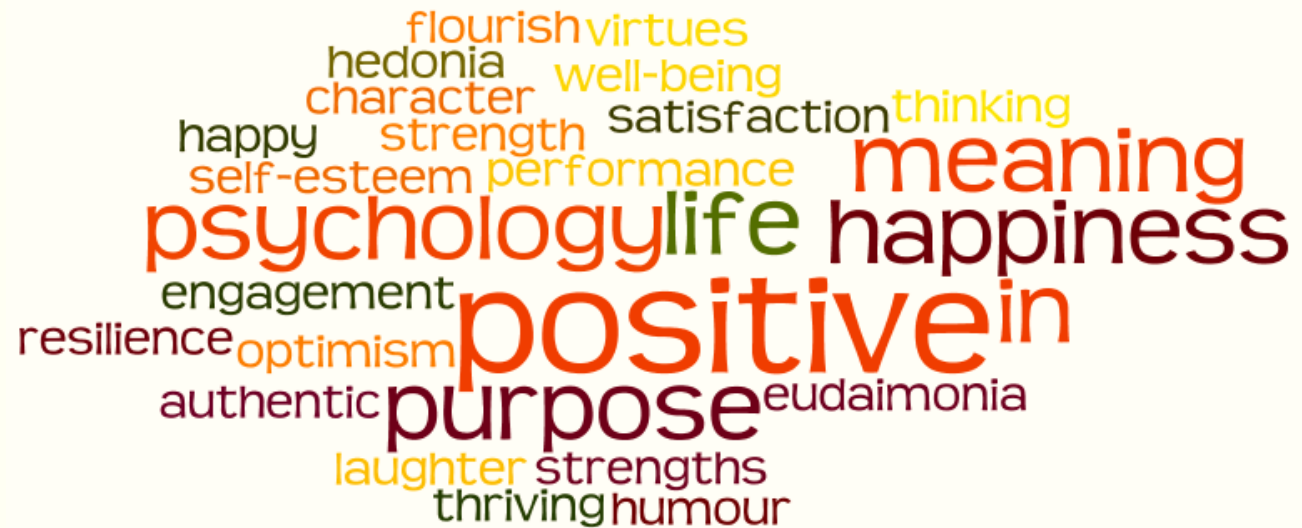


POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: POSITIVE CONSTRUCTS, NEGATIVE POSSIBILITIES

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Positive Psychology: Introduction

- Our concept of mental health has long since expanded from simply the absence of disease
- Positive psychology focuses on identifying and promoting positive human development
- Less consideration given to potential risks or boundary conditions of positive constructs

Today's Talk

- This talk is not meant to be a criticism of the research currently being conducted but to highlight the potential costs of four positive psychological concepts

Happiness

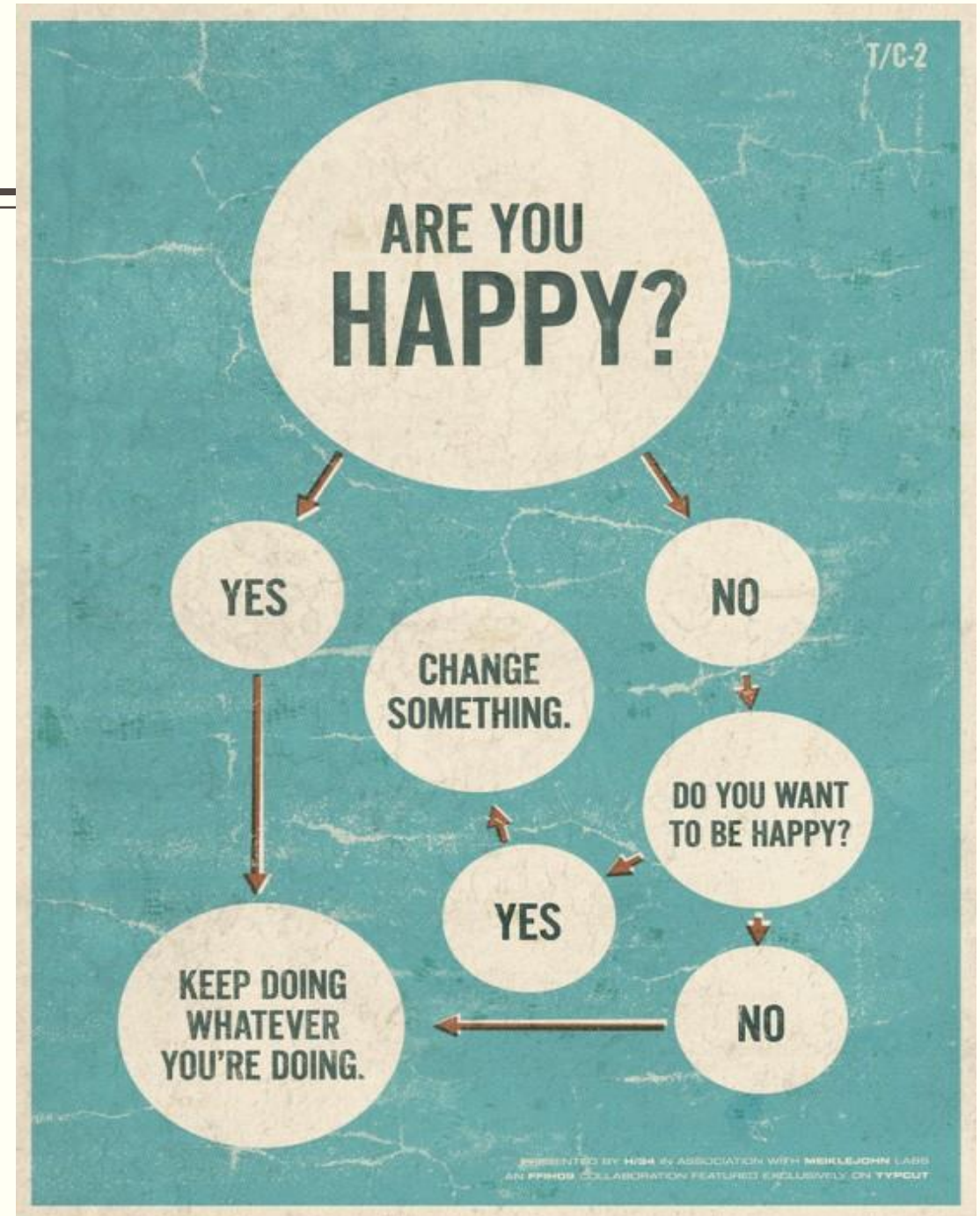
Self-
Esteem

Meaning

Optimism

Happiness

- Many people perceive happiness to be one of the most important goals in life.
- In addition, most individuals report wanting to feel happier (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011)

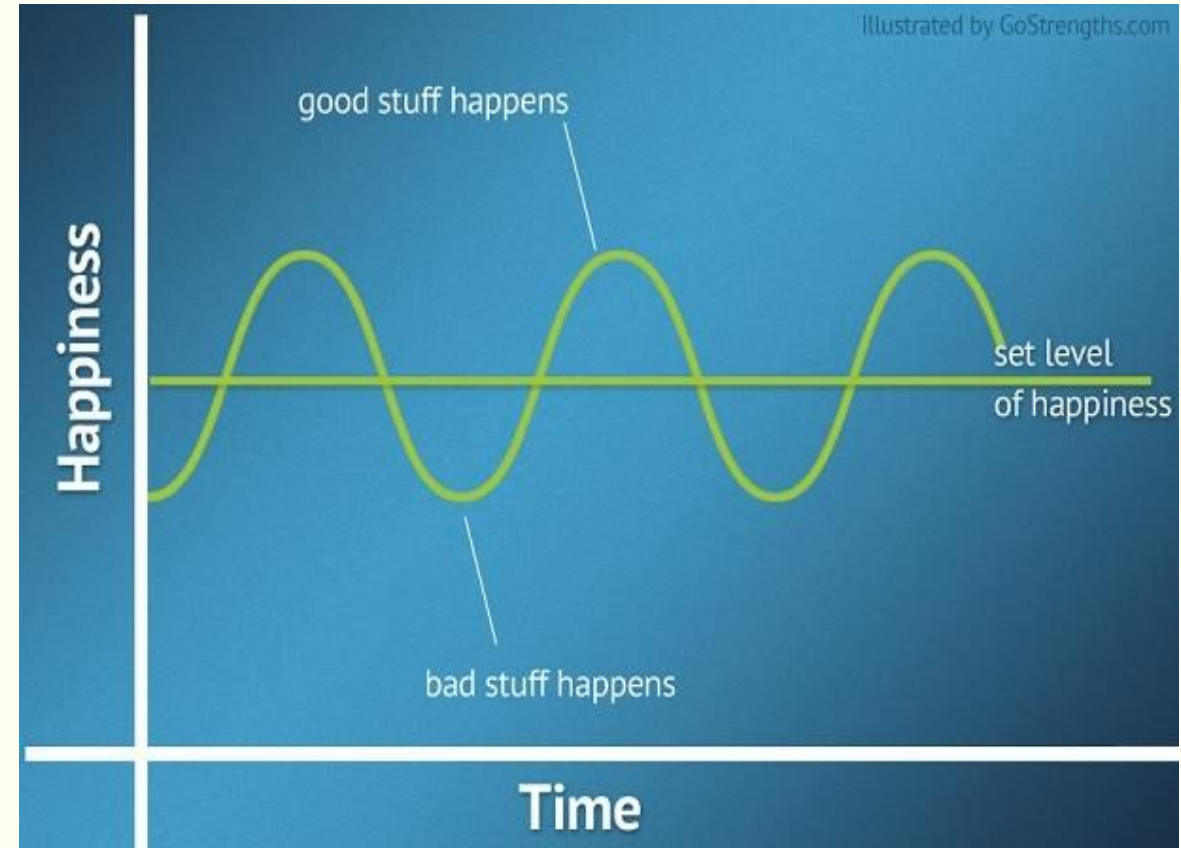


Happiness

- People who are happier:
 - Better mental health (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2004)
 - Longer life (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001)
 - More energy (Gailliot, 2012)
 - Better social relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002)
 - Better physical health (Veenhoven, 2008)
 - Less depressed (Chang & Farrehi, 2001)
 - Higher self-esteem (Lucas et al., 1996)
 - Etc.

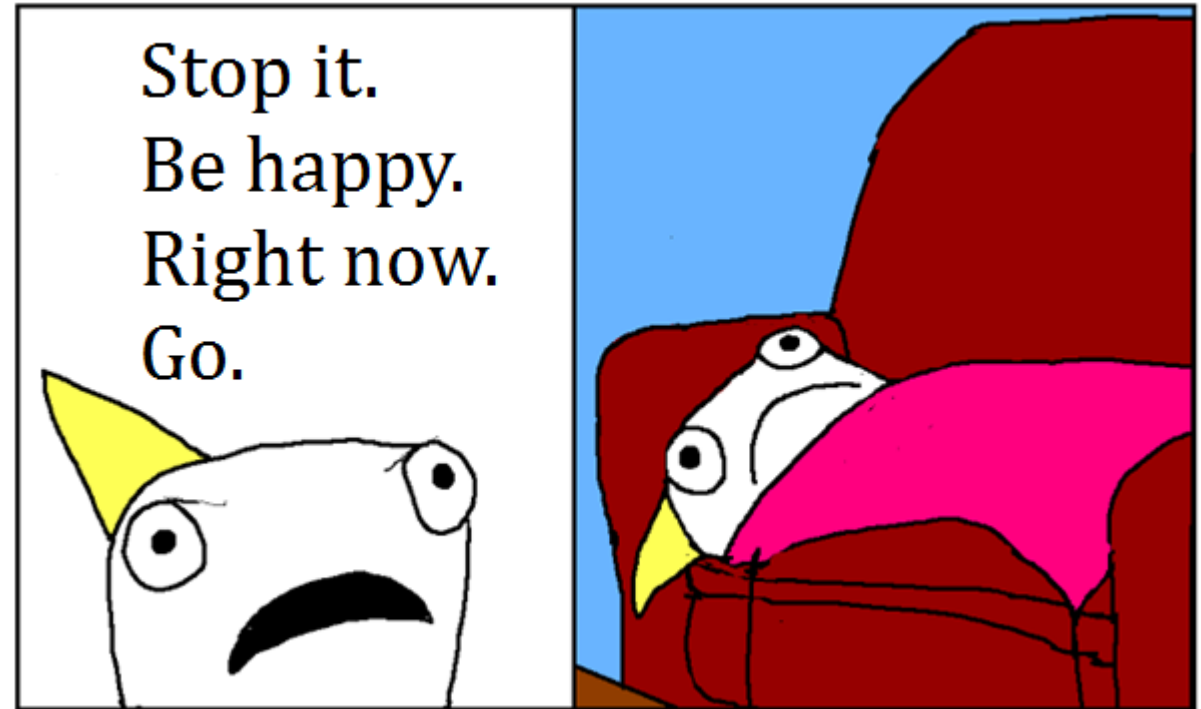
The Downside of Happiness

- Happiness may be difficult to change
- Roughly 50% of well being inherited (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999)
- Hedonic adaptation
- Most studies that found long-term changes only found downward shifts (e.g., Lucas, 2005; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003; 2004)



The Downside of Happiness

- The pursuit of happiness without results yields opposite results
- A higher value of happiness = less happiness in positive scenarios. (Mauss, Tamir , Anderson, & Savino, 2011)
- Try to feel as happy as possible = feeling less happy (Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein, 2003))



Downside of Happiness

- Just fake it?
- Faking happiness has risks as well
- Those who mimicked the behaviours of happy employees experienced increased negative affect & work withdrawal (Scott and Barnes 2011)



Increasing happiness: there may be hope

- Recent research has suggested that active changes to one's behaviour may predict long term changes in happiness (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky 2006)
- These active changes require more effort to begin and sustain
- Increasing happiness may not be hopeless but it isn't easy.



Self-Esteem

- Popular component of self-esteem in positive psychology literature is positive affirmations

(e.g., Armitage, 2012; Harris, 2011; Lynch & Graham-Bermann, 2000)

- People report often using positive affirmations and believe them to be effective. (Wood, Perunovic, and Lee 2009)



Self-Esteem: Positive Affirmations

- Positive Affirmations have been associated with:
 - Improved health (Charlson et al., 2007)
 - Improved relational security (Stinson et al. 2011)
 - Improved social behaviour (more warm) (Stinson et al. 2011)
 - Increased confidence (Briñol, Petty, Gallardo, & DeMarree, 2007)
 - Increased well-being (Nelson, Fuller, Choi, Lyubomirsky, 2014)



Self-Esteem: Positive Affirmations

- Some research has found positive affirmations may do more harm than good. (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee 2009)
- A series of studies found that when trait self-esteem is low, positive affirmations predicted lower state self-esteem, and worsened mood.
- Given positive affirmations are geared towards those with low self-esteem this finding is troubling.

Searching for Meaning

- It is common for people to search for meaning after a negative event
- Finding meaning is associated with:
 - Better adjustment (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006)
 - Improved relationships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)
 - Personal growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)
 - New appreciation with life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)



Meaning

- Searching for meaning and finding meaning are positively related, but not all who search find.
- Finding meaning is associated with positive outcomes, searching alone is associated with lower levels of well-being. (Kernan & Lepore, 2009)
- Those who search but are not successful experience lower levels of adjustment compared to those who did not search. (Davis and Novoa, 2013)

Meaning

- Meaning making leads to benefits when meaning is found and the search terminated.
- Individuals should not be encouraged to search for meaning to negative events unless there is a reasonable likelihood that searching will result in some new meaning.

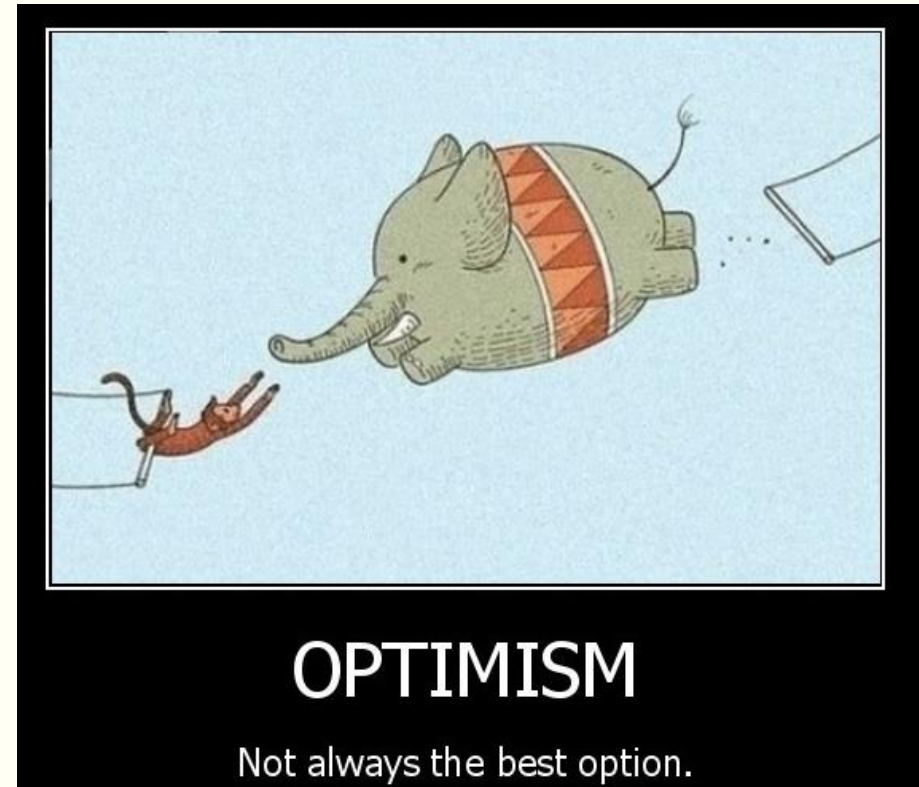


Optimism

- Optimism embodies the message of positive psychology
- Linked to a wide array of positive outcomes:
 - Harder working (Brown & Marshall, 2000)
 - Better problem-solving (Brown & Marshall, 2000)
 - Less loneliness (Barron, Foxall, von Dollen, Shull, & Jones 1992)
 - Better adjustment (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992)
 - Less stress (O'Brien, VanEgeren, & Mumby, 1995)
 - Better recovery from surgery (Leedham, Meyerowitz, Muirhead, & Frist, 1995)
 - Etc.

Potential Drawbacks of Optimism

- If people underestimate their vulnerability to negative events, it may be more difficult to adjust should a negative event occur. (Perlof 1983)
- Optimism exacerbated the associations between accumulated negative life stress and poor psychological outcomes. (Chang and Sanna 2003)



Optimism

- Underestimating one's future self was more adaptive than overestimating one's future self (Cheng, Chan, and Fung 2009)
- Overly positive estimations of future life satisfaction were moderately associated with distress and dissatisfaction. (Busseri, Choma, and Sadava 2009)



Optimism

- Focusing on a positive future may lead one to neglect preventative health behaviours, or engage in riskier health behaviours due to a perception of minimal risk
- Unrealistic optimism significantly predicted more alcohol-related negative events (Dillard, Midboe, and Klein 2009)
- Smokers who were unrealistically optimistic were more likely to endorse the notion that one's risk of developing lung cancer was unrelated to one's actions and less likely to plan to quit smoking (Dillard, McCaul, and Klein 2006)

Future Directions

- Currently, the field of positive psychology has many studies promoting positive interventions with minimal focus on their potential limitations.
- It is important that when researching constructs that have the ability to improve quality of life, we give attention to possible drawbacks.
- By adopting a more balanced approach we are more likely to achieve our goal of enhancing human development and thriving.

Thank you for your time. Any questions?