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## **Overview of Dr. Martin Seligman's Career in Psychology**

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Updated: June 19, 2025

Following is a brief summary of Dr. Martin Seligman's lifetime work in the field of psychology. For more details, see his [curriculum vitae](#) and his book [The Hope Circuit](#).

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**First, a brief bio:** Dr. Martin Seligman is the Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania and Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology. He is also Director of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program (MAPP).

He was President of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1998, during which one of his presidential initiatives was the promotion of Positive Psychology as a field of scientific study. This initiative spurred a dramatic increase in empirical research on human well-being, and as a result there is now a deeper and broader base of science-based knowledge of human well-being. This knowledge has enabled the creation of actionable interventions that demonstrably increase well-being, including interventions in positive education and positive psychotherapy. Since 2000 his main mission has been the promotion of the field of Positive Psychology. His primary aim as APA President was to bridge science and practice so both might flourish, a goal that has been paramount throughout his life as a psychologist.

He is a leading authority in the fields of Positive Psychology, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, optimism and pessimism. He is also a recognized expert on interventions that prevent depression and build well-being. He has written more than 350 scholarly publications and 30 books.

Among his books are *Tomorrowmind* (Simon & Schuster, 2022), *The Hope Circuit* (Public Affairs, 2018), *Flourish* (Free Press, 2011), *Authentic Happiness* (Free Press, 2002), *Learned Optimism* (Knopf, 1991), *The Optimistic Child* (Houghton Mifflin, 1995), *Helplessness* (Freeman, 1975, 1993) and *Abnormal Psychology* (Norton, 1982, 1988, 1995, with David Rosenhan). His book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A handbook and classification*, was co-authored with Christopher Peterson (Oxford, 2004). His books have been translated into more than 50 languages and have been best sellers in the U.S. and abroad. These books are research-based syntheses, based on empirical foundations.

Dr. Seligman's influence is widely recognized in Psychology. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the American Psychological Association (APA) Award for Lifetime Contributions to Psychology (2017), the Tang Award for Lifetime Achievement in Psychology (2014), the APA Award for Distinguished Scientific Contribution (2006), the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Society for Research in Psychopathology (1997), and the Distinguished Contribution Award for Basic Research with Applied Relevance from the American Association of Applied and Preventive Psychology (1992). He also received two awards from the American Psychological Society - the James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award for Applications of Psychological Knowledge (1995) and the William James Fellow Award for Contributions to Basic Science (1991).

He received his A.B. from Princeton University, Summa Cum Laude (Philosophy), 1964; Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania (Psychology), 1967; Ph.D., Honoris causa, Uppsala University, Sweden, 1989; Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris causa, Massachusetts College of Professional Psychology, 1997; Ph.D., Honoris causa, Complutense University, Spain, 2003; and Ph.D., Honoris causa, University of East London, 2006.

Dr. Seligman's research has been made possible by generous grants from numerous organizations, including Atlantic Philanthropies, John Templeton Foundation, Templeton Religion Trust, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Hovey Foundation, Mayerson Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), U.S. Department of Education, among others.

[Click here for a more complete bio of Dr. Seligman.](#)

## Summary of Lifetime Activities

Since the 1960s, Professor Martin Seligman has made innovative and transformational contributions to the science and practice of psychology, education, public health and well-being, and public policy. His vision, scholarship, and leadership have shaped the thinking and teaching of a generation of scholars, educators, and policymakers, in ways that has promoted the understanding and advancement of human flourishing for many people around the world.

He has had three guiding principles throughout his career:

1. Claims by psychology should be firmly grounded in the scientific method, in well-designed empirical research.
2. The ultimate value of his scientific research is solving real-world problems and improving the quality of human life.
3. Bridge science and practice. Bring evidence-based solutions into people's lives. Practical applications can inform better science-based solutions from lessons learned and best practices.

To place Seligman's work in a broader historical, he describes how the science of psychology has evolved in three important ways since the 1960s toward a more comprehensive understanding of human nature that can help us build a better future:

1. **The Development of Cognitive Psychology since the 1960s:** Our thoughts shape our emotions, behavior and who we are. People are capable of agency, free will, and choice. We can relieve suffering by learning how to overcome negative thinking biases that cause suffering and undercut thriving.
2. **The Development of Evolutionary Psychology since the 1980s:** Human evolution during the Pleistocene Epoch (ice ages) shapes our genes and behavior to this day. A focus on threat detection had survival advantages in a world full of daily danger and food scarcity, which drives negative thinking biases to this day.
3. **The Development of Positive Psychology since the 1990s:** Relieving suffering is not the same as thriving. People want to thrive, not just survive. We can learn positive thinking habits and actionable skills to increase thriving. Central to thriving is human agency. Central to human agency is imagining possible futures, evaluating, planning,

and then choosing from among them. People can learn optimism and hope in a better future, which can produce thriving.

Seligman believes that human agency has increased over the millennia and is one of the engines of human progress and innovation. He believes that agency is a psychological superpower, responsible for progress in technology, economic prosperity, art, medicine, peace, democracy, and longer life expectancy. He asserts that agency is the belief that I can influence the world and achieve my goals. In the absence of agency, there is stagnation.

He believes the world is now in labor, giving birth to an Age of Agency populated by agentic individuals who will flourish. If the challenges of our time can be overcome – war, pandemic, climate catastrophe – this could be an age of unprecedented progress and flourishing.

Following is a brief overview of Seligman's activities in psychology from the 1960s to the present.

## **The Science of Psychology**

### **Learned Helplessness**

Seligman believes that helplessness in humans has been widespread and the source of much suffering. Could we discover what causes it? Could we learn how to reverse it and prevent it? This is one of the reasons he became a psychologist.

Seligman's research in the 1960s, along with Steven Maier and Bruce Overmier, led to a discovery they called learned helplessness. When exposed to objective uncontrollability, this research showed that people can recognize when there is no relationship between their efforts and bad events. They learn they are helpless. If we learn we have no control over a bad event, we give up.

Experiences of objective helplessness today, however, can sometimes become an over-generalized expectation of helplessness tomorrow and beyond. If we expect that nothing we do makes a difference, we stop trying. Experiences of helplessness today can produce hopelessness for the future.

Their research also discovered that not everyone gives up from uncontrollable experiences. Also, controllable experiences can protect against the learning of helplessness. Mastery experiences can inoculate against hopelessness.

He next investigated why some people give up and some do not, which led him to develop the attributional style theory of depression with colleagues. This theory asserts that individuals with pessimistic interpretations of events in their life are at greater risk for depression. Research has shown that optimistic interpretations can reduce the risk of depression as well as enhance motivation, mental health, physical health, life expectancy, and achievement in school, work, and sports.

Seligman's research further showed that optimism can be measured and it can be learned, producing many benefits. Seligman and his colleagues developed interventions that build optimism and well-being, and prevent depression, described below. This research on optimism was one of Seligman's paths to Positive Psychology.

**Historical note on the development of cognitive psychology:** Learned helplessness research played a role in the “cognitive revolution”. Behaviorism was the dominant model for understanding behavior from the 1920s to the 1950s, asserting that behavior is shaped primarily by environmental contingencies, by external reinforcement, and punishment. Behaviorists believed that the focus should be on measuring observable behaviors, not internal mental states like thoughts and emotions. Behaviorism, however, could not explain complex human behaviors such as language, problem-solving, and creative thinking.

Starting in the 1960s, a wave of researchers challenged behaviorist views, referred to as the “cognitive revolution”, demonstrating that the ways people think and learn play a critical role in behavior, leading to the field of cognitive psychology. Learned helplessness research provided a clear, real-world example of how beliefs, expectations, and perceptions of control can shape behavior.

This research demonstrated that learned helplessness was one of the models for human depression, which influenced new treatments for depression, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which focuses on changing maladaptive beliefs and attributions about control to alleviate feelings of helplessness and prevent hopelessness.

**Evolutionary Basis for Negative Bias.** Another path to Positive Psychology for Seligman was the large research literature that negative thoughts have a greater impact on human motivation and behavior than positive thoughts. And he asked himself: Why did I believe that my work was about pessimism and not optimism, about failure and not success, about depression and not happiness? Why do we tend to focus more on our weaknesses than strengths, on sin than virtue? Why is our politics more about the ignoble side of candidates than the noble? Why does journalism have a bad-news bias?

Part of the answer for this negative bias lies in evolutionary psychology. The geological period that shaped most of human evolution and our genes was the Pleistocene Epoch, also called the ice ages. A focus on threat detection has major survival advantages in a world that is full of danger, food scarcity, and loss. We are bad-weather animals on the alert for threats. The default mode of the mind is to swish around until it discovers a potential problem that might explode into real trouble, then make plans to avoid it.

If our environment is no longer as full of life-threatening daily dangers as the ice ages, however, our default bad-weather bias is not necessarily adaptive and can be self-defeating when taken too far. Training our brain to consider more optimistic perspectives (in addition to pessimistic) sometimes needs to be learned and cultivated with practice. For many, pessimism comes easy, optimism takes deliberate effort. This is not about eliminating pessimism. Pessimism still has its place depending on the environment you live in. Dr. Seligman calls this flexible optimism.

## Positive Psychology

**The Rationale.** In the 1990s, Seligman became increasingly interested in the flip side of human deficits and psychopathology – human strengths and thriving. Elected President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, he made one of his presidential initiatives the promotion of Positive Psychology – the scientific study of the factors that enable people to thrive. Seligman made the case that psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had largely focused on relieving human suffering. Since World War II, incredible progress has been made in the understanding and treatment of mental health disorders, with many successes.

Seligman believed, however, that psychology had little to say about human flourishing. Relieving suffering is not the same as flourishing. Removing the disabling conditions is not the same as building the enabling conditions that make life most worth living.

Seligman asserts that human strengths and excellence are just as authentic as distress and disorder, that people want to thrive, not just survive. Suffering and well-being are both part of the human condition and psychologists have a responsibility to understand both in order to create a more complete picture of human nature. He believes that science, the arts, medicine, the news media, politics, and religion can all play a role in building flourishing.

Since 2000, Seligman's main mission has been the promotion of the field of Positive Psychology. One of his primary goals has been to produce large-scale public health benefits by building strengths and well-being through Positive Psychology interventions. Scientific studies have demonstrated that Positive Psychology programs can significantly improve well-being as well as reduce and prevent depression and anxiety.

Seligman does not claim that Positive Psychology is a new field but has many distinguished ancestors. Since at least the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the *good life* has been the subject of philosophical inquiry and many psychologists have been working on Positive Psychology topics for decades. The contribution of contemporary Positive Psychology has been to:

- Make the explicit argument that human flourishing deserves its own empirically based field of study.
- Bring together diverse and isolated lines of theory and research under one scientific umbrella and call this field Positive Psychology.
- Promote collaboration and the cross-fertilization of ideas across different fields of science.
- Develop a broader conceptual understanding of well-being.
- Bring this field to the attention of various foundations and funding agencies, to raise money for research.
- Firmly ground all assertions in the scientific method.

**Early Foundations.** In the early years of Positive Psychology, Seligman cultivated a generation of scientists in the field by:

- Raising millions in grant funds to financially support the research of dozens of scientists.
- Organizing conferences and summer institutes to build research collaborations and mentoring by senior scientists.
- Creating popular websites where people can learn about Positive Psychology science and practice.

To help him plan and implement the goals and initiatives in the early years, Seligman assembled the Positive Psychology Steering Committee, a group of leading scholars that included Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener, Ray Fowler, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Robert Nozick, Christopher Peterson, and George Vaillant. His longtime colleague, [Mr. Peter Schulman](#), played a central role in the operational and financial management of these activities.

**Measuring Human Strengths.** With his longtime colleague Christopher Peterson, Seligman authored *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* in 2004 to lay the foundation for research, measurement, and interventions on strengths. They identified six core virtues that consistently emerged across different cultures over thousands of years of history – justice, wisdom, courage, humanity, temperance, and transcendence – which suggests a non-arbitrary classification.

This groundbreaking book examines twenty-four strengths in terms of their meaning, explanation, measurement, causes, correlates, consequences, and development across the life span, as well as strategies for their deliberate cultivation. A strength was included if it is:

- (1) Widely endorsed across cultures and history.
- (2) Valued in its own right and not just as a means to end.
- (3) Contributes to thriving.

Examples of strengths are the capacity to love, perseverance, compassion, creativity, curiosity, teamwork, leadership, fairness, hope, and integrity.

This comprehensive and systematic classification has informed psychometrics, research, education, and practical interventions. Peterson and Seligman developed the VIA Survey of Character Strengths, a self-report questionnaire that measures and ranks the 24 strengths for personal development. This survey is widely used in schools, therapy, and by researchers. Millions of people around the world have completed this survey, in several languages.

**PERMA Theory of Well-Being.** Seligman's theory of well-being (PERMA) has shaped research, practice, and interventions, including the teaching curricula of many schools. This theory states that there are five building blocks that enable well-being – **P**ositive Emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**ccomplishment (PERMA) – and there are strategies to increase each.

There are many different routes to a flourishing life. People will derive well-being from each of these five building blocks to varying degrees. A good life for one person is not necessarily a good life for another. The PERMA theory is descriptive, not prescriptive. In

other words, this theory does not tell people what choices to make or what to value, but research on the factors that enable well-being can help people make more informed choices to live a more fulfilling life that is aligned with their values and interests.

**Research and Applications.** Positive Psychology has resonated widely around the world and taken great strides since 1998. Seligman has played a key role in many initiatives, including:

- Interventions that increase well-being have been developed and validated in well-designed studies – large scale, longitudinal, randomized, controlled studies.
- Millions of people have participated in these interventions, including in education (colleges and secondary schools), health care, the U.S. military, U.S. law enforcement, professional sports, corporations, and the general public.
- Funding for the science of well-being and Positive Psychology has increased manifold, now amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars.
- Research has increased exponentially, with thousands of peer-reviewed articles published on well-being every year.
- University courses in well-being have grown from near-zero to thousands and are now among the most popular courses in higher education.
- The scientific foundations for new scientific fields has been built, including:
  - Positive Health (<https://positivehealthresearch.org/>): Research has found that there are health assets and protective factors – such as optimism, well-being, self-regulation, having purpose in life – that improve health and prevent disease.
  - Positive Psychotherapy: With his colleague Dr. Tayyab Rashid, Positive Psychotherapy has produced books and manuals with guidance for therapists.
  - Positive Neuroscience (<http://posneuroscience.org/>)
- Measuring and building well-being is now on the political agenda of a number of states and cities and even a few major nations.
- Seligman spearheaded the World Well-Being Project with his colleague Dr. Lyle Ungar, a research project that measures well-being of large populations around the world in real-time using big data, social media, and machine language analysis (<http://www.wwbp.org/>).
- The International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) has been founded with thousands of scientists and practitioners as members, as well as national associations



in many countries.

- The International Positive Education Network (IPEN) has been founded to promote Positive Education, transform education practice, and reform government policy.

## **The Practice of Positive Psychology and Public Health**

Since 2007, Professor Seligman has been leading the large-scale application of what has been learned from empirical studies to build well-being in the real world, through relatively brief interventions. Millions of people have participated in these programs.

### **Positive Education**

The flagship application is Positive Education, which has been incorporated in the curricula of hundreds of primary and secondary schools and colleges around the world – in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, China, Singapore, South Korea, Mexico, Peru, Bhutan, United Arab Emirates, India, among others.

Many thousands of schoolteachers have attended programs developed by Professor Seligman and his colleagues Dr. Karen Reivich, Dr. Jane Gillham, and Dr. Alejandro Adler. These teachers have gone on to teach Positive Education curricula to hundreds of thousands of students around the world. The Positive Education programs Seligman, Reivich, Gillham, Adler, and colleagues created for middle schools and colleges have been shown in scientific studies to prevent depression and anxiety, as well as increase well-being and optimism.

The primary mission of schools has been instilling knowledge of numeracy and literacy, but they have historically not included the teaching of skills that build well-being, skills that will enable them to be good and kind, resilient and flourish throughout the challenges of life. Schools are the primary place where the values of a culture get instilled in young people. Positive schools and positive teachers are a critical fulcrum for producing more well-being in a society.

Positive Education has been part of the United Nations Global Happiness Council and is being incorporated into education policies in countries across the globe. In the 2019 Global Happiness Policy Report from the Global Happiness Council, published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Professor Seligman and Dr. Alejandro Adler present a “how to” checklist, as well as four case studies of schools and school systems around the world that have built Positive Education, to provide further resources to school and policy leaders on how to implement and spread Positive Education at scale. <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/posedseligmanadler2019b.pdf>

The first case study comes from Geelong Grammar School’s endeavors to build whole-school Positive Education in Australia. The second also comes from Australia and shows how The University of Adelaide is embedding Positive Education into teacher training on a statewide basis. The third is from Monterrey, Mexico and tells the story of Universidad Tecmilenio, the world’s first entire Positive Education University, which serves more than

50,000 students spread over 29 campuses. The fourth is the experiences of Dr. Adler in convincing ministers of education of entire nations to adopt and evaluate Positive Education in countries such as Bhutan, Mexico, and Peru. The Ministry of Education in Bhutan has adopted a Gross National Happiness curriculum for all of its schools that was developed and tested in collaboration with Professor Seligman's Positive Psychology Center.

The commitment to delivering Positive Education curricula in a culturally appropriate way, engaging all pertinent stakeholders in an educational ecosystem, and measuring well-being over the long-term distinguishes Positive Education as a scalable, scientific endeavor that will continue to spread and produce long-lasting impacts on education and society.

Seligman, Reivich, Schulman, and their Penn colleagues collaborated with the U.S. Army for many years to customize and deliver their Positive Psychology program for Soldiers using a train-the-trainer model. Many thousands of U.S. Army soldiers have attended these train-the-trainer programs and these soldiers have gone on to teach the skills to more than a million soldiers. This train-the-trainer model is scalable and sustainable on a large-scale – each person who attends the program can teach the principles and skills to hundreds if not thousands of people over time.

## **Education and the Dissemination of Knowledge**

Seligman has bridged the gaps between science, application, and the public through a variety of initiatives:

**Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program:** In 2005, Seligman and his Positive Psychology Center colleague, Dr. James Pawelski, created the first Master of Applied Positive Psychology program (MAPP) to teach the theory, research, and application of Positive Psychology, at the University of Pennsylvania. This popular program is thriving and has served as a model for many educational programs in Positive Psychology around the world.

<https://www.lps.upenn.edu/degree-programs/mapp/>

**Online Applied Positive Psychology Certificate Program.** In 2019, Seligman helped to create this online program designed to meet the needs of working adults and students. This popular program is thriving.

<https://lpsonline.sas.upenn.edu/academics/certificates/applied-positive-psychology/>

**Online Positive Psychology Courses for the General Public.** In a collaboration between Penn and the Coursera platform, Seligman led the development of a five-course specialization called Foundations of Positive Psychology. More than 130,000 people have attended these highly-rated courses to learn about the principles, skills, and applications of Positive Psychology.

<https://www.coursera.org/specializations/positivepsychology/>

**Articles in Science Journals, Books, and Presentations.** Seligman has published more than 350 articles in science journals. He has written more than 30 books, including

bestselling self-development books. His books have been translated into more than 50 languages. He has delivered hundreds of presentations around the world to many thousands of people, to introduce people to Positive Psychology. His TED talk has been viewed by more than 7.5 million people. [https://www.ted.com/speakers/martin\\_seligman](https://www.ted.com/speakers/martin_seligman)

**Websites:** Seligman and Schulman created two popular websites visited by many millions around the world to learn about Positive Psychology. There are numerous free resources for scholars, researchers, teachers, practitioners, and the general public. The two websites are the Positive Psychology Center website (<https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>) and Authentic Happiness (<https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/>).

**Professional Associations.** Seligman played a lead role in creating two professional associations, the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) and the International Positive Education Network (IPEN), with thousands of members.

- IPPA's three-part mission is to (1) promote the science and practice of Positive Psychology to enable individuals and institutions to thrive, (2) to facilitate collaboration among researchers, teachers, students, and practitioners of Positive Psychology around the world and across academic disciplines, and (3) to share the findings of Positive Psychology with a broad audience. There are also Positive Psychology national associations in many countries.  
<http://www.ippanetwork.org/>
- IPEN's mission is to bring together teachers, parents, academics, students, schools, colleges, universities, charities, companies and governments to promote a new approach to education: academics + character + well-being. The goals are to support collaboration, change education practice and reform government policy.

## Public Policy

The science and measurement of well-being have important implications for public policy. Countries have relied largely on economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as an indicator of national progress. There is growing consensus, however, that economic measures alone do not fully reflect a nation's progress and well-being.

Measures of well-being can supplement economic indicators to more accurately represent how a nation is doing and to better inform public policy.

For example, research indicates that people need supportive, positive relationships and social belonging to sustain well-being. Economic indicators, however, do not measure the quality of social relationships and therefore omit this key contribution to well-being. The fact that strong social relationships are essential for well-being has many policy implications. For instance, school curricula can explicitly educate students about the importance of long-lasting social relationships, as well as teach the social skills that nurture supportive and intimate relationships.

**We measure what we value and we value what we measure.** Public policy follows from what we measure. If a society focuses largely on measuring economic output, people are likely to focus more attention and energy on economic output, sometimes to the detriment of other values. If a society measures well-being, people will focus more of their attention on well-being.

Economic indicators are out of sync with national well-being in developed nations. For example, since the 1950s, GDP in the U.S. has tripled per capita but life satisfaction has been virtually unchanged. There is a similar pattern in other nations. Over this same period, depression rates have increased 10-fold and rates of anxiety have also risen.

Assessing the well-being of individuals with mental health disorders could lead to government and business policies that yield benefits to the individual, the organization, and the nation. Psychological disorders cause widespread suffering. Many disorders can be effectively treated yet a large proportion of people with disorders go untreated. Failure to treat these individuals can be costly in terms of well-being and lost productivity. More rigorous and systematic national well-being surveys could help shape the provision of mental health resources.

The science of well-being is theoretically, metrically, and empirically advanced enough to supplement economic indicators with well-being indicators. National well-being measures are well underway. There have been several international initiatives to measure national well-being, including the OECD's Better Life Index (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the United Nation's World Happiness Report. Drs. Seligman, Diener, and Adler have played key roles in these initiatives.

<https://worldhappiness.report/>

## **Conclusion**

Seligman's vision, scholarship, and leadership have shaped the thinking and teaching of a generation of scientists, educators, and policymakers, in ways that are increasing the understanding and advancement of human flourishing. His commitment to broad intellectual questions of practical importance coupled with a rigorous respect for the scientific method has led to a tectonic shift in the science and practice of psychology, education, public health and well-being, and public policy around the world.