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Happiness 101

By D.T. MAX
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One Tuesday last fall I sat in on a positive-psychology class called the Science of Well-Being — essentially a class in how to make yourself happier — at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. George Mason is a challenge for positive psychologists because it is one of the 15 unhappiest campuses in America, at least per The Princeton Review. Many students are married and already working and commute to school. It's a place where you go to move your career forward, not to find yourself.

Illustration by Ian Adelman; Photograph by Stephen Lewis

The class was taught by Todd Kashdan, a 32-year-old psychology professor whose area of research is "curiosity and well-being." Kashdan bobbed around the room or sat, legs dangling, on his desk beneath a big PowerPoint slide that said "The Scientific Pursuit of Happiness" as he took the students, a few older than he, through the various building blocks of positive psychology: optimism, gratitude, mindfulness, hope, spirituality. Though the syllabus promised to "approach every topic in this class as scientists" and the assigned readings were academic, the classroom discussion was Oprah-ish. The students seemed intrigued by the research Kashdan presented mostly in relation to their own lives.

The focus of Kashdan's class that day was the distinction between feeling good, which according to positive psychologists only creates a hunger for more pleasure — they call this syndrome the hedonic treadmill — and doing good, which can lead to lasting happiness. The students had been asked first to do something that gave them pleasure and then to perform an act of selfless kindness. They approached the first part of the assignment eagerly. One student recounted having sex with her boyfriend 30 feet

underwater while scuba diving. Another said he “went to Coastal Flats and got hammered.” A third attended a Nascar race in North Carolina, smoked, drank and had sex. Some also watched favorite TV shows; others chatted with friends.

When it came time to talk about the second part of the assignment, the students were excited, too. The Nascar attendee, who was afraid of needles, gave blood. Another collected clothes from family members and donated them to a shelter for battered women. The boy who had gotten hammered bought a homeless person a 12-pack of “Natty Ice” at a 7-Eleven, wondering if it was the right thing to do. A fourth gave her waiter at Denny’s a $50 tip. At times, Kashdan, who ran the class in the nonjudgmental manner of a ’70s rap-session leader — he used the word “cool” a lot — would compliment them on their behavior and pull out a moral. In this case, as one student wrote in a summary she submitted to Kashdan, comparing “a day at the spa covered in really expensive French” stuff and “a day of community improvement covered in horse” manure, the smile on the community organizer’s face “beat out the smile on the masseur’s face any day.” That is, she had learned that doing good is good for you.

Though Kashdan brought up published studies that optimistic people live longer and that certain regions of the brains of positive people show more activity (“Have a very active left prefrontal lobe day,” he joked at one point), in class they didn’t spend a lot of time on clinical research. Absent were the rats with electrodes, data charts, syndromes and neuroses. The main experimental corpus seemed to be the students themselves, with Kashdan assuming the role of therapist, asserting that pleasure isn’t enough. True happiness comes with meaning, he said, and the students agreed.

I sat in on the course a few more times during the semester, and when Kashdan was done with pleasure versus selfless giving, he took up gratitude and forgiveness, close relationships and love, then spirituality and well-being and finally “meaning and purpose in life.” “I never use the word morality,” Kashdan said. Rather his goal was to show that “there are ways of living that research shows lead to better outcomes.”

More than 200 colleges and graduate schools in the United States offer classes like the one at George Mason. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Barbara Fredrickson passes out notebooks with clouds on a powdery blue cover for each student. At the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, students pass out chocolates and handwritten notes to school custodians and secretaries. The introductory positive-psychology class at Harvard attracted 855 students last spring, making it the most popular class at the school. “I teach my class on two levels,” says Tal Ben-Shahar, the instructor. “It’s like a regular academic course. The second level is where they ask the question, How can I apply this to my life?” True, the course is known as a gut, but it is also significant that 23 percent of the students who commented on it in the undergraduate evaluation guide said that it had improved their lives. “It wasn’t until my senior year that I started thinking maybe law school wasn’t for me,” wrote one graduate, Elizabeth Peterson, in her biographical précis for the masters program in applied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She had decided to take the class on a

whim. “I was pretty much hooked from there. I realized that what I loved the most was talking to people about their problems.”

Positive psychology brings the same attention to positive emotions (happiness, pleasure, well-being) that clinical psychology has always paid to the negative ones (depression, anger, resentment). Psychoanalysis once promised to turn acute human misery into ordinary suffering; positive psychology promises to take mild human pleasure and turn it into a profound state of well-being. “Under certain circumstances, people — they’re not desperate or in misery — they start to wonder what’s the best thing life can offer,” says Martin Seligman, one of the field’s founders, who heads the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Thus positive psychology is not only about maximizing personal happiness but also about embracing civic engagement and spiritual connectedness, hope and charity. “Aristotle taught us virtue isn’t virtue unless you choose it,” Seligman says.

Sitting in Kashdan’s classroom, you might wonder whether psychology had abandoned its proper territory or found a new one, and if a new one, whether it owed more to science or to Sunday school. Perhaps that was because the class reflected the discipline’s own tension between simplicity and complexity, “good tough science,” as Seligman calls it, and airier talk of values. With its emphasis on the self in the world, positive psychology is already an ethics seminar. Which is fitting, given that it has its roots in a Socratic dialogue of sorts. Seligman likes to tell the story of how his daughter Nikki, when she was 5, accused him of being a grouch. She reminded him that he had criticized her for being whiny and that she had worked hard to stop whining. If she could stop being whiny, he could stop being grumpy. He realized, he says, that she was right, that he was “a pessimist and depressive and someone of high critical intelligence” and that he needed to change. Seligman, who at 54 had just been elected president of the American Psychological Association and was renowned for his hard science — most of his research had been in depression — decided to put his considerable talents into finding out “what made life worth living.”

Though positive psychology is only beginning to be used as an educational tool in classrooms and secondary schools, in the nine years since Seligman’s epiphany it has taken a firm hold in academia. The field’s steering committee includes a number of psychologists and psychiatrists who have done highly regarded clinical work: Ed Diener of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, whose specialty is “subjective well-being”; Christopher Peterson at the University of Michigan, who has made a study of admired character traits around the world; George Vaillant, who has long headed a Harvard project tracking success and failure among the college’s graduates; and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, who has spent years studying “optimal functioning,” or the state of being intensely absorbed in a task, what he calls “flow.” Seligman’s book, “Authentic Happiness,” published in 2002, lays out the field’s fundamental principles and has been translated into nearly 20 languages. Last year’s annual positive-psychology summit in Washington attracted hundreds of academics working in the field or interested in doing so, as well as a children’s programming director, who was working to imbue her cartoons with positive psychology messages, and

the Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman, who studies the relationship between economics and perceptions of happiness. In addition there were a lot of "life coaches," independent consultants who hire themselves out to help clients achieve their life goals.

Despite its seemingly American emphasis on self-reliance and self-expression, positive psychology is also proving popular in England and the British Commonwealth. Nick Baylis, a psychologist at Cambridge University, helped found the Well-being Institute there last year and is consulting with Wellington College, a private boarding and day school, on how to apply positive psychology to its curriculum. The Geelong Grammar School, a prestigious boarding and day school in Australia, is planning to shape its curriculum around the precepts of positive psychology in 2008, and the government of Scotland has also been in touch with Seligman to see whether the discipline might help its citizens. "Our old nation has been renewed through our new Parliament, and if we can embrace this new science of positive psychology, we have the opportunity to create a new Enlightenment," one government official announced.

Positive psychology is popular with educators because if happiness is something that can be learned, it can be taught. And because being happier seems to have positive long-term effects not just on well-being but also on health and life span. In one often-cited study, researchers at the University of Kentucky analyzed the essays novices born before 1917 wrote on entering the School Sisters of Notre Dame and correlated them to the nuns' life spans. They found that 9 out of 10 of the most positive 25 percent of the nuns were still alive at 85, while only one-third of the least positive 25 percent were. Overall, their study showed positive emotions correlated to a 10-year increase in life span, greater even than the differential between smokers and nonsmokers. Another study, by Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at U.C. Berkeley, correlated the smiles that the female graduates of Mills College in Oakland, Calif., displayed in two mid-20th-century yearbooks with life satisfaction and found that the bigger the smile, the more satisfying the marriage and the greater their well-being. Inspired by studies like these, positive psychologists have developed "interventions," or practices, designed to maximize positive emotions and have tested them on thousands of people. One such intervention is to think every night about the good things that happened to you that day. Another is to make sure in any given day that you either work or play in a new area that draws on what positive psychologists call your "signature strengths" to create a sense of well-being. Gratitude visits — looking up someone who has taught or mentored you and thanking him or her — are important in positive psychology, too; this last intervention, studies show, gives the biggest increase in happiness of all.

In the first few weeks of the semester, Kashdan asked his students to keep a record of their thoughts and experiences. He then gave them "experiential assignments" to make them happier, working their emotions the way an athletic coach might work their muscles. One week they were to report on attempts to go into "flow." "Sex, drugs and chocolate are all highly useful avenues for people to attain flow states," Kashdan said. To enter flow, students were asked to do something that they were good at, be it writing, playing basketball or talking to their friends. According to positive psychology, your

signature strengths play a special role in building your confidence and thus bringing you happiness. Seligman's Web site, authentichappiness.org, has a 240-question test to help determine whether your gift is for creativity, bravery, love or something else. In class, one student recounted going into flow during a fistfight; another told of being at her father's grave. A third talked about being with a friend watching TV and suddenly having a profound conversation. "We had so much love for each other," the student remembered in class, "and suddenly we were crying."

Several studies undertaken by positive psychologists have suggested that meditation enhances well-being, so another class assignment was to meditate for 15 minutes three days in a row, attend a free yoga class (Kashdan's wife, a yoga instructor, arranged this with her studio), be mindful twice a day and report on the results. The mindfulness exercises — excercises in heightened awareness and openness to experience — are central to positive psychology and made a big impression, according to Kashdan: "Some said they just noticed for the first time how many types of trees there are on the way to campus."

The following week, students were asked to watch "Before Sunrise" and "Before Sunset," movies starring Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy. In the former, the two fall in love through intense conversation during one long evening in Vienna and then part. The sequel catches up with them nine years later. The students had to write about the first time they fell in love. The next assignment was to pay a gratitude visit or write a gratitude letter. After that, the students were to exercise their curiosity by doing something "novel, complex, and uncertain . . . epistemic, sensory and social" — that is, they were to use their signature strengths to try something new. One student tasted a pomegranate for the first time; another went to a book reading by Carly Fiorina, the former C.E.O. of Hewlett-Packard. Finally, the students were asked to select one memory they would be willing to spend an eternity with, an intervention inspired by the Japanese movie "After Life."

Kashdan's enthusiasm — he is a passionate teacher — ate up class time, and so the students never got to other parts of the syllabus, among them optimism exercises and exercises that would make them better teammates. On the last week, students handed in their final papers, describing how they had tried to enhance their lives toward, in Kashdan's words, "a specific, personally meaningful positive outcome" during the semester. There was no final exam; the students' grades were based in large part on the paper and class participation.

In an era when psychology is seeking to become a hard science of fM.R.I.'s and evidence-based therapies, when, as Seligman says, "if it doesn't plug into the wall, it's not science," positive psychology can seem like a retro endeavor with the appeal of a cure that fits on a recipe card. While this may make it particularly adaptable for use in the classroom, critics are often most disturbed by what they perceive as its prescriptive nature. "There is way too little evidence of stable, long-term benefits — and lack of harm — to justify large-scale incorporation of positive psychology programs into schools," Julie Norem, chairwoman of the psychology department at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, said in an e-mail message. "It pays scant attention to individual

differences." For all that the open, 1960s-style classroom has fallen out of favor, it allowed a child to find his or her own way. In the words of the founder of the famous Summerhill school in England, a child should be free "to live his own life — not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows best." Children were treated as unique, which you might think would result in a more capable, independent adults. By comparison, positive psychology can seem as if it is laying out a road and asking the adherent to follow. "If I could wave my magic wand, there would be no positive psychology — there would be positive psychologists," says Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, whose own work in the science of affective forecasting suggests that what we think will make us happy rarely does, or at least not for long. "I guess I just wish it didn't look so much like a religion."

Indeed, the sectlike feel of positive psychology can be hard to shake off when watching classes like Kashdan's or even when reviewing the record of the field's beginnings. When Seligman was first trying to establish the discipline, he and his colleagues invited 25 young psychologists to the Yucatán to discuss the positive side of life. They snorkeled and talked philosophy and then swam some more. They summarized their work and listened to others' reactions. One evening, the group devoted itself to poetry and song. Seligman recited Ezra Pound's "Immorality"; a colleague named Sonja Lyubomirsky read some of Prospero's speeches from "The Tempest." Seligman's daughter Lara — Seligman educates his five younger children in part by traveling with them — recited a Delmore Schwartz poem, "I Am Cherry Alive."

The talk under the palapas was not just about happiness but also about engagement. Participants contrasted the "hedonic treadmill" with "the meaningful life." To find the qualities that gave life purpose, the team examined Western religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Bushido as well as the mores of 70 nations. Over time, positive psychologists, led by Christopher Peterson, settled on 24 virtues — or character strengths, as they prefer to call them — including courage, modesty, spirituality and leadership. "The agenda comes from the world," Seligman told me. "These are universals we're after."

The search for what unites humans in virtue was an ambitious effort to integrate psychology with those fields that have long sat alongside it: ethics, religion, philosophy. Before the retreat in Mexico, Seligman met with one of his former professors, the Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick. His book "The Examined Life," written late in his career, looked at how questions of value might be related to everyday experience. It was Nozick who suggested a "taxonomy of character," by which he meant, as Seligman put it, a list of "those abiding moral traits that everyone values." Lyubomirsky remembers that many of the young scientists were uncomfortable doing so. "There was a lot of debate about it," she said. "We were trained as hard scientists." Seligman wasn't so sure himself that he wanted virtue to be part of positive psychology either: he was wary of science becoming prescriptive, but Csikszentmihalyi was enthusiastic, Seligman recalled, and in the end Seligman agreed.

Two criticisms as troubling as the problem of positive psychology's religiosity are 1) that it is not new — psychology always cared about happiness and 2) that the publicity about the field has gotten ahead of the science, which may be no good anyway. True, there have been attempts to marry psychology to ethics, to enlist it in the service of decoding what it means to be fully human, throughout its history. In the 1950s and '60s, for instance, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, among others, established humanistic psychology to focus on what gave meaning to life, looking at the very subjects positive psychologists now take as their own. But where Maslow and Rogers relied primarily on qualitative research for their theories, Seligman and his colleagues hope to establish positive psychology — and thus the nature of happiness itself — on firmer scientific ground. The idea that whatever science there is may not yet be first-class troubles Seligman, too. "I have the same worry they do. That's what I do at 4 in the morning," he says.

When Todd Kashdan asked his students at George Mason to tell him which they liked better, experiencing pleasure or doing good, he cautioned, "Don't give me the Miss Universe answers." But when I met the participants in the nation's only master's program in applied positive psychology, at the University of Pennsylvania, I felt the spirit of Gandhi was hovering over us. One woman wrote in her application essay, "My strange and energetic career has included activism for peace and justice; teaching safety and self-defense skills to 10,000 students." She was also a founder of two nonprofit organizations and taught "Swedish massage and stress-reduction skills." Another sold her Mercedes and was using her savings to pay for the course. A third left banking to find the meaning in life.

There were, in all, about 30 students in the master's class at Penn on the Saturday in September I attended. MAPP, as the program is known, is organized around intensive days of class time, online work and conference calls. Seligman, who runs the program, says that he likes to invite others to lecture so he can learn what's going on in the field, and so that day Barbara Fredrickson of the University of North Carolina was presenting her "broaden and build" theory, while Seligman sat at a little table nodding and taking notes. "It's a neat design that allows humans and other organisms to grow and become more resourceful versions of themselves," she told the class.

The first part of her theory stems from a series of experiments that she published in 2005 in which five groups of 20 people each watched short film clips. The clips were meant to elicit negative, positive or neutral emotions. The participants were given a sheet ruled with 20 blank lines and asked to write down what they were feeling. Those who had just had positive emotions induced were able to provide more ideas about what their responses would be than those with either negative or neutral ones.

For Fredrickson, this was evidence that positive emotions lead to broader thinking. The participants were also tested for what is called global-local-visual processing. When asked to look at a design on a computer of three squares arranged in a triangle, those who had watched happy-making film clips tended to see the broader pattern — i.e. the triangular pattern — while the angrier subjects saw only the squares. (The neutral ones saw some of each.)

This was only the first part of Fredrickson's theory. But it could be that thinking broadly has no effect on happiness or well-being — it might even be a deficit. To show that broadening led to building, she then described an experiment she had undertaken on a group of employees at Compuware, a progressive information-technology firm in Detroit. With the company's assistance, she followed two groups — one that was taught a loving-kindness meditation (a meditation in which the practitioner repeats phrases that cultivate a caring attitude toward all life) and one that was wait-listed for the meditation. After eight weeks, she compared the two groups' responses to questions about well-being. Those who meditated reported higher mental resources than before; their mindfulness, freedom from illness and connectedness to others all increased. But interestingly, their sense of well-being hadn't, at least not immediately. It dropped at first. "It's like you started a gym membership and then you realize you have to go," Fredrickson theorized. But once their sense of well-being increased, they retained their edge over those who only wanted to meditate even after the meditation program was over.

All this interested Seligman's students, but what Fredrickson says always catches their attention most is a study Fredrickson did with a Brazilian workplace psychologist named Marcia Losada, who observed annual strategic-review meetings of employees through one-way mirrors. The data she collected showed that the most effective teams — the criteria were customer satisfaction, profitability and internal review — were the ones who had more positive meetings. There was even a number that corresponded to the minimum amount of positive to negative feedback necessary to encourage successful functioning. That number, Fredrickson told the class, was three positive comments to one negative comment. "The ratio lady," one student called her.

With its emphasis on universals and practical applications, positive psychology fits these divided times: it preaches values without linking them to a particular value system and embraces spirituality without making you go to church. When positive psychology was introduced into the language-arts program at Strath Haven High School outside Philadelphia in 2003, the left-leaning parents welcomed it because the values were internationally accepted; all but the most conservative ones were reassured that there were values at all.

Seligman recently held a meeting with the leaders from the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, the Episcopal Academy in Merion, Pa., the Riverdale Country School in the Bronx and the KIPP program, a national network of public charter schools, at which the educational leaders discussed introducing positive psychology into their schools. They are all looking to restore "wholeness" to the teenage years, to replace the supposed sense of certainty that the '60s removed and that returned in the '80s as a national political objective but that teachers are now too bogged down in the fundamentals to teach and adults, working longer and longer hours, are simply too busy to shore up at home. A follow-up meeting is scheduled for June, this time with a dozen schools; one item on the agenda is to add personal strengths and virtues to admissions criteria. (Educational Testing Service is exploring a test that students wouldn't be able to fake.) "What this is about is building character," Seligman says.

Currently, the biggest project on positive psychology's drawing board is at the Geelong School. "As a school, we would like to know how to make all students more resilient, how to turn depressing thoughts into positive ones," Charles Scudamore, the head of the project at what Seligman calls "Australia's Eton," wrote in an e-mail message. That there is a need for a curriculum to promote engagement and happiness among teenagers is obvious, and Geelong is the first school to give positive psychologists a chance to show that they can really change teaching. According to Scudamore, "When we adopt a positive-psychology approach, it will be seen and practiced in all that we do." The Australians "have had a lot of depression in kids, that's half the reason they want it," said Ed Diener, the professor of psychology at the University of Illinois.

What the psychologists have in mind for Geelong is very much the sort of intervention Kashdan was teaching at George Mason. The draft proposal by which they secured Geelong's support included gratitude exercises, exercises in the "three pathways of happiness," "the four ways to promote savoring" and "the five ways to overcome" adversity. To teach savoring, the teacher would explain mindfulness and show the students how to taste their food more thoroughly and then instruct them to try "savoring with a friend." The students would have journals to record their emotions, their "grudges and gratitudes." They would mentor a younger student too. Scudamore says he hopes that even the teachers will feel "their well-being" and their teaching skills enhanced. Seligman and his family are scheduled to make a six-month visit. An American-trained positive-psychology instructor will be in residence to provide training and real-time feedback.

This endeavor outstrips the ongoing Strath Haven experiment. The effort there, financed by a $2.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, is limited to the ninth-grade language-arts program. At the school last year, the positive psychologists interwove their teachings with the literature classes. The idea was to buffer the lessons from bleak books like "Lord of the Flies" and "Romeo and Juliet" with some reassuring thoughts — or at least a more positive framework for understanding human behavior than the classics offer. Thus, according to Mark Linkins, now coordinator of the Swarthmore school district's curriculum, who helped teach the classes, the animalistic and murderous Jack in "Lord of the Flies" shows "what happens when someone is lacking in signature strengths." And when reading "The Odyssey," students were asked: "What are the signature strengths that Odysseus lived and breathed? What are the things he might have improved on to make things go better?" It is too soon to know the effect of these stratagems on the school's students, since part of the protocol agreed to with the Department of Education requires that they be followed for four years. The results will be compared with a control group that received the standard curriculum. (For his part, Seligman home-schools the children he had with his second wife. He says he likes to balance the standard high-school fare he gives the older ones with "books in which notions of virtue and nobility do not end in humiliation and death," like Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" and Arthur C. Clarke's "Childhood's End.")

Not all positive psychologists are sure educational interventions are a good idea. Lyubormisky, for instance, turned down a similar request from the Compton school

system in California. “I did not think the science was ready to be applied in that big a way,” she told me. Linkins acknowledges that happiness may come at the cost of a full understanding of literature and human complexity. But, he said, “it’s preferable to be happy than not, even if that means the potential for creative output is diminished.”

The question is, Can positive psychology actually fulfill its promise of making people happier? If positive emotions widen the sphere of what it is to be human, as positive psychology asserts, then positive psychology, at least as it is taught in the classroom, can seem to narrow it. If you are not optimistic, fake it. If you do not have friends, make some. I wondered what sort of student positive psychology would create. Was he or she more likely to be a future Nobel Peace Prize winner or J. P. (Gus) Godsey, the Virginia Beach stockbroker, dad and Craftsmen-tool enthusiast whom USA Weekend Magazine declared in 2003 “the happiest person in America” (“You are a blessed, happy person, Gus,” Martin Seligman commented in the article. “You’ve created many of your blessings on your own.”)

When I e-mailed various graduates of Penn’s first master’s class, I found that they continued to take positive psychology’s emphasis on the engaged life very seriously. One woman was using positive psychology to teach first-year medical students better patient-communication skills, citing Fredrickson’s optimal flourishing ratio as a benchmark. John Yeager, who has a doctorate in education and runs the Center for Character Excellence at the Culver Academies, a boarding school in Indiana, wants to “help teachers ‘broaden and build’ character strengths and positive emotions in children, young adults and themselves.”

Of course the master’s students were a self-selected group, willing to pay almost $40,000 for a degree with no clear career track. The students at George Mason, though they, too, had chosen the course, were perhaps more relevant to the question of what positive psychology can really teach. There I found a mixed response. They seemed remarkably sure that they had undergone an important experience but less sure what the nature of that experience had been. Had they saved the world or themselves? I spoke to Brandon Rasmussen, an easygoing student who seemed to me like a surfer dude washed up on some New Age shore. The class had energized him, and he had been a vigorous participant — earning an A. His final paper was about learning to really be with his friends, going into flow with them, something he had long had difficulty doing. “My personal satisfaction is the personal measure for me, and my personal satisfaction is great,” he explained. “I hate to say this, but really in the scheme of things we’re not going to change the war in Iraq.” Then he paused and thought how that sounded. “We can only fix the world one person at a time.”

D.T. Max is a frequent contributor to the magazine. His most recent book is “The Family That Couldn’t Sleep,” a scientific and cultural history of fatal familial insomnia, mad cow and other prior diseases.