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HAPPINESS MANIFESTED

how positive emotions can reinforce healthy lifestyle changes

By Brian Davis

Feeling good might not only be beneficial to the human psyche, but could also play an important role in our physical health. Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, the principal investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology lab at UNC-Chapel Hill, studies how our thoughts and emotions influence our bodies biologically. Her most recent research identified the health benefits associated with psychological well-being.[1]

The consensus amongst psychologists is that feeling good translates to benefits in our physical health that transcend simply feeling well psychologically (e.g. reduced stress and depression). However, the reasoning behind this correlation is poorly understood.[1] Through her research, Dr. Fredrickson was able to identify specific forms of happiness that predict how one's genes are expressed within white blood cells. She found that our cells can differentiate the source of happiness, and they respond accordingly. "Our immune system, by being attuned to our emotional experience, readies us for the most likely biological threat," she said.[2]

Dr. Fredrickson and her colleagues contrasted two forms of happiness: feelings of purpose, connection and meaning, known as eudaimonic well-being, and feelings of pleasure and satisfaction, known as hedonic well-being. When we are highly stressed, our cells increase the expression of genes involved in inflammation and decrease the expression of genes involved in antibody synthesis in a process known as conserved transcriptional response to adversity (CRTA).[1] Dr. Fredrickson and her colleagues found that the cells of people who predominantly experience a sense of eudaimonic well-being showed a reduction in CTRA, resulting in reduced inflammation and an increase in the production of antibodies. Conversely, the cells of people who predominantly experience a sense of hedonic well-being showed an increase of CTRA, resulting in increased inflammation and decreased antibody production.[1] These findings support the idea that the cells in our body can detect the source of our happiness and change CRTA gene expression as a result.

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson

Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are not mutually exclusive. It is difficult to imagine a scenario where you can experience purpose without pleasure, or pleasure completely devoid of meaning. Dr. Fredrickson's message after analyzing the data is not that one should not pursue pleasurable expe-

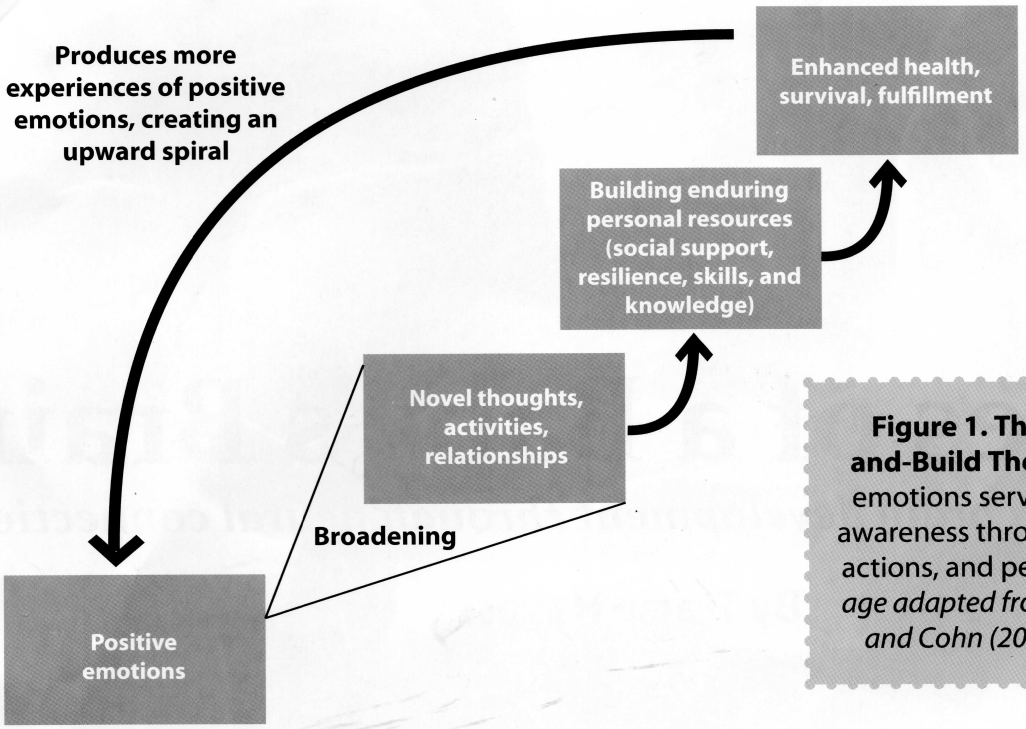

Figure 1. The Broaden-and-Build Theory: Positive emotions serve to broaden awareness through thoughts, actions, and perceptions. *Image adapted from Fredrickson and Cohn (2008, Fig. 48.1).*

rience. She believes that pleasurable experiences do eventually lead to eudaimonic well-being. "The data suggest that the 'feel good' part on its own isn't enough to drive health. It appears that health benefits emerge when feeling good leads to doing good, or otherwise experiencing meaning and purpose." The problem occurs when people are only focused on their sensual pleasures in ways that are devoid of meaning and connectedness. Everyone has the potential to experience eudaimonic well-being. However, the positive emotion system can also easily lead to addiction.[2]

Many experiences in our culture are artificially created for us to produce high amounts of pleasure, such as the thrill of gambling or consuming, and do not allow for us to reach deeper meaning. Dr. Fredrickson explains, "Our culture has dissociated the most pleasurable part of experience and packaged just that." People frequently find themselves trapped in habits where they become dependent on things that make them feel good physically, says Fredrickson. This results in people feeling good for a short period of time due to satisfying their sensual pleasures, but a void remains in the area of their lives that are associated with a sense of purpose and belonging. Dr. Fredrickson believes that we can "use our knowledge of positive emotion to build nonconscious habits to do the right thing rather than being hijacked to do the wrong thing."[2]

The core of Dr. Fredrickson's research focuses on how positive emotions affect us. Her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Figure 1) states that positive emotions expand one's awareness through thoughts, actions and perceptions, which leads to the eventual discovery of new resources such as knowledge, alliances and skills.[3] "The bones of the broaden-and-build theory are that what you feel today is going to influence who you are next season."[2] This idea that cultivating positive emotions leads to compounding effects that improves our life has led Dr. Fredrickson to theorize that experiencing positive emotions can contribute to an upward spiral in lifestyle changes.

The upward spiral theory of lifestyle change guides new research in the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory. As a result of their previous findings in broaden-and-build research, the lab has turned towards investigating whether and how positive emotions alter a person's bodily systems and nonconscious motives in ways that ultimately reinforce healthy lifestyle change. Members of the lab believe that positive emotions can both lead people to new positive health behaviors and also raise their overall psychological propensity for a suite of wellness behaviors.[3] Dr. Fredrickson is adamant about the importance of understanding emotions in order to better grasp the effects they have on our overall health. "Without understanding emotions, [the mind and body] are on separate realms. Understanding emotions helps us bridge mind and body."[2]

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> -Dr. Barbara Fredrickson

References

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