

Assumptions of the positive approach

Assumption 1: Acknowledgement of free will

Most other approaches take a determinist view, suggesting that our behaviour is controlled by factors outside of our control. **This disease model removes responsibility from individuals.**

The positive approach acknowledges the part that these factors can play in behaviour, but suggests a much greater role for free will. **It believes that humans have the power to choose how they react to a situation and what they do in the future.** It suggests that humans have the free will to develop their signature strengths and have control over their own well-being. This means that happiness is accessible to all of us, as we are in control of our lives and have the capacity to make choices.

There is evidence that a belief in free will and personal control is associated with a greater subjective well-being.

Psychological example:

This can be seen in the use of **mindfulness and quality of life therapy**, where individuals are encouraged to become more aware of their own feelings and emotions.

They are able to exercise free will to be more conscious of the present and use this to increase their levels of happiness.

Assumption 2: Authenticity of goodness and excellence

The positive approach suggests that **psychology had become too focused on negative aspects of personality** such as stress and depression. Other approaches are about fixing what is wrong with people, rather than focusing on and celebrating what is right.

This is an unbalanced view as in reality, what people do well is much more predominant. It is therefore just as important to research and support individuals who are 'OK' and wish to develop their own personal sense of well-being. **By focusing on positive traits and self-improvement, we can view human behaviour in a much more positive way.**

Therefore, another key assumption of this approach is that qualities of goodness and excellence are just as worthy of our attention.

Psychological example:

This focus on goodness and excellence can be seen in Seligman's (2002) theory of **signature strengths**. This suggests that there are 24 character strengths including curiosity, fairness and honesty. Each individual has all of these strengths and should be encouraged to nurture and develop them to improve their well-being.

These have been collated into the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), and further developed into an online self-report questionnaire.

Assumption 3: Focus on 'the good life'

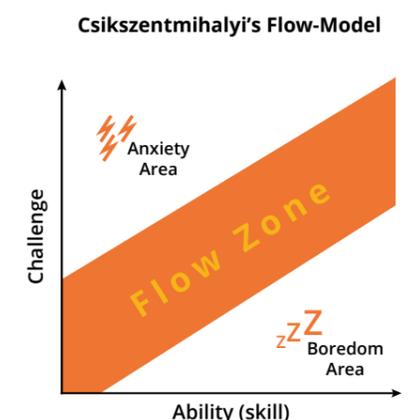
Seligman suggests that there are three dimensions to happiness.

1. **The pleasant life:** activities focused on positive emotions that make us feel good, for example eating your favourite food or listening to your favourite song.
2. **The good life:** engaging in activities that absorb us and help us to reach a state of flow. This includes focusing on our signature strengths, having positive relationships with others and working towards achieving our goals.
3. **The meaningful life:** this refers to the state of fulfilment we get from using our character strengths for a deeper purpose. For example, we might use our strengths to help campaign for an issue we feel strongly about, like the environment.

Psychological example:

One example of the 'good life' can be seen in the key positive approach concept of **'flow'**, developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This means reaching the state of being fully engaged in an activity.

Different activities lead to a flow state for different people. It needs to be a balance between the level of challenge the activity presents and the skills we have to deal with it.



Applying assumptions to the formation of relationships

Applying focus on 'the good life' to the formation of relationships

Humans are social creatures, programmed to find, build and maintain relationships. Christopher Peterson (2008) identified that positive psychology can be summarised in the phrase 'other people matter', i.e. building relationships with others will help to make us happy.

One element of the good life is **positive connection to others**. Forming positive relationships with others can improve our subjective well-being and help us to achieve the 'good life'.

Another element of the good life is **engaging in activities that absorb and engage us**, helping us to reach a state of flow. This might include activities we do with our friends such as playing sports.

It is often **by being with others that we get the most out of positive experiences in our lives**, for example when we share good news or personal achievements.

Evidence:

Diener and Seligman (2002) surveyed 222 undergraduate students. Those categorised as 'very happy' had stronger romantic and other social relationships and were more sociable than the less happy groups.

Olszen et al. (2012) carried out a longitudinal study. Children who had wider social networks and engaged in more social activities like playing sports were happier as adults. These social connections were a better predictor of well-being than other factors like academic attainment.

Applying authenticity of goodness and excellence to the formation of relationships

Positive psychology places an emphasis on character strengths as being an important way to improve our well-being. **Many of these character strengths are focused on developing and maintaining social relationships.**

One group of the VIA character strengths is **humanity**. This includes kindness, love and social intelligence, all strengths linked to our relationships.

We can improve our relationships with others by focusing more on what is going right in the relationships than what is going wrong. This means **being aware of your partner's character strengths and celebrating these**, rather than taking them for granted.

Kashdan et al. (2017) found that when individuals showed a greater appreciation of their partner's character strengths, this was associated with positive outcomes of the relationship, such as greater commitment and support for each other's goals.

Applying acknowledgement of free will to the formation of relationships

The positive approach recognises a role for free will in our behaviour. According to Sonja Lyubomirsky, **40% of the variance in happiness is due to intentional activity**. Intentional activity can include a range of activities that people choose to engage in as part of their everyday lives, therefore exercising their free will. For example, exercising or reframing events in a more positive light.

One intentional activity that can improve happiness is nurturing social relationships. For example, by choosing to get back in touch with someone you have not heard from in a while or investing time in improving existing friendships.

Therefore, we can **exercise our free will to improve and maintain our relationships**, which in turn increases our well-being.

