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## Head's Message: Authentic Happiness

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For the last three weeks, I've written about issues related to stress and unhappiness in girls and women. In each column, I've tried to identify ways in which we can combat these conditions, and particularly help our daughters/students to do so. This week, I'm going to talk about happiness again, this time focusing on some other research that suggests that we, even those of us who fall on the pessimistic end of the personality spectrum, can make ourselves happier.

In the last decade or so, a field called Positive Psychology has developed. Although a number of psychologists have contributed to this movement, the leader is a professor Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman's has aimed to encourage the field of psychology to understand not just how to treat suffering and mental illness, but also to learn what makes people happy and to find ways to make them happier. His research has identified the "strengths and virtues that enable human thriving." In addition, his own and others' research has demonstrated that people indeed can engage in practices that make them happier, including identifying specific activities that enhance happiness.

Specifically, Seligman outlines six virtues and twenty-four strengths that when embraced help ensure happiness. These are:

### **Wisdom and knowledge**

Creativity  
Curiosity  
Open-mindedness  
Love of learning  
Perspective

### **Courage**

Authenticity  
Bravery  
Persistence  
Zest

### **Humanity**

Kindness  
Love  
Social Intelligence

### **Justice**

Fairness  
Leadership  
Teamwork

### **Temperance**

Forgiveness  
Modesty  
Prudence  
Self-regulation

### **Transcendence**

Appreciation of beauty and excellence  
Gratitude  
Hope  
Humor  
Religiousness

These strengths and virtues hold true across cultures around the world, throughout the United States, and across generations in the U.S. It's also important to note that while all character

strengths “contribute to fulfillment, strengths ‘of the heart’ – zest, gratitude, hope, and love” have a greater impact on “life satisfaction” than the other strengths.

Seligman and other psychologists’ work have identified specific activities that improve happiness in both the short and long term. According to Seligman’s research, three effective “interventions” are

- The gratitude visit
- Three good things in life
- Using signature strengths in a new way

The “**gratitude visit**” involves writing a letter to someone to whom you are grateful, thanking the person for all s/he has done for you. Sending the letter alone is efficacious, but significantly better is visiting the person and reading the letter to him/her. This activity has the highest short-term effect (though its long term affect is less pronounced than the other two interventions).

For “**three good things in life**,” each day you record three positive things that happened with an explanation of their cause.

“**Using signature strengths in a new way**” is somewhat more complex. By taking an inventory Seligman has created (which you can find on his website at [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)), you identify your top five signature strengths from the list above. Then each day, you are supposed to use one of your signature strengths in a new way.

Both the “three good things in life” and “using signature strengths in a new way,” even if only done for a week, exert positive effects on happiness for six months or more. If practiced for more than a week, not surprisingly, the effects last even longer and are more significant.

Both the “three good things in life” and the “using strengths in a new way” resonate with Marcus Buckingham’s findings. In the “three good things in life” activity you focus on what positive aspects of your life, which is similar in some ways to marking your strong moments. The “using signature strengths in a new way” equates to accepting what you learn about yourself from the strong moments and striving for imbalance. In both cases, you are building on your natural strengths, inclinations, and proclivities.

The effectiveness of positive psychology bears importance for us as adults, but it also has value for our girls. As I am fond of observing, adolescent girls love to complain. It’s an activity they perfect. Some complaining is no more than healthy venting. However, when they start to feed off each other or if we as adults indulge their complaining by giving their whining more credence than it deserves, they can spiral into unhealthy negativity. Instead of enabling this negativity, we should be encouraging our girls to be more positive (not about everything – certainly some of what they complain about is completely legitimate and we also don’t want to squelch their youthful idealism). The research of some of Seligman’s colleagues demonstrates

that helping others, whether just a friend or family member or through some more formal activity like community service, makes people feel good. Likewise, expressing gratitude (“the gratitude visit”) positively affects your outlook as does identifying positive events or aspects of one’s life (“three good things”). Having our girls consciously thank others periodically establishes a commendable lifelong habit that will also make them more fulfilled. Identifying those “three good things” every day will surely mitigate the complaining, shifting momentum from negative to positive. And just as identifying the strong moments and striving for imbalance will help girls develop strategies for a satisfying life, so will consciously thinking about their character strengths and building on them.

People who are happy, are healthier, more resilient, less stressed, and more successful and connected with others. So pursuing happiness is not selfish and hedonistic, but rather part of being healthy and productive. In many ways, working to keep yourself emotionally fit is as important as keeping yourself physically fit with similar benefits.

To learn more about Seligman’s work, go to his website at [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org). There you can find links to a paper entitled “Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions” by Martin Seligman, Tracy Steen, Nansook Park, and Christopher Peterson originally published in *American Psychologist* in July-August 2005 as well as a January 2005 *Time Magazine* article entitled “The New Science of Happiness” by Claudia Wallis.