a topic like forgiveness. Clinical psychologists might seek to understand how a willingness to forgive can facilitate healing after trauma. Social psychologists might study how forgiveness can be influenced by the social environment and vice versa. Personality psychologists might investigate to what degree personality traits like agreeableness or introversion could be associated with people's tendencies to forgive. Developmental psychologists might study how the capacity or tendency to forgive may change over the life-span, and whether there are critical periods during childhood when the ability to forgive is acquired. Industrial/Organizational psychologists might be interested in how the tendency to forgive affects a leader's success within a business or organization. Finally, neuroscientists might attempt to discern which circuits in the brain are related to forgiveness (see Table 1.1).

In short, positive psychology is *interdisciplinary*. In fact, positive psychology isn't fully a discipline in itself, because the vast majority of people doing research in positive psychology come from other disciplines within psychology. Although both authors of this textbook are clinical psychologists, for instance, we study and contribute to positive psychology.

Table 1.1 How researchers from different disciplines might approach positive psychology

Subdiscipline of psychology	Possible topics of interest in positive psychology
Clinical psychology	The role of positive psychology constructs in treating or preventing psychological disorders
Social psychology	Social influences on positive experiences, affect, and behavior
Personality psychology	The role of personality in positive experiences, affect, and behavior; positive personality traits
Developmental psychology	The process of developing positive traits and affective and behavioral tendencies throughout the life-span
Industrial/organizational psychology	The role of positive psychology constructs in organizations, companies, and industry
Neuroscience	The roles of the brain and nervous system in positive traits, experiences, affect, and behavior

Why We Need Positive Psychology

There are at least two important reasons to study positive psychology. First, it's a counterbalance to our natural human tendency to pay more attention to the negative than the positive. In one classic study, researchers interviewed three groups of people: some who had won the lottery approximately a year prior to the interview, some who had experienced a serious injury-producing car accident also about a year earlier, and a control group of people who had experienced neither outcome (Brickman et al., 1978). Given that a year had passed, the lottery winners didn't report being any happier than those in the control group. The positive emotions that undoubtedly existed soon after the win had already diminished. On the other hand, the accident survivors' negative feelings persisted. In other words, negative events appear to influence people in a longer-lasting way than positive ones.

But this is just one of many examples of research demonstrating that negative emotions and events may be stronger than positive ones. Writing in the journal *Review of General Psychology*, Roy Baumeister and his colleagues (2001) documented this phenomenon in numerous areas of life, including our financial decisions, friendships, and even our most intimate relationships. When making financial decisions, for instance, studies show that people weigh losses more heavily than gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991; Pan, 2019). When forming first impressions of another person, negative observations of the person ultimately contribute more to our conclusions (Baumeister et al., 2001; Buhl, 1999). Finally, in married couples, negative interactions are more strongly related to relationship satisfaction than positive interactions (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

Evolutionarily, this bias toward noticing and using negative information may have helped our ancient ancestors survive and pass their genes to us. While out gathering berries, if our ancient relatives found themselves too entranced by the beauty of the colorful plants around them, they might have missed subtle signs that a tiger was stalking them. Those who were more sensitive to signals of danger may have been less likely to place themselves in harmful situations (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). In our modern world, however, we are about as likely to be attacked by a sabretooth tiger (or the modern-day equivalent) as we are to be struck by lightning or win a billion-dollar lottery jackpot. So, this tendency isn't as useful as it once was.

There's no need to despair, however. As Sparks and Baumeister (2008) have observed, "While a single bad event is more impactful than a comparable good event, good events can still serve to counterbalance or offset the effects of bad events" (p. 63). We just need more of them! From this standpoint, positive psychology is essential as a counterweight to our natural bias toward prioritizing the negative over the positive.

Historically, psychologists seem to have fallen prey to the same bias. A review of the literature found that of all the articles published in psychology journals from 1992–2000, fewer than 2 percent of them focused on topics falling within the scope of positive psychology (Rusk & Waters, 2013). Positive psychologists seek to provide an antidote to this tendency. However, it's important to note that positive psychology



If you've taken other psychology courses in the past, what percentage of class time was spent studying dysfunction, normal functioning, and optimal functioning?

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doesn't study the positive at the expense of the negative (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Nobody is saying that *only* the positive matters. Just as clinical psychologists don't think that nothing good ever happens, positive psychologists don't deny the painful aspects of life, nor do they attempt to paint a smiley face over the real problems, obstacles, and losses people face. They simply point to the fact that other areas of psychology already do a sufficient job investigating these important topics. As a result, they aim to increase our understanding of the full range of human experiences by studying optimal functioning.

But attempting to counterbalance the negative with the positive isn't the only good reason to be interested in positive psychology. Although positive feelings and experiences may certainly act as buffers against negative feelings and experiences, positive psychologists believe that positive topics are valuable in their own right. Consider, for a moment, what you think makes life good. As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, chances are the first answer that entered your mind wasn't "not being depressed" or "not having my relationships fall