

# In a nutshell

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## Flourish

By Martin Seligman (William Heinemann, 2011)

*Flourish* is the latest of Martin Seligman's numerous books on topics relating to psychological health, happiness and well-being. Seligman is a renowned American psychologist, formerly President of the American Psychological Society.

His other books include: *Learned Optimism: How to Change your Mind to Change your Life* ; *Authentic Happiness: Using the new Positive Psychology to Realise Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment*; *The Optimistic Child: A Revolutionary Approach to Raising Resilient Children*; and, *What You Can Change and What You Can't; Complete Guide to Successful Self-Improvement*.

Seligman emphasises, right at the start of *Flourish*, that he is not talking about Big Yellow Smiley Face happiness. In fact, he expresses some frustration that the process of marketing his books has yielded an unfortunate miscommunication about his core messages. Underlying the entire book is the theme of recognising and accepting that humans are complex, life is challenging and that a large proportion of us has genetic disposition or tendency towards depression and anxiety and other 'negative' states. Seligman's professional evolution has led him to distance himself from the pursuit of happiness as it is often understood, to champion instead the development of capacity for well-being; to flourish. And according to Seligman's research-based conclusions, the experience of the happiness that makes us smile, laugh and have a sense of *feeling* happy (hedonic well-being), is just one of the five elements that has been found to be present in individuals, families, organisations and even nations which can be said to be flourishing (eudaimonic well-being). So while the presence of hedonic happiness is acknowledged by Seligman as being important, on its own it is not the goal and does not yield the individual with a sense that life is good, necessarily. In no sense does Seligman promote the 'think positive' message. The aim is not to find some glib cure-all, at one level the message is don't expect to wake up singing and skip down the hallway each morning - accept that emotional struggles are part of your life - and here are some practical and effective ways to manage the struggles and to live a life that seems worth living.

Seligman presents the research evidence: the sense that life is good is common to those who score highly in each of the following categories of experience, to which he has applied the acronym PERMA.

1. Positive emotions
2. Engagement
3. (Positive) Relationships
4. Meaning
5. Achievement for its own sake

Each of these elements is important for any person, however there are a couple in particular that seem particularly relevant to a writer - engagement and achievement for its own sake.

Under the headline of engagement we find the concept of *flow* or being in *the zone*- described in a great many research projects and books by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have worked together for years. Csikszentmihalyi found that flow occurs when we are engaged in an activity which is challenging and yet achievable, has clear goals, provides some sort of immediate feedback and is absorbing. When we are in a state of flow we feel at one with what we are doing, we lose track of time, we feel in control, lose any sense of self-consciousness and find our activity intrinsically rewarding. So for a writer it makes sense that when you are not able, or do not create opportunities to engage with writing, to experience flow, you may experience frustration, disillusion or even despair.

The "A" in PERMA, achievement, is achievement for its own sake. It is not necessarily linked at all to external measures of success (although it may be) - achievement that is significant in producing a sense of well-being is achievement that has intrinsic value to the individual. It seems to me that there is good reason to focus on this one - particularly for writers who feel compromised by commercial constraints, who need to write in a particular style or genre in order for their work to be marketable. In essence, even if a writer feels compromised to some extent, there is scope here to develop a personal benchmark and to write to a particular standard or style within the constraints that are in place. So, for example, if a writer feels that it's necessary to write in a genre s/he generally regards as lowbrow, the writer may work out ways to inject elements of their preferred style or literary merit into the lowbrow work. There may be subtle literary references, paradoxes or subtext that satisfy the writers personal literary values while simultaneously bringing in the income.

Seligman is tough and feisty. His earlier work on Learned Helplessness set the tone for much of his life's work - in essence that psychological well-being is closely linked to sense of capacity; an individual's own genuine sense that their choices and actions influence the outcomes in their life. Seligman found optimism and resourceful thinking styles more broadly to be critical influences on an individual's experience of life - and that a person could learn and practise optimism. In *Flourish* Seligman explains that as President of the American Psychological Society he argued for the "tectonic shift" away from the psychology of "misery and uprooting the disabling conditions of life" towards a focus on what it is that makes life worth living - a strengths based approach to psychological practice. Rather than a focus on fixing what was damaged, psychology would now explore the effects of strengthening the existing resources of an individual and developing new resources.

Seligman's Learned Helplessness findings prompted him to explore the following question. If Learned Helplessness is linked to poor achievement and ill-health, would a sense of capacity in an individual then be linked to emotional and physical well-being? As part of this exploration, Seligman and colleagues discovered that there was a proportion of the population who, no matter how inescapable their misfortune, did not become helpless. The research found that the 'immunising' factor was the person's thinking style - the way that they interpreted the 'toxic' events. Those "*who believe that the causes of the setbacks in their lives are temporary, changeable and local*" do not become helpless in the face of setbacks or misfortune. They think the negative events will go away quickly, that they can do something about the way they respond to the event and that the event is

relatively isolated. This is optimistic thinking. People who have a pessimistic thinking style will tend to think, when encountering a setback, it's going to last forever, it's going to undermine everything and there's nothing I can do about it. So, for example, a writer with this style of thinking, having had a day of disappointing writing, may conclude - "*My writing today is hopeless, I will never get this book finished, I can't even call myself a writer. I am no good.*" Another writer, faced with the same poor outcome from a day's work may conclude, "*My writing today really lacks energy. I wonder what I could do differently tomorrow to make it more engaging? Oh well, I can't write well every day. I'm sure I'll get back on track once I've had a break. I'm going to look back over some of that earlier work that I was happy with and see if that can get me going well again.*"

Seligman presents overviews of research exploring links between thinking style and health and concludes that evidence demonstrates a positive relationship. Seligman and his colleagues found pessimistic thinking style linked to higher rates of depression than for optimists, lower achievement in the workplace, lower academic and sporting achievements and rockier relationships. Research also examined well-being effects on the incidence of cardiovascular disease, infectious illness, cancer and all-cause mortality - with demonstrated relative health for those ranking higher on well-being scores.

Passionate about the possible implications for individuals and society of developing a large scale shift in psychological approach, Seligman and colleagues engaged in an experiment on the grandest of scales. They introduced the elements of positive psychology in to the US military at every level and across the nation, then tested the outcomes on these tens of thousands of participants. It is fascinating to read Seligman's accounts of the discussions with the military top brass. Faced with untenable levels of psychological damage and dysfunction among soldiers, not to mention extraordinarily high and growing compensation claims for ill health, these military leaders grabbed even the preliminary findings of Seligman's work and, without waiting for the usual processes of clinical review insisted that the programs be put in place immediately.

The resilience training delivered to the US military involved teaching soldiers new ways of thinking about concerns and stressful events in their lives, simple, effective methods of improving relationships and taught them to focus on and develop their personal strengths. The results are fascinating and encouraging. Included in the resilience training is a new approach to trauma which shifts the emphasis from post-traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth.

*Flourish* also explores the elements of high performance and examines factors that differentiate top high achievers from others who otherwise appear to have similar potential to achieve. Seligman explains that grit or tenacity is the secret ingredient. So, in a group of similarly intelligent, skilled and high achieving individuals the difference between the achievements of very highest achievers and the rest is what has now been thoroughly studied and analysed - *grit*, an extreme trait of self-discipline. Once again, for writers, here is the message - even if you are talented and passionate about your writing, you may expect writing to be hard, at least sometimes. Self-discipline and grit are what will give you the opportunity to take your writing to another level of excellence. I am emphasising this because so often I will hear about writers who really suffer emotionally because of the difficulties they face as they prepare to write, as they do write and as they review and edit what they have written. There is a very significant difference between the expectation they have of what writing will or should be like, and how they actually experience the processes of writing. And in this

gap between expectation and reality is pain. To work instead with the expectation that this pain is exactly what is commonly involved in writing may not reduce the difficulty itself but may encourage the writer to lean into the difficulty and push themselves through the difficulty using the knowledge that it is self-discipline and grit that may make the critical difference to success. The writer may come to be somewhat encouraged by the pain - to know that pain and difficulty may be the indicators that the writer is challenging her/himself to find unique creativity in expression.

Seligman makes it clear that he believes there is scope for a focus on and practice of positive psychology to transform the experience of life whether for individuals, organisations, or nations. To promote the spread of knowledge about and engagement in positive psychological practice, Seligman and his colleagues at Penn State University have made available an impressive array of self-tests, tools and surveys available freely to the international public. To use the material, you will need to register and log in to the university portal below. By taking part in any of the surveys on their *Authentic Happiness* site, you will be taking part, anonymously, in a massive international research project. If you are interested here is the link <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx> .

In conclusion, Martin Seligman's *Flourish* is a fascinating presentation of the results of many large scale research projects conducted during the past decade that have examined elements of well-being and have found new psychological interventions for many common psychological conditions. As well as outlining Seligman's philosophical stance in relation to mental health policy, *Flourish* contains many simple, practical, effective and immediately useable evidence based practices that work well as therapeutic tools as well as enhancing well-being for any individual.