

Psychology discovers happiness.

I'm OK, You're OK

By Gregg Easterbrook

"Life is divided up into the horrible and the miserable," Woody Allen tells Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*. "The horrible would be like terminal cases, blind people, cripples—I don't know how they get through life. It's amazing to me. And the miserable is everyone else. So, when you go through life, you should be thankful that you're miserable."

That's a fairly apt summary of the last century's consensus regarding the psyche. Psychiatry now recognizes some 14 "major" mental disorders, in addition to countless lesser maladies. Unipolar depression—unremitting blue feelings—has risen tenfold since World War II and now afflicts an estimated 18 million Americans. Increasingly, even children are prescribed psychotropic drugs, while frustrated drivers are described as not merely discourteous but enraged. In the past 100 years, academic journals have published 8,166 articles on "anger," compared with 416 on "forgiveness"; in its latest edition, the presumably encyclopedic *Encyclopedia of Human Emotions*, a reference for clinicians, lists page after page of detrimental mental states but has no entry for "gratitude." Sigmund Freud declared mental torment the normal human condition and suggested that most people's best possible outcome would be to rise from neurosis into "ordinary unhappiness." It's a wonder we don't all lose our minds.

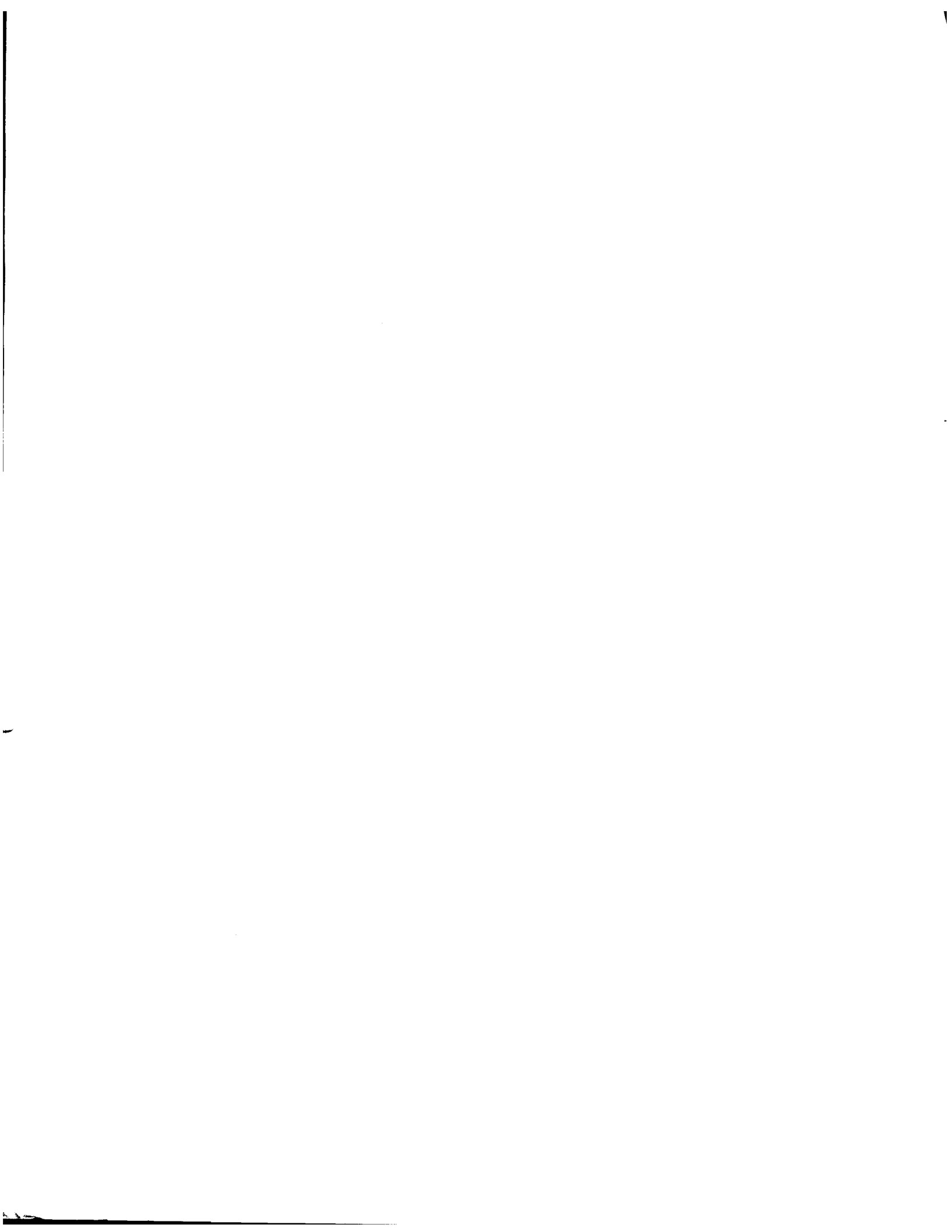
And yet, somehow, most people turn out OK. Only a tiny fraction of the populace commit antisocial acts or lose their ability to function in society. Roughly 80 percent of Americans describe themselves as basically satisfied with their lives. Not only have we not all lost our minds, but, considering modern stress, most of our minds seem in surprisingly good condition.

This observation is leading to a revolutionary development in the theory of the psyche—positive psychology, which seeks to change the focus of inquiry from what causes psychosis to what causes sanity. Researchers "tend to study the things that can go wrong in people's minds but not the things that can go right," says Robert Emmons, a psychologist at the University of California at Davis. Yet what can go right is at least as important, not

just for individuals but for society. And, in contrast to much modern scholarship, positive psychology may produce knowledge that actually improves lives and makes the world a better place.

The initial ideas of positive psychology came to Martin Seligman 35 years ago when he and a colleague were giving electric shocks to dogs. Seligman, who has since become a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and is a past president of the American Psychological Association, found that by zapping dogs unless they jumped a barrier, he could reduce the animals to a state of cowering helplessness in which they would not attempt any other tasks. It may seem obvious that creatures exposed to regular pain would enter a state of wretchedness, but the psychology establishment of the time, dominated by behaviorists, rejected Seligman's result. Behaviorism claimed that dogs (or people) do that for which they are rewarded and avoid that for which they are punished: A dog shocked when performing one task should just move on to another. But the subjects of Seligman's experiment simply sat down and whimpered pitifully. Seligman took this as evidence that psychological states are in some sense *learned*, not merely involuntary reflexes to stimuli. And if negative mental states can be learned, he eventually realized, why not altruism or equanimity?

When Seligman proposed such rethinking to some older professors, it made them furious. After all, a fundamentally positive approach to psychology conflicted with the profession's modern history. Roughly since the Enlightenment, study of the mind had been flavored by the Cartesian notion that abstract thought is the brain's calling, while emotional states are handicaps. That view was briefly challenged by Charles Darwin, who, after publishing *The Origin of Species*, hypothesized that if physical traits had evolved, mental states must have, too. Darwin's final work, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872, speculated that psychological qualities must be mainly beneficial or evolution would not have preserved them—loyalty, for instance,



could have enhanced early humans' survival by causing them to care for one another.

But while Darwin's views on biology spread throughout the intellectual world, his views on the mind were quietly dismissed. Freud's much more negative interpretation—that the consciousness is steeped in self-delusion and emotions are repellent by-products of infantile sexual compulsions—fit the new century's zeitgeist of existential despair. When evidence for Freud's claims eventually turned out to be shaky, the equally uninviting model of behaviorism arose. Behaviorism held that we're all lab rats in a meaningless maze, and it viewed human feeling with open contempt. The dogma's low point came when the behaviorist guru John Watson pronounced that parents should "never hug and kiss" children, because this would only condition them to want affection.

At about the time behaviorism was reaching its zenith, the U.S. government established the National Institute of Mental Health and greatly expanded the Veterans Administration. The NIMH gave grants almost exclusively to researchers studying mental illness, while the VA (now the Department of Veterans Affairs) paid to train a generation of clinicians to treat World War II combat trauma. Between Freudianism, behaviorism, and a government that funded the study and treatment of the negative, psychology in the early postwar era became a truly dismal science.

Of course, this view had opponents. Humanistic psychology, founded by Abraham Maslow in the 1950s, argued both that life was well worth living and that people could find fulfillment by understanding that human needs come in a sequence, from physical to spiritual. (Seligman has been accused of borrowing ideas from humanistic psychology.) Around the same time, physicians accidentally discovered that some new tuberculosis drugs palliated depression. The discovery proved a hammer blow against Freudianism. As psychologists Fari Amini, Richard Lannon, and Thomas Lewis note in their book, *A General Theory of Love*, if a few molecules can alleviate psychological pain, "[h]ow does one square that with the supposed preeminence of repressed sexual urges as the cause of all matters emotional?"

The discovery that emotions have a biological component provided an opening for new views of the psyche. It meant mental states were not childhood curses (Freud) or involuntary twitches (behaviorism) but an integral element of the living world, evolving with life just as Darwin had guessed. Barbara Frederickson, a positive psychologist at the University of Michigan, has since expanded on Darwin's view, noting that while some negative emotions confer obvious survival advantages—fear causes you to run—natural selection may favor positive emotions in more subtle ways. A person who is joyful or outgoing, Frederickson supposes, is more likely

to make friends; the friends would then come to the person's aid in times of crisis, increasing the odds that friendliness would be passed to offspring. Further, as Amini, Lannon, and Lewis put it, if emotional states have a biological basis, they must be "part of the physical universe" and therefore "lawful," subject to understanding.

By the early '90s, researchers had fashioned this cluster of insights into a new movement Seligman originally called "good life" studies—the effort to determine what psychological forces caused people such as Eleanor Roosevelt (one of his heroes) to live life admirably. But because "good life" can connote champagne and dancing girls, in the late '90s advocates renamed the framework "positive psychology." Since then, the concept has gained ground with researchers.

Positive psychology's first empirical focus was figuring out who exactly is happy. Edward Diener, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, has come to the following conclusions. First, poverty causes unhappiness but wealth does not cause happiness. Second, the old as a group have more "life satisfaction" than the young. (Diener notes, "The minds of the young are full of the things they want to achieve and have not, whereas most of the elderly have either achieved what they wanted or made their peace with the fact that they never will.") And, third, according to a well-being test designed by Diener, the norm is positive; most Americans' scores on his test indicate they are "slightly satisfied" with life.

Diener's discovery that the impoverished are unhappy is hardly surprising: In a classic confirm-the-obvious exercise, he went to Calcutta and produced irrefutable data that the poor there experience "a very low level of life satisfaction." Studies by Diener and others show that as a person's income rises toward the middle-class level, his or her sense of well-being rises as well. But once basic material needs are met, income decouples from happiness. Since the 1957 publication of John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, real income for the average American has trebled. But during that same period the fraction of Americans who describe themselves as "very happy" in the University of Chicago's long-running National Opinion Research Center polls has not budged: It was one-third in 1957, and it is one-third today.

Researchers surmise that once people become middle-class, additional income ceases to correlate with happiness because people begin to perceive money primarily in relation to those around them. Most do not think, *Does my house meet my needs?* but rather, *How nice is my house compared with the neighbors'?* Upon reaching upper income brackets, people may grow obsessed with what they still don't have, activating some kind of "nature's revenge" law that denies extra contentment to the wealthy. When Diener gave his tests to a group of multimillionaires from the *Forbes* 400, he found that, on



ANNUAL EDITIONS

average, they were only a tiny bit happier than the typical suburbanite.

Through its studies of the relationship between income and happiness, positive psychology supports the philosophical-theological conclusion that longing for material things ultimately harms the person doing the longing. Materialism also causes people to spend rather than save, which embeds anxiety in daily life—a point championed by Harvard University economist Juliet Schor. Cross-cultural studies of happiness buttress these findings. Sociologist Ronald Inglehart has found that life satisfaction is highest in the Scandinavian countries (where income is fairly evenly distributed, mitigating neighbors'-house angst) and lowest in poor nations. Life satisfaction is also unusually high in Ireland, which boasts a "count your blessings" culture. Life satisfaction is distressingly low in affluent Japan—much lower than in Argentina or Hungary—perhaps because Japanese culture emphasizes money even more relentlessly than American culture.

Exactly how "happy" a person might be is ephemeral, of course. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman of Princeton University has been attempting for years to create a wholly objective measure of well-being, without much success. Kahneman found, for instance, that if he asked college students whether they were happy, most said yes. But if he first asked how many dates they had had in the last month and then asked if they were happy, most said no. Kahneman says he stopped asking subjects if they considered themselves unhappy because the question caused some to burst into tears.

Positive psychology further finds that happiness is hard. Laura King of Southern Methodist University, writing in the current issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, shows that a positive attitude toward life requires considerable effort; people may slip into melancholy simply because it's the path of least resistance. Freud anticipated this when he noted that "unhappiness is much less difficult to experience" than elevated feelings. As a result, positive psychologists tend to view happiness as a condition that must be actively sought. Kahneman marvels at one study that found that quadriplegics have high emotional satisfaction relative to lottery winners. The lottery winners, we can guess, got swept up in and betrayed by materialism, while the quadriplegics worked hard to adjust to their condition and in so doing learned how to appreciate life better.

Finally, positive psychology suggests individual happiness is not self-indulgent but in the interest of society, since studies show happy people are more likely to do volunteer work, give to charity, and contribute to their communities in other ways. Robert Browning wrote, "[M]ake us happy and you make us good." A wonderful, quirky 1998 book by Dennis Prager, *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*, proposes that people actually have a civic duty to become happy because this will make them altruistic.

This isn't to say that positive psychology advocates an unrealistically rosy view of life. Psychologist Lisa Aspinwall of the University of Utah has found that one reason optimists generally have better "life outcomes" than pessimists is they pay more attention to safety and health warnings: Being optimistic doesn't make them blind to threats but rather makes them want to be around for the long haul.

Reversing the logic of dogs shocked into helplessness, Seligman advocates "learned optimism"—the idea that, by learning to expect tribulations and occasional unhappiness, people can avoid pessimism. Seligman thinks primary schools should teach children to expect difficulties, so that when problems start, as inevitably they will, children will not be traumatized but will view occasional setbacks as part of the natural course of events. An idealized anticipation of life, Seligman says, only creates disillusionment, whereas expecting to have some really bad days fosters a sustainable positive outlook. Managing one's expectations in this way, of course, requires self-control. And in fact Roy Baumeister, a researcher at Case Western Reserve University, has found that self-control is a better predictor of "life outcomes"—career and marriage success, overall happiness—than IQ.

Gratitude and forgiveness also turn out to promote happiness. Recent studies have shown that people who describe themselves as grateful—to others and to God or nature for the gift of life—tend to enjoy better health, more successful careers, and less depression than the population as a whole. These results hold even when researchers factor out age and income, equalizing for the fact that the affluent or good-looking might have more to be grateful for. And just as positive psychology doesn't recommend Pollyannaish optimism, it doesn't call for Panglossian gratitude. "To say we feel grateful is not to say that everything in our lives is necessarily great," says Emmons, the University of California psychologist. "It just means... if you only think about your disappointments and unsatisfied wants, you may be prone to unhappiness. If you're fully aware of your disappointments but at the same time thankful for the good that has happened and for your chance to live, you may show higher indices of well-being."

In this regard, the power of self-suggestion is considerable: Studies show that those who dwell on negative experiences become negative, while those who keep "gratitude journals," in which they write down what they're thankful for, experience improved well-being. Counting your blessings may sound corny, but if it helps you do better in life or simply have a good day, it's perfectly rational. Adam Smith anticipated this in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, one premise of which is that people who do not feel grateful cheat themselves out of their experience of life. Lack of gratitude leads to bitterness, Smith wrote, and bitterness only harms the person who feels it.



Likewise, positive psychology advises forgiveness because it benefits the person who forgives. If you bear a grudge or want retribution, your own well-being declines. Even in cases when someone has done you a severe wrong, such as a crime, forgiving the person is in your self-interest, because it prevents your own life from being subsumed in bitterness.

Depression is the malady of greatest concern to positive psychology, and here the figures are haunting. Incidence of bipolar depression—exaggerated mood swings—has not changed during the postwar era; the disorder is now believed to be primarily biological and is treated with medication. But the tenfold postwar increase in incidence of unipolar depression appears to have no biological explanation, and the rate holds in all developed nations. Steadily rising Western standards of living have been accompanied by a huge upswing in the percentage of the population that constantly feels bad. What's going on?

Seligman thinks most unipolar depression is a learned condition, and he offers four causes. First, too much individualism: "Unipolar depression is a disorder of the thwarting of the I, and we are increasingly taught to view all through the I." Past emphases on patriotism, family, and faith may sometimes have been suffocating but also let individuals view their private disappointments as minor within the larger context. Today, Seligman supposes, "rampant individualism causes us to think that our setbacks are of vast importance, and thus something to become depressed about."

Next, Seligman blames the self-esteem trend. "Self-esteem emphasis has made everybody think there's something fundamentally *wrong* if you don't feel good, as opposed to 'We just don't feel good right now but will later,'" he says. If something is fundamentally wrong with your life, that's pretty depressing. Self-esteem types maintain that people should feel good about themselves all the time, an idea positive psychology proponents deem totally unrealistic. The preaching of self-esteem in schools, Seligman thinks, has backfired by increasing melancholy.

Third, Seligman thinks depression is rising because of "the promiscuity of postwar teaching of victimology and helplessness." Intellectuals and the media have spent the last couple of decades discovering victims; surveys find that ever-higher percentages of incoming college freshmen describe themselves as having been victimized or possessing little control over their fates—though, objectively, personal freedom has never been higher. The "We're all victims" view discourages people from asserting control over their psyches.

Seligman finds particularly counterproductive the fad of adults claiming they were victimized by their parents. Only in extreme cases—such as sexual abuse—is there a clear link between parenting and adult personality: "You are entitled to blame your parents for the

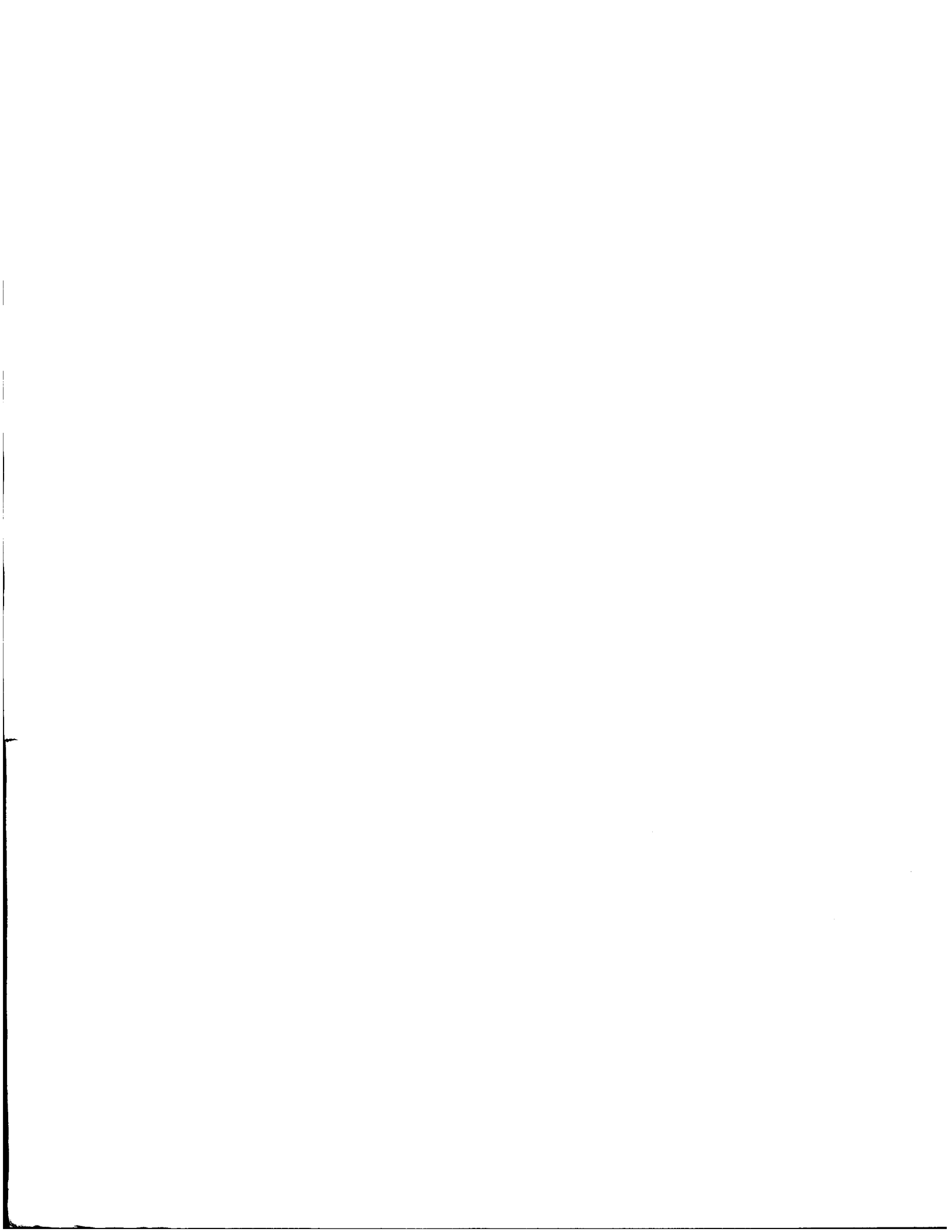
genes they gave you, but you are not entitled, by any research I know of, to blame them for the way they treated you," Seligman says. Depressed patients often attribute their condition to their parents, but once recovered they rarely say their parents were to blame for their disorder.

Fourth on Seligman's list of depression's causes is runaway consumerism. "Shopping, sports cars, expensive chocolates—these things are shortcuts to well-being," he says. While overall happiness has not increased as national income has trebled in the postwar period, surveys show that what Americans expect materially has grown in lockstep with the earnings curve. Like a street drug, materialism requires more and more to produce the same brief high. As David Myers, a social scientist at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, has noted of this predicament, "[T]he victor belongs to the spoils."

Whatever the causes of unipolar depression, there are two main treatments. One is Prozac and an expanding variety of related medications. The other is cognitive therapy, a psychological approach based on the premise that your mind can fix its own problems. Both pharmacology and cognitive therapy show similar effectiveness—about two-thirds of patients get better, and one-third do not respond. Proponents of positive psychology generally prefer the cognitive route.

The cognitive strategy against depression includes learning to recognize the "automatic" negative thoughts that flit through the mind as the blues are coming on and to counter such thoughts. To some extent this is simply common sense and echoes what is found in "power of positive thinking" books. But previous theories of the mind have distinctly lacked common sense and, therefore, have done little good. The University of Illinois's Diener says, "Freudian theory offered little of value to society, wanting to convince us we were all screwed up and there was nothing we could do beyond getting our misery under control. Positive psychology offers patients a realistic way to treat conditions and offers society as a whole a way to build virtues and human strengths."

Seligman is trying to convey this message on a broader scale with a pilot program in Philadelphia middle schools to teach students "learned optimism." Positive psychology is also integral to the "character education" movement blooming in schools and universities, which teaches both that virtue is a duty and that it improves individual lives. These efforts may soon gain a powerful new rationale, as growing research suggests that a positive psychological outlook not only improves "life outcomes" but enhances health directly. In her new book *The Balance Within*, Esther Sternberg, chief of neuroendocrine immunology and behavior at the National Institutes of Health, presents evidence that emotions play a role in regulating the immune system—the more positive your



ANNUAL EDITIONS

sense of well-being, the better your white blood cells function.

By focusing on improvement rather than dysfunction, the positive-psychology movement also hopes to destigmatize mental therapy. Today most insurers will not reimburse patients for therapy unless their diagnosis includes one of the standard codes for mental illness. The result is that many pay for treatment out of their own pockets to avoid having such an entry on medical records, while many others receive no care. Seligman and University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson are trying to change this by working on a manual for classification of "the sanities," a handbook that would be the reverse of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* that clinicians use to code mental illnesses. Such a volume, they believe, not only might solve the insurance records problem but could encourage the many who

experience mild psychological pain to get help—just as physicians once thought patients should simply live with mild ailments, such as aching knees, but now believe people should seek every possible cure.

As positive psychology moves from the margins to the mainstream, millions may embrace the remarkable idea that it is not only in society's interest to be altruistic, optimistic, and forgiving but in your own. For roughly a century, academic theory has assumed that when people lose their minds, the awful truth about life is revealed. Now comes a theory that says the truth is revealed when people acquire happiness and virtue. Which model sounds better to you?

GREGG EASTERBROOK is a senior editor of TNR.

Reprinted with permission from *The New Republic*, March 5, 2001. © 2001 by The New Republic, LLC. Reprinted by permission.

