

THE BIG IDEAS

PERMA

Seligman on eudaimonia.

Your Nervous System

An introduction.

Longevity

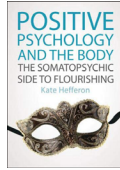
And positive emotion.

Diet and Wellbeing

Sugar is not your friend.

Physical Activity

As a positive psych intervention.



Positive Psychology and the Body

The Somatopsychic Side to Flourishing

BY DR. KATE HEFFERON, PHD · OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS © 2013 · 274 PAGES

“As positive psychology continues to make leaps and bounds in terms of scientific advancement, the focus on the importance of the body within optimal physical and psychological functioning is still lagging. There are 7,626 books written about positive psychology on amazon.co.uk. Not one of them focuses on the body and its role in the facilitation of wellbeing. Indeed, within major textbooks (excluding Hefferon and Boniwell, 2011), there are only brief references to physical activity, touch, nutrition, etc. which leaves one of the most fundamental pieces of the happiness puzzle missing—the body.

This book aims to provide a glimpse into the vast amount of scientific research completed on the physical mechanisms which assist either momentary experiences of pleasure or longer-lasting feelings of meaning and self-development. The approach to this book is a critical reflection on the omission of the body in positive psychology as well as a critical review of the literature to date. This book spans topics such as physical activity, interpersonal touch, sexual behaviors, nutrition, and many more, from a phenomenological to a more psycho-biological approach to happiness. Some of the topics covered in themselves are contradictory to the concept of wellbeing, hence the criticality stems from the reflection on their potential role in flourishing.”

~ Kate Hefferon from *Positive Psychology and the Body*

“Positive psychology is defined as the ‘scientific study of virtue, meaning, resilience and wellbeing, as well as evidence based applications to improve the life of individuals and society in the totality of life.’”

~ Kate Hefferon

I got this book after reading a testimonial by Kate Hefferon in [Character Strengths Matter](#).

When I saw the title of this book in Kate’s micro-bio, I thought to myself, “Aha!! FINALLY!! Someone is talking about positive psychology and the body!!”

(Yes, that’s how I talk to myself.) (And, yes. This is the kind of thing that gets me fired up. :)

So, of course, I immediately got the book. Read it. And, here we are.

This is actually a *textbook* not a normal book. It provides an overview of research on a range of subjects including: “Positive Psychophysiology,” “Positive Neuroscience,” “Positive Sexuality” and “Positive Nutrition.”

If you’re looking to make sure you’ve read everything you can on the subject, I think you’ll enjoy it. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

Otherwise, you’ll probably be better off checking out our Notes on the authors mentioned in the book, including: John Ratey’s [Spark](#), Richard Davidson’s [The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#), Dan Siegel’s [Mindsight](#), Tyler Graham and Drew Ramsey’s [The Happiness Diet](#), Kristin Neff’s [Self-Compassion](#), Barbara Fredrickson’s [Love 2.0](#), Martin Seligman’s [Flourish](#), [Authentic Happiness](#) and [Learned Optimism](#), Carol Dweck’s [Mindset](#) and [Self-Theories](#), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s [Flow](#) and [Creativity](#).

"Did you know? We take 10,000 blinks, 20,000 breaths, and 100,000 heart beats a day."

~ Kate Hefferon

Although not mentioned (as they were written after this textbook was published), also check out [Why We Sleep](#) by Matthew Walker and [The Joy of Movement](#) by Kelly McGonigal.

It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

PERMA

"In 2011, [Martin] Seligman published a new book *Flourish*, which created a departure from a previous focus on authentic happiness theory which is largely associated with Hedonia. Seligman created 'wellbeing theory,' consisting of five elements (PERMA), which he argues people will choose for their own sake. Each one of the five elements has been found to enhance wellbeing and be intrinsically motivating and quantifiably measurable. These elements include:

Positive emotions Stemming from the original theory of the 'pleasant life' Seligman kept in positive emotions as he argues it is a 'cornerstone of wellbeing theory,' however, happiness and satisfaction with life are now simply elements of this component, not the final goal.

Engagement Similar to the above element, engagement remains within the new wellbeing theory as it fits the criteria as above and is a staple in leading to a flourishing life.

Relationships This element surrounds the importance of 'other people' and the crucial role they play in our ability to flourish.

Meaning A former happiness theory component, meaning remains in wellbeing theory and covers the sense of purpose and belonging as well as serving something higher than yourself.

Accomplishment This new component encompasses individuals who engage in the 'achieving life,' focusing on success, achievement and most of all mastery.

Seligman further states that these elements contribute to, but do not singularly define, wellbeing. By including both hedonic and eudaimonic components to wellbeing theory, Seligman created a more holistic perspective to optimal functioning. Seligman argued that flourishing could be the missing theoretical backbone to all of positive psychology, as the majority of positive psychology topics and applied programmes aim to enhance an individual's levels of flourishing. Researchers are currently devising a tool to measure flourishing as operationally defined by PERMA."

That's from the first chapter in which Kate walks us through various approaches to psychology and positive psychology—looking at how to create hedonic and eudaimonic happiness.

We've talked about Martin Seligman's own evolution from a more "hedonic" form of happiness to a more "eudaimonic" form of happiness as represented in the titles to his books *Authentic Happiness* and *Flourish*.

As he puts it in *Flourish*: "I used to think that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction, and that the goal of positive psychology was to increase life satisfaction. I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing. This theory, which I call well-being theory, is very different from authentic happiness theory, and the difference requires explanation."

That passage above is a pretty good explanation of his PERMA approach.

P.S. This wisdom from Seligman is worth keeping in mind as well: "In authentic happiness theory, the strengths and virtues—kindness, social intelligence, humor, courage, integrity, and the like (there are twenty-four of them)—are the supports for engagement. You go into flow when your highest strengths are deployed to meet the highest challenges that come your way. In well-being theory, these twenty-four strengths underpin all five elements, not

"One of the greatest findings of the past 20 years is that, through effort and experience, the brain can change."

~ Kate Hefferon

"There are severe repercussions to not getting enough sleep, including tiredness, vulnerability to depression, hallucinations and reduced productivity."

~ Kate Hefferon

just engagement: deploying your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships."

P.P.S. In Module I in our Mastery Series (called "Eudaimon-ology"), we talk about the fact if you brought Aristotle and Seligman into a room together and asked them what the ultimate purpose of life is—the greatest good or "summum bonum"—they'd give you the same answer. Aristotle would answer in Greek with *eudaimonia*. Seligman would answer with the English translation of that word: *Flourish*. :)

MEET YOUR (AUTONOMIC) NERVOUS SYSTEM

"The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is the reactive, integrated system that responds during periods of activation, such as feelings of fear, anticipation and excitement. Activation of the SNS induces physiological changes such as increased heart rate, secretion of adrenaline, sweating and pupil constriction. The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), on the other hand, 'is the system of rest, repair and enjoyment.' Balance between these two branches of the autonomic nervous system is essential for optimal functioning. The propensity for one of these systems to dominate over the other under certain circumstances, thereby producing appropriate physical responses, is a fundamental requirement for flourishing. If one systems tends to dominate (typically the SNS, thereby inhibiting appropriate activation of the PNS) then the balance between these two branches of the nervous system is compromised and optimal functioning is compromised. In order to assess this balance, psychophysicologists can study heart rate variability (HRV) (Segerstrom et al. 2011)."

Welcome to Chapter 2 on "Positive Psychophysiology: Physiological Systems and Their Role in Wellbeing."

Meet your autonomic nervous system.

It has two parts: The sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the sympathetic nervous system is basically the "ON!" switch. The parasympathetic nervous system is basically the "OFF" switch.

Guess what?

In our modern world, it's as if we're stuck in a constant, chronic, grinding "ON!!!" state.

But, only ALL DAY. EVERY DAY.

The result? What we like to call "Enervated Anxiety."

It's opposite? What we like to call "Energized Tranquility."

Helping you flip the ol' "OFF!" switch so we can properly oscillate our energy is a big part of all of our work together. Hence, the constant recommendations to turn off your incessant digital stimulation, get a good night of sleep, take real breaks during the day, etc., etc. etc.

P.S. Kate also brings the point home by telling us: "When we are scared or frightened, the brain immediately reacts, sending signals to the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis, which secretes the hormone cortisol from the adrenal cortex. This process ensures that increased levels of cortisol are passed through the entire system in less than 15 minutes. Cortisol is a steroid hormone and essential for many functions within the body system. Cortisol's primary function is to regulate all these processes around a 24-hour cycle. Basal levels of cortisol are controlled by the body clock (the suprachiasmatic nucleus located in the hypothalamus of the brain) and informed by light/dark cycles. For optimal functioning, levels should be low during sleep, produce a peak in the first 30-45 minutes after awakening and gradually decline over the day. However, cortisol is also the body's primary stress-response hormone."

"What is your sleep routine? Are you someone who likes to watch TV, talk on the phone, check emails before bed? One major interference with sleep is light, thus experts recommend turning off phones, tablets, laptops and anything with a screen 30-60 minutes before sleep as the light can trigger optic nerves, shutting off melatonin and stopping you getting into that needed REM sleep."

~ Kate Hefferon

"Cortisol is more than just a stress hormone; its primary role is to tell other body systems when it's night and day, so that they can function appropriately and in a synchronized fashion. Cortisol works in partnership with its night-time counterpart melatonin, a hormone secreted from the pineal gland in response to darkness. Cortisol and melatonin are counter-regulatory, thus if cortisol is high at night, it will inhibit melatonin secretion during sleep."

~ Kate Hefferon

The issue is that in our society today stress is ever present as threat is usually psychosocial in origin, and not physical as it was during evolution. For us humans, environments that induce novelty, lack of control, unpredictable events, anticipation, threats to self-esteem and physical illness can all increase the secretion of cortisol. The problem is that exposure to excessive stress can dysregulate the HPA axis such that its primary role as conductor of 24-hour cycles becomes compromised and when this happens, illness can result."

P.P.S. Reminds me of Alberto Villoldo's wisdom from [One Spirit Medicine](#), where he tells us that we evolved to deal with one lion (occasionally) roaring at us at a time. These days, it's as if the ENTIRE JUNGLE is CONSTANTLY roaring at us.

"From television and Internet alone, we're exposed to more stimuli in a week than our Paleolithic ancestors were exposed to in a lifetime. And we're continually running to keep up with the new information, to the point that we're chronically exhausted. I can't count how many times I have heard someone say, 'If it weren't for caffeine, I wouldn't get anything done!' Nature designed the brain to deal with only one lion roaring at us at a time, not the entire jungle turning against us. Now, however, our brain is too overtaxed to spend time sorting through all the data, much less looking at it with fresh eyes and deciding what is or is not a crisis, and what, if anything, needs to be done about it."

POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND LONGEVITY

"If we look at the relationship between positive emotions, happiness (subjective wellbeing) and longevity, the research shows that on average happier people live longer. As one of the most famous experiments in positive psychology, the following study remains legendary in demonstrating the potential effects of positive emotions on longevity. Nuns are the epitome of healthy living, and as they have very controlled lifestyles, this makes for ideal research participants. As part of a larger study, researchers at the University of Kentucky decided to retrospectively review and analyze the entry statements of newly appointed nuns (mean age 22 at time of entry). By 85, 97 per cent of the nuns whose entries contained the most positive wording and emotional content were still alive (vs. 52 per cent of the least positive). And similarly, at 93, 52 per cent of the cheerful entrants were still alive versus 18 per cent of the least cheerful. Thus, researchers suggest that being happy could actually add up to 10 years to your life. In order to extend the findings into other autobiographical works Sarah Pressman analyzed the autobiographies of 96 famous psychologists and found that those who used more positive emotive wording lived on average six years longer than those who used more negative emotive words."

That's from a chapter called "The Positive Psychology of Illness."

How fascinating is THAT study?

The quick recap: Nuns check in for service. They created "entry statements." Average age of 22. Decades later, researchers analyze those entries and coded them for positive content.

By age 85, an astonishing (!) 97% of the nuns whose entries contained the most positive wording and emotional content were still alive. NINETY- SEVEN PER CENT!! In contrast, only 52% of those with the least positive entries were still alive at age 85.

At 93 (!!!) 52% of the cheerful entrants were still alive whereas only 18% of the least cheerful were alive.

Positive emotions. They do a body good.

Makes me think of Martin Seligman, the father of [Learned Optimism](#), who puts it this way: "We estimate that being in the upper quartile of optimism seems to have a beneficial effect on cardiovascular risk roughly equivalent to not smoking two packs of cigarettes daily."

"Did you know? 99.9 per cent of DNA in all humans is identical. . . and 98 per cent of our DNA is shared with apes."

~ Kate Hefferon

In *The Myths of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky tells us: "Whether our optimism is big or little, many of us waver in our expectations of the future. Fortunately, numerous research-tested activities have been shown to boost positive thinking. The most robust strategy involves keeping a journal regularly for ten to twenty minutes per day, in which we write down our hopes and dreams for the future (e.g., 'In ten years, I will be married and a home owner'), visualize them coming true, and describe how we might get there and what that would feel like. This exercise—even when engaged in as briefly as two minutes—makes people happier and even healthier."

One more time: Optimism. It does a body good. ([Learn how to build it here.](#))

AND...

Important note: Right after this section, Kate shares some wisdom in a sub-section called "Caveat to optimism" in which she says: "As with most of the topics in positive psychology, we must take into consideration the alternative viewpoints. We need to be very open about the benefits and indeed the negatives when dealing with optimism in health. Optimism may cause individuals to persist at trying to control situations that are biologically uncontrollable, which may in turn lead to enhanced levels of distress, disappointment and depression. It may also cause us to forgo adoption of medical advice and treatment. Overall, the 'cult of optimism' and tyranny of positive thinking must not go unheeded. Kashdan and Rottenberg have argued that psychological flexibility is imperative in illness and health environments, enabling us to adapt to uncertain environments and outcomes and to better adjust to these."

Ah. The "cult of optimism" and the "tyranny of positive thinking" must not go unheeded—which is why Gabriele Oettingen's *Rethinking Positive Thinking* is one of my favorite books.

Science says, we MUST (!) embrace the constraints of reality and honestly appraise obstacles (**WOOP!**). It also says that unmitigated good isn't good. Instead, we'd be wise to counterbalance our levity with the appropriate gravity to create optimal **BUOYANCY!**

DIET AND WELLBEING

"Sugar has been a component within western diets since the sixteenth century. While 500 years ago, the average human would be lucky to come across sugar, it is estimated that today the average Westerner consumes 3 lb of sugar a week. Overall, our sugar consumption per year has risen from 5 lb per person, per year in 1700, to 152 lb per person in 2000. Recent research has found evidence that sugar, while not only bad for our waistlines, can have deleterious effects on our brain. Sugar has been found to shrink areas responsible for important functions such as memory and mood regulation, wearing on the hippocampus.

Westover and Marangell conducted a cross-national study (Korea, USA, France, Germany, Canada, New Zealand) on the relationship between sugar consumption and incidence of major depression. They found that 'there was a highly significant correlation between sugar consumption (cal/cap/day) and the annual rate of depression.' While this study has some major limitations, it highlights the importance of re-assessing the manufacturing of processed food and the role of sugar within our diets."

As you might've guessed, that's from a chapter called "Positive Nutrition."

Sugar. It does a mind and body bad.

One of the books Kate references many times in this section is *The Happiness Diet* by Tyler Graham and Drew Ramsey. They tell us: "A large study recently published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* found that eating processed foods, such as refined carbohydrates, sweets, and processed meats, increased the risk of depression by about 60%. Eating a whole-food diet, on the other hand, decreased the risk of the disease by about 26%."

"Did you know? Researchers propose that even positive or negative millisecond thoughts can change the brain structure for either the better or the worse."

~ Kate Hefferon

Unless you want to boost your likelihood of feeling depressed, get rid of what they call "carbage" and focus on REAL food!!!

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AS A POSITIVE PSYCH INTERVENTION

"Hefferton and Mutrie identified physical activity as a 'stellar' positive psychology intervention due to its ability to not only reduce risk and alleviate ill health, but to produce positive emotions, self-efficacy, mastery and overall flourishing. In terms of *reducing*, activity has been found to lower the risk of developing 'obesity, cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes (type 2), osteoporosis, certain sleep disorders, high blood pressure (e.g. blood pressure reduces for up to 12 hours post exercise), certain cancers (colon, breast, rectal, lung, prostate, endometrial) and even premature death.' Exercise can also be used to enhance immune system functioning, however, there appears to be a J-shape relationship, such that moderate, chronic levels of activity are better in the promotion of immune system functioning than chronic, high intensity.

In terms of *producing*, physical activity has been linked to both hedonic and eudaimonic experiences of wellbeing including: positive emotions, self-esteem, body image, cognitive functioning, psychological wellbeing, posttraumatic growth, flow, purpose in life and many, many more concepts."

Physical activity. It does a body VERY good.

Check out our Notes on *Spark* and *The Joy Movement* (and [Movement 101](#) and our whole collection of Notes on [Exercise + Movement](#)).

For now, how's YOUR movement/exercise?!

What's awesome? What needs a little work? And... What can you do to Optimize?

Here's to making the connection between Positive Psychology and the Body as we get our Zest on TODAY!

B

Brian Johnson,
Philosopher in Residence

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...

[The Happiness Diet](#)

[Mindset](#)

[The Joy of Movement](#)

[Spark](#)

[The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#)

[Mindsight](#)

[Self-Compassion](#)

[Why We Sleep](#)

[Love 2.0](#)

About the Author of "Positive Psychology and the Body"

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Kate Hefferon is a chartered psychologist, Senior Lecturer and the Head of the Posttraumatic growth research unit at the University of East London. Her interests lie within the areas of post-traumatic growth, physical activity, health and well-being. She is the author of numerous peer-reviewed papers and book chapters as well as lead author on popular Positive Psychology texts books.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.