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Foreword

In 1980, David Burns published the phenomenal best-seller, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, in which he outlined the cognitive-behavioral techniques scientifically established to lift depression and anxiety. *Feeling Good* became the most frequently recommended book for depressed individuals by U.S. mental health professionals, and over 4 million readers purchased it. The book gave people suffering from depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem the tools to *feel better*. Indeed, studies showed that 70% of the book's readers markedly improved in their symptoms and maintained those improvements for a period of 3 years – essentially moving from a –8 on a general mood scale to a 0, or a perhaps even to a +2.

Times have changed. The goals of today's psychologists are loftier and more ambitious. During the last decade or so, researchers in the growing field of positive psychology have made tremendous advances in knowledge about not only how to lift people from feeling dreadful to *feeling good*, but how to elevate them to *feeling great* – to living flourishing lives, to developing their strengths, gifts, and capacities to the fullest. In a nutshell, positive psychology is the psychology of what makes life worth living. It represents a commitment on the part of research psychologists to focus attention on the sources of psychological wellness – for example, on positive emotions, positive experiences, and positive environments, on human strengths and virtues. The label is rooted in the principle that empowering individuals to build a positive state of mind – to live the most rewarding, fruitful, and happiest lives they can – is just as critical as psychology's conventional focus on mending their defects and healing their ailments and pathologies.

Positive psychology's focus on character, flourishing, and fulfillment may seem like a wise and obvious shift, yet psychology from mid-20th century on had been fixated on disease, disorder, and the dark side of life. Fortunately, we're in a new era, each month bringing us hot-off-the-presses scientific articles about how to achieve and sustain

happiness, how to make life more productive and more enjoyable, and how to build character and learn resilience. These key findings, however, are generally only published in technical scholarly journals subscribed by universities and thus lying beyond the reach of the student or non-expert. The body of work produced by positive psychology has yet to be brought together and elucidated in an accessible, comprehensive and comprehensible volume. Until now. This 4-volume Praeger Perspectives series has assembled and translated for the first time the discoveries about how to become happier and more fulfilled, about how to define and develop human strengths, about how people rise to the occasion during the worst of times, and about much more.

Yet I would wager that you have already been offered answers to many of these questions in self-help books, Dr. So-So radio and TV programs, and in countless newspaper articles, magazine pieces, and blogs. Why then is this 4-volume series for Praeger Perspectives needed? Because the answers, explanations, and prescriptions proposed by self-help gurus, and interpreted and often misinterpreted by the media, generally have limited grounding in scientific theory and even less empirical confirmation. In contrast to the information you generally find in today's media, every statement, claim, and recommendation in this series is backed up by cutting-edge scientific research. You will find few conclusions in these chapters purely based on the authors' life experiences or that of their grandmother or neighbors or depressed clients or random people they have interviewed. Empirical research holds multiple advantages over such anecdotal or clinical observations. By using the scientific method, researchers are able to untangle causes from effects and to study a phenomenon systematically and without bias. Of course, science is imperfect and has its own set of limitations, but we can be much more confident in its conclusions than those of a single person tendering advice based on his or her assumptions, prejudices, and narrow collection of experiences.

One of my all-time favorite letters to the editor was by this newspaper reader, who wrote on the subject of science:

There are questions of faith, such as “Does God exist?” There are questions of opinion, such as “Who is the greatest baseball player of all time?” There are debate questions, such as “Should abortion be legal?” And then there are questions that can be answered to a degree of certainty by the application of the scientific method, which are called empirical questions – in other words, those that can be largely settled by the evidence.¹

Questions about human strengths, the benefits of positive emotions, growth in the face of stress and trauma, and the pursuit of happiness and flourishing turn out to be just such empirical questions. Scientific advances in the field of positive psychology are now solid enough to interpret and translate into descriptions, explanations, and recommendations for the nonscientist. This 4-volume set about the best in people promises to be a landmark series, representing the most rigorous research and the current state of knowledge about positive psychology. Yet it is written in an accessible and uplifting style, such that you may come away from reading the chapters with a new perspective on yourself, on human nature, and perhaps even with a clear sense of how to change your life.

Note

¹Ivins, M. (2000, September 22). The manufactured public schools crisis. *The Fort-Worth Star Telegram*