

The Greater Good: “Components of well being”

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[edited extracts]

Purpose To psychologists, purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. The goals that foster a sense of purpose are ones that can potentially change the lives of other people... Our sense of purpose will change over the course of our lifetime. ... Like happiness, purpose is not a destination, but a journey and a practice. That means it’s accessible at any age, if we’re willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to be—and act to become that person. If we’re able to revisit and renew our sense of purpose as we navigate milestones and transitions, suggests this research, then we can look forward to more satisfying, meaningful lives.

Altruism Altruism is when we act to promote someone else’s welfare, even at a risk or cost to ourselves. Though some believe that humans are fundamentally self-interested, recent research suggests otherwise: Studies have found that people’s first impulse is to cooperate rather than compete; that toddlers spontaneously help people in need out of a genuine concern for their welfare; and that even non-human primates display altruism. ... [R]ecent neuroscience studies ... have shown that when people behave altruistically, their brains activate in regions that signal pleasure and reward, similar to when they eat chocolate (or have sex). This does not mean that humans are more altruistic than selfish; instead, evidence suggests we have deeply ingrained tendencies to act in either direction. Our challenge lies in finding ways to evoke the better angels of our nature.

Empathy ... Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Contemporary researchers often differentiate between two types of empathy: “Affective empathy” refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others’ emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another’s fear or anxiety. “Cognitive empathy,” sometimes called “perspective taking,” refers to our ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions. ... Having empathy doesn’t necessarily mean we’ll want to help someone in need, though it’s often a vital first step toward compassionate action.

Forgiveness Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness. ... [W]hen you forgive, you do not gloss over or deny the seriousness of an offense against you. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor does it mean condoning or excusing offenses. Though forgiveness can help repair a damaged relationship, it doesn’t obligate you to reconcile with the person who harmed you... Instead, forgiveness brings the forgiver peace of mind and frees him or her from corrosive anger. ... [E]xperts agree that it at least involves letting go of deeply held negative feelings. In that way, it empowers you to recognize the pain you suffered without letting that pain define you, enabling you to heal and move on with your life. While early research focused on forgiveness of others by individuals, new areas of research are starting to examine the benefits of group forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

Happiness ... [W]e often use the term to describe a range of positive emotions, including joy, pride, contentment, and gratitude... Many [researchers] use the term interchangeably with “subjective well-being,” which they measure by simply asking people to report how satisfied they feel with their own lives and how much positive and negative emotion they’re experiencing.

In her 2007 book *The How of Happiness*, positive psychology researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky elaborates, describing happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.” That definition ... captures the fleeting positive emotions that come with happiness, along with a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life—and suggests how these emotions and sense of meaning reinforce one another.

Social Connection When researchers refer to the concept of social connection, they mean the feeling that you belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that this is a core psychological need, essential to feeling satisfied with your life. Indeed, humans are a profoundly social species; our drive to connect with others is embedded in our biology and evolutionary history. It begins at birth, in our relationship with our caregiver—and the effects of this relationship seem to reverberate throughout our lives. When we’re cared for as children, we’re more likely to have healthy, secure attachments as we get older. What’s more, the pleasures of social life register in our brains much the same way physical pleasure does ... “To the extent that we can characterize evolution as designing our modern brains, this is what our brains were wired for: reaching out to and interacting with others,” writes neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman in his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. “These social adaptations are central to making us the most successful species on earth.”

Awe Awe is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world, like looking up at millions of stars in the night sky or marveling at the birth of a child. When people feel awe, they may use other words to describe the experience, such as wonder, amazement, surprise, or transcendence. The most common sources of awe are other people and nature, but awe can be elicited by many other experiences as well, such as music, art or architecture, religious experiences, the supernatural, or even one’s own accomplishments. We often think about awe in response to rare and intense events... [b]ut awe is also found in the everyday... Today, researchers are uncovering the benefits of awe for clear thinking, good health, and close relationships. Although the modern view of awe in Western society is overwhelmingly positive, awe is a complex emotion, one that can be intensely pleasurable or imbued with dread, depending on the context... More awful experiences of awe are tinged with fear and threat and may not have the same benefits as awesome experiences of wonder or amazement.

Diversity ... “diversity” refers to both an obvious fact of human life—namely, that there are many different kinds of people—and the idea that this diversity drives cultural, economic, and social vitality and innovation. ... [D]ecades of research suggest that intolerance hurts our well-being—and that individuals thrive when they are able to tolerate and embrace the diversity of the world. ... [R]acial diversity ... is just one dimension of the human reality. We also differ in gender, language, manners and culture, social roles, sexual orientation, education, skills, income, and countless other domains. In recent years, some advocates have even argued for recognition of “neurodiversity,” which refers to the range of differences in brain function. Research shows that differences do make it harder for people to connect and empathize with each other. Navigating differences can be tough... and yet people all over the world do it every day. It’s a prosocial skill, like empathy or forgiveness, that can be developed over a lifetime with intentionality, knowledge, and practice. In diverse societies, cultivating our ability to forge relationships across differences can actually increase our well-being.

Mindfulness Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens.

Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.

Though it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular practice of mindfulness has entered the American mainstream in recent years, in part through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he launched at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since that time, thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness in general and MBSR in particular, inspiring countless programs to adapt the MBSR model for schools, prisons, hospitals, veterans centers, and beyond.

Gratitude Robert Emmons, perhaps the world’s leading scientific expert on gratitude, argues that gratitude has two key components. ... “First,” he writes, “it’s an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we’ve received.” In the second part of gratitude ... “we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... We acknowledge that other people—or even higher powers, if you’re of a spiritual mindset—gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.” Emmons and other researchers see the social dimension as being especially important to gratitude. ... [G]ratitude encourages us not only to appreciate gifts but to repay them (or pay them forward). ... This is how gratitude may have evolved: by strengthening bonds between members of the same species who mutually helped each other out.

Compassion Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. ... While cynics may dismiss compassion as touchy-feely or irrational, scientists have started to map the biological basis of compassion, suggesting its deep evolutionary purpose. This research has shown that when we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the “bonding hormone” oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving, and feelings of pleasure light up, which often results in our wanting to approach and care for other people.

Bridging Differences ... Differences don’t necessarily need to divide people, but we do have a tendency, rooted in evolution, to split the world into “us” and “them”—and to treat members of our own “ingroup” with kindness while behaving badly toward outside groups. These tendencies can be especially pronounced at times when we feel stressed or threatened, anxious about our own security or survival. ... By understanding the social and psychological roots of polarization, we can promote solutions that help bring people together by what they share in common, not what sets them apart.