

Resilience Project #5: Positive Psychology

"It's not necessarily reality that shapes us. [Rather] the lens through which your brain views the world shapes your reality. If we can change the lens, not only can we change your happiness, we can change every single business and educational outcome at the same time."

-Shawn Achor (author of The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work)

The field of psychology was developed in and shaped by the "disease" model: it was about figuring out what's wrong with you and trying to cure you. In the footsteps of the medical profession, psychology took relatively fuzzy concepts related to human behavior and measured them with rigor. It created classification systems, isolated variables, discovered causes, and invented treatments. The goal was to make miserable people less miserable, and in many instances, it succeeded in doing so. But, as it turns out, the absence of disease is not health.

A more recent branch of psychology, Positive Psychology, turns this model on its head. One of its chief developers, Dr. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, posits that, along the way, psychologists forgot that people make choices and have responsibility. While traditional psychology seemed to have forgotten about improving "normal" lives, **the aim of this new approach is to help all of us to live more fulfilled, productive and happy lives. It is as interested in building strength as in repairing damage.**

This approach is very much in line with the way that we, as counselors, tend to think, and we are big fans of their work. They have used the scientific approach to studying human behavior that developed with the field of psychology and applied that rigor toward trying to figure out **what actually makes a happy life—and, even more important, how can I get me one of those!?!?**

We have two great TED Talks to share with you. The first is by Shawn Achor, a very funny, fast-talking, former professor of Positive Psychology at Harvard. **He argues that most of us think like this: "If I work harder, I'll be more successful. If I'm more successful, I'll be happier."** In thinking this way, though, we've got it backwards, he says, because once we achieve success, we immediately re-set our goals and begin to focus on the next success we need to achieve. If we keep changing the goal post, if happiness is always on the opposite side of success, our brain never gets there. **He argues that, in fact, our brains work in the opposite order. If we can raise the level of positivity in the present, our brain experiences a "happiness advantage."** Dopamine floods our system when we are happy, and when it is present, our brains works harder, faster, and more intelligently. By rewiring our brains to be more positive and optimistic, we will be more successful. (Don't miss his findings on how to accomplish this goal near the end at about minute 11:00.)

http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work.html

The second talk is about twice as long at 24 minutes, but if the Positive Psychology approach appeals to you, you will probably really enjoy this one, as well. This is Martin Seligman, past president of the American Psychological Association and one of the founders of Positive Psychology:

http://www.ted.com/talks/martin_seligman_on_the_state_of_psychology.html

If you're interested in trying to figure out just how happy you are, relative to others, check out Dr. Seligman's surveys on his web site: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>

The Staples Resilience Project is an ongoing initiative by the Staples Guidance Department. These emails are just the beginning. We welcome your feedback.

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