



How to sustain happiness, satisfaction, growth, superior functioning & resiliency.

Flourishing contrasts with languishing (a disorder intermediate along the mental health continuum) experienced by those who describe their lives as hollow or empty.

Based on newer work that measures mental health in positive terms rather than pathology that measures mental health as the absence of mental illness, studies suggest that fewer than 20% of adults flourish.

It has been proposed that a key predictor of whether an individual will flourish or languish is the ratio of positive to negative affect. (Affect is an emotion or mood associated with an idea or action). An example of positive affect is feeling grateful and upbeat, expressing appreciation and liking. An example of negative affect is feeling contemptuous and irritable and expressing disdain or disliking.

This ratio predicts not only subjective well-being but also, when high, characterizes human flourishing. In fact it has been shown to be high among marriages that last and that both partners find satisfying, and low among marriages moving toward dissolution.

For example, John Gottman's research ([Why Marriages Succeed or Fail...](#)) suggests that what separates contented couples from those whose marriage is miserable is a healthy balance of the positive and negative feelings and actions that the couple have for each other.

Gottman found that a marriage was likely to be stable if there was a ratio of 5 to 1 - if there were five times as much positive feeling and interaction between the couple as there was negative. In fact, a marriage with a ratio of 5 to 1 was stable regardless of whether it is characterized by validation, conflict avoidance or volatility. For example, a volatile couple may well yell and scream a lot, but if they spent five times as much of their marriage being loving and making up their relationship was not likely to dissolve.

A number of well-controlled studies conducted over time show a clear relationship between frequent positive affect and how long people live. In a study of over 2200 individuals aged 65 or older (controlled for age, income, education, weight, smoking, drinking, and disease), researchers found that happy people were half as likely to die, or become disabled when tracked for a two year period.

Another study at Yale University investigated perceptions of aging and survival rates over a twenty-two year period among over 650 individuals aged 50 to 94. The researchers found that those who developed positive attitudes about aging lived more than seven years longer than those who had negative attitudes. In fact, this study showed positive attitudes had a greater effect than lowered blood pressure or cholesterol (estimated to increase lifespan by four years) or exercise, weight loss, or non-smoking status (that add one to three years).

A third study provides evidence that women who are prone to expressing positive emotions (as evidenced by yearbook facial expressions) experience fewer psychological and physical difficulties, have better relations with others and generally feel more satisfied with their lives.

The women in the pictures featuring the greatest positive emotional expressions (eg a broad smile) viewed themselves high on personality traits associated with good interpersonal and cognitive skills. They were also viewed more favorably by others. Women who expressed more positive emotion in their yearbook pictures became more organized, mentally focused and achievement oriented and had more favorable attitudes about marriage and personal well-being, **even up to thirty years later**.



Lastly, another study presents a very positive portrait of emotion in old age by showing that the tendency to have a positive outlook on life continues into their golden years. This longitudinal study spanned over two decades and involved four generations of families. The study showed that positive affect remained fairly stable across time, with only a small decrease for the oldest participants in the study. However, older participants who were more extraverted were less likely to show a decline in positive affect. Also, negative affect decreased with age for all generations.

As can be seen by the above, even though positive affect is transient, the resources developed accumulate and can produce future health and well-being or flourishing. Also just as positive thinking and actions can trigger pleasant feeling states, so can pleasant feeling states trigger positive thinking and actions.

Empirical Evidence Shows Benefits of Positive Affect:

- increases happiness
- increases immune function
- widens the scope of attention
- predicts psychological growth
- reduces inflammatory responses to stress
- speeds recovery from the cardiovascular after-effects of negative affect
- predicts resilience to adversity
- broadens behavioural repertoires
- increases intuition and creativity
- predicts longevity

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