




2016

Take Charge of Your Happiness by Taking Charge of Your Self: Enhancing Well-being Through Greater Self-awareness

Yashi Srivastava

University of Pennsylvania, yashi.imi@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone

 Part of the [Cognitive Psychology Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), and the [Training and Development Commons](#)

Srivastava, Yashi, "Take Charge of Your Happiness by Taking Charge of Your Self: Enhancing Well-being Through Greater Self-awareness" (2016). *Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) Capstone Projects*. 137.
https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone/137

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone/137
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Take Charge of Your Happiness by Taking Charge of Your Self: Enhancing Well-being Through Greater Self-awareness

Abstract

The pursuit of happiness is an age-old human quest; so is the axiom of “know thyself”. This book proposal explores the link between these two ancient ideas, relevant even in modern times. Using the backdrop of my personal quest for happiness in combination with findings from various scientific disciplines, I argue that our happiness, at least in part, is under our control, and that self-awareness can be an empowering tool in finding lasting happiness. There are three parts to this book proposal: Part I reviews the scientific literature on well-being and explores answers to the question: What makes us happy? Part II presents a new definition of self-awareness along with challenges associated with knowing our selves, and also offers ways to become more self-aware. Part III provides specific suggestions for people to use their self-awareness to enhance their well-being. The objective of the proposed book is to inspire people to take charge of their happiness by taking charge of themselves, instead of blaming other people or circumstances for their unhappiness. I believe that if everyone in this world used their limited time and attention to focus on aspects of well-being within their control, not only would we all be happier, we may also contribute to a better world, one filled with more love, compassion, and happiness.

Keywords

self-awareness, know thyself, happiness, well-being, positive psychology

Disciplines

Cognitive Psychology | Other Psychology | Training and Development

Take Charge of Your Happiness by Taking Charge of Your Self:

Enhancing Well-being Through Greater Self-awareness

Yashi Srivastava

University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: James O. Pawelski

August 1, 2016

Take Charge of Your Happiness by Taking Charge of Your Self:
Enhancing Well-being Through Greater Self-awareness
Yashi Srivastava

Capstone Project
Master of Applied Positive Psychology
University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: James O. Pawelski
August 1, 2016

Abstract

The pursuit of happiness is an age-old human quest; so is the axiom of “know thyself”. This book proposal explores the link between these two ancient ideas, relevant even in modern times. Using the backdrop of my personal quest for happiness in combination with findings from various scientific disciplines, I argue that our happiness, at least in part, is under our control, and that self-awareness can be an empowering tool in finding lasting happiness. There are three parts to this book proposal: Part I reviews the scientific literature on well-being and explores answers to the question: What makes us happy? Part II presents a new definition of self-awareness along with challenges associated with knowing our selves, and also offers ways to become more self-aware. Part III provides specific suggestions for people to use their self-awareness to enhance their well-being. The objective of the proposed book is to inspire people to take charge of their happiness by taking charge of themselves, instead of blaming other people or circumstances for their unhappiness. I believe that if everyone in this world used their limited time and attention to focus on aspects of well-being within their control, not only would we all be happier, we may also contribute to a better world, one filled with more love, compassion, and happiness.

Keywords: self-awareness, know thyself, happiness, well-being, positive psychology

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	5
Part I: What Makes Us Happy.....	8
On Arranged Marriages and Happiness.....	8
The Pursuit of Happiness.....	9
But First, what is Happiness?.....	10
Our Need for Perceived Control.....	11
Positive Psychology: An Introduction.....	13
PERMA.....	14
PERMA-V.....	20
Is Our Happiness Under Our Control?.....	22
Part II: Know Thyself.....	25
Why Bother with Self-awareness?.....	26
Are we in Charge of Our Selves?.....	26
Self-awareness Redefined.....	27
Beware of Becoming Self-aware.....	28
Level 1: Understanding the Human Mind.....	29
Limits of the Human Mind.....	29
Strengths of the Human Mind.....	36
Level 2: Individual Self-awareness.....	39
Explanatory Style.....	39
Mindsets.....	40

Character Strengths.....	41
The Process of Self-awareness.....	42
Introspection.....	42
Observing One’s Own Behavior.....	43
Taking Feedback from Others.....	43
Meditation.....	44
Reading Psychological Literature.....	44
Part III: Taking Action.....	45
Self-awareness and PERMA-V.....	46
A Note on Balance.....	54
Suggestions for Future Research and Conclusion.....	55
Gratitude.....	56
References.....	57

Introduction

Four years ago, during an overnight train ride in India, I found myself questioning the point of my existence. It was just a few weeks before my twenty-ninth birthday, and I had never felt so helpless in my entire life. My romantic relationships were a disaster, my corporate job was burning me out, and my health had taken a heavy toll. Worst of all, I felt utterly alone. It seemed that there was no one, not one person in the whole wide world who truly understood me. Deeply dejected, I lay on an upper berth of the train and wondered: What is the purpose of life? If we are all going to die one day, why put up with so much pain and suffering? What is the point?

I was traveling from New Delhi to Gorakhpur, my hometown in the Northern part of India, and was accompanied by my father. For a few days now, I had been suffering from viral fever, and he had insisted that I come home with him. At first, I didn't want to go. "I can't take leave from work," I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen. "Let me talk to your manager," he said, and I fell silent. I couldn't blame him, though. This was the second time in two months that I had caught a viral infection, and my recent blood tests reported an all-time low hemoglobin of 7 instead of the recommended minimum of 12 grams per deciliter. I was fatigued and weak, and even the doctor had prescribed two weeks of complete bed rest for me. So, I agreed to take a couple of weeks off to go home, take rest, and eat healthy, home-cooked meals.

It wasn't just my health that was bothering me, though. The effects of a recent break-up were gnawing at me too. Then, there was the societal and familial pressure of getting married before I turned thirty, a benchmark that could render me forever "unmarriageable" in India. Finally, even though I hadn't yet admitted this even to myself, deep down, I knew I was getting bored of my job: the one aspect of my life I had truly loved and enjoyed until then. In sum, everything in my life seemed to be falling apart, and I had no idea how to survive the turmoil.

Fortunately, for an introvert like me, days with nothing to do can be filled with reflection. I spent the two weeks of bed rest reading books and pondering the state of my life. The more I thought, the more confused I became. I had done everything I thought will bring me happiness: worked hard to get good grades in college, secured a great job that paid well, and was doing well enough to be in line for another promotion at work in a few months. Wasn't all this success supposed to bring me joy? And yet, here I was, with my life in shambles, contemplating why I was alive in the first place. Even after doing everything that "should" be done for a happy life, my life didn't seem worth living.

Four years later, as I conclude my Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP), a program that has helped me answer questions about what makes life worth living, I can't help but smile. I have come a long way since that train ride (hereafter referred to as "the train ride"). In retrospect, maybe I needed that experience to be where I am today. My existential crisis challenged me to look for ways to live a better life, and the journey has been quite rewarding.

I think Nietzsche was right in saying what does not kill us makes us stronger. Those challenging times taught me a lot and strengthened me. Two of the many lessons I learned have turned out to be especially important. The first was the realization that what I really wanted in life was mental peace and happiness. Everything else I had been chasing until then (love, money, success, etc.), was important only as long as it contributed to this larger goal; otherwise, these things seemed to have little value. The second lesson was that to be happy, I needed to change *myself* instead of hoping that other people and circumstances would align as per my wishes. Up until then, I had been blaming external situations and other people for my problems. In those two weeks, I finally understood that this approach was always going to remain a frustrating, futile way to live. I couldn't control other people's behaviors or decide the exact course of my life. I

could, however, focus my limited time and attention on what I could control: my own choices, habits, and actions. As I recuperated from my illness, I became increasingly determined to take charge of my happiness, and this seemed possible only by taking charge of my self.

In the past four years, I have made a sincere effort to apply these lessons in all walks of my life, and the results are promising. I am healthier and happier today than I ever was; I have a wonderful husband; my work is a source of joy and meaning, and I am surrounded by incredible people who inspire me to constantly learn and grow. Have I accomplished all this by myself? Of course not. Much of it has been possible through the love and support of people around me, and I consider myself truly fortunate. I do believe, though, that my choices have made a difference.

My personal transformation occurred through trial and error. However, in the past year, as I studied positive psychology, I learned that these changes were not accidental: there is a large and growing body of scientific literature that can explain my life's transformation. With the backdrop of my own story, and a newly-found understanding of the science of happiness, I now find myself driven by a desire to share my learning with others who may benefit from it.

This is the proposal for a book I will write on the subject. The main premise of the proposed book is that to find lasting happiness, we need to know our selves better. I will make this point by using the framework of my own story and citing relevant research from a variety of fields including psychology, behavioral economics, and neuroscience. This proposal acts as a detailed outline of the book and is divided into three parts. Part I discusses the eternal human quest for happiness, attempting to answer the question: What makes us happy? Part II conceptualizes self-awareness as a more complex concept than it is normally understood to be, and suggests ways to become more self-aware. Part III is about taking action and explores how we can all take charge of our happiness by taking charge of our selves.

Part I: What Makes Us Happy?

On Arranged Marriages and Happiness

“Did you have an arranged marriage?” People from western cultures often ask me.

“Yes, I did.” I usually respond with a bright smile.

Most of them are extremely curious about this seemingly strange process of finding a life partner. “Did you get to meet each other before you were married?” “Did your parents decide who you were going to get married to?” “How long did you know each other before you tied the knot?”

And, once in a while, with hesitation in their voice, they ask: “Are you happy?”

I love sharing the story of how I met my husband and affirming that even though I have had an arranged marriage, I am quite happy. Sometimes, my responses are followed by an uncomfortable silence, giving me the sense that my conversation partners are not fully convinced by my claim. On other occasions, people express their amazement and want to know more. I have rarely met someone from the West, though, who wasn't at least a bit surprised by the revelation that someone can have an arranged marriage *and* be happy.

Why is it so? Why do people feel that arranged marriages may not be happy marriages? While there may be a number of reasons for this, I am quite confident that one of them is the assumption that in an arranged marriage, one doesn't get much autonomy in choosing one's life partner. This is a scary thought for many people. How can you be happy spending your life with someone you didn't choose for yourself, someone who was, well, “dumped” on you? Now, whether this assumption about arranged marriages is true or not can be the topic of a completely different (and extremely interesting) discussion. The point I want to make here is that we often feel our happiness depends on whether or not we have a choice in the important decisions

affecting our lives. (For the sake of closure on the topic, I will mention that India, today, witnesses a wide range of arranged marriages varying in the degree of autonomy one gets in choosing one's spouse. While some don't get any say in the matter, others get full autonomy. I was fortunate enough to get to decide who I wanted to marry, and yes, I think this good fortune has had a role to play in my marital happiness).

Another observation I have had from numerous such conversations about arranged marriages is that apart from believing in a need for autonomy, most people also think of happiness as our ultimate goal. As long as I am happy, they tell me, what difference does it make how I met my husband?

Before I became a student of positive psychology, these insights were merely personal observations. In the past year, however, I have learned that the topics of happiness and our need for autonomy are considered an integral part of the human experience and have been pondered for many years.

The Pursuit of Happiness

The pursuit of happiness has been an age-old human quest. From Aristotle to modern psychologists, thinkers across time have prescribed possible paths to human well-being. Aristotle believed that happiness is the highest good, that the ultimate aim of all human beings is to be happy (Melchert, 2002); in ancient eastern philosophy, the Buddha's teachings were mainly concerned with putting an end to suffering and happiness was equated with liberation; the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America identifies the pursuit of happiness as a basic human right; more recently, the Dalai Lama has stated that all human beings have an innate desire to overcome suffering and be happy and that they have a right to fulfill this aspiration; and finally, positive psychology, an emerging field dedicated to the scientific study of

human flourishing, has become so popular in the less than two decades since its inception that even its founders have been taken by surprise (Seligman, 2011). Happiness truly seems to be the final goal of all human beings across time and cultures.

It is important to note, however, that while humanity has sought happiness for millennia, there hasn't always been agreement on what the term means. Aristotle noted, for example, that while all of us want to be happy, people often do not agree on what happiness *is* (Melchert, 2002). Even in modern psychology, researchers vary in their view of what constitutes well-being and how one might attain it. Since this book is about how we can all take charge of our happiness, I think it is important to clarify what I mean by happiness.

But First, what is Happiness? I sit on my couch, watching television, when a commercial for Coca-Cola invites me to open a bottle of soda, and thus, open happiness. It is in that moment I realize why Martin Seligman, who is often referred to as the father of positive psychology, is not a big fan of the word “happiness” (Seligman, 2011). Certainly, a bottle of soda, a piece of chocolate, or a scoop of ice-cream can give us momentary joy, and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the simple pleasures offered by life. But is that the kind of happiness humanity has been seeking for millennia? Is that all there is to a happy life?

Even when Aristotle discussed the concept of “the good life” thousands of years ago, he made a distinction between *feeling* happy (hedonia) and *being* happy (eudaimonia) (Melchert, 2002). Aristotle's term for happiness, “eudaimonia”, can be more accurately translated to “well-being” or “flourishing” rather than the popular English term “happiness” (Melchert, 2002). In the pursuit of the good life in modern times, Seligman (2011) also argues that while positive emotions are a part of human happiness, they are not all there is. He suggests that the constituents of well-being go by the acronym PERMA, which stands for Positive emotions,

Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement (Seligman, 2011). We will review these concepts in more detail shortly. For now, it is sufficient to remember that human happiness is complex in nature and many factors contribute to it.

For the sake of simplicity, the terms “happiness”, “flourishing”, and “well-being” have been used interchangeably in this book proposal. However, when I use any of these words, I use them in Aristotle’s eudaimonic sense rather than in Coca-Cola’s hedonic sense.

From my conversations about arranged marriage, I had identified two ideas that I later discovered humanity has been wondering about for many years. We have discussed one of them: happiness. Now, let us turn to our need for autonomy.

Our Need for Perceived Control

A sense of perceived control: the belief that one has the ability to alter the outcomes of one’s life, has a long history as a central idea in psychological thought, and several researchers have identified the reasons a sense of control is important and the consequences of losing it (Thompson, 2009). Before he came to be known as the father of positive psychology, Seligman was famous for his work on learned helplessness, an organism’s tendency to give up in the face of challenging situations where it *perceived* a lack of control over its environment, even though in reality, it *did* have control (Seligman & Maier, 1967).¹

From an evolutionary perspective, it has been argued that our desire for control over our environments is what drives all our other motives: emotional, cognitive, as well as behavioral (Geary, 1998). Decades of research in a variety of domains indicate that a perception of control

¹ Even the revised theory on learned helplessness maintains that “organisms are sensitive to the dimension of control, and this dimension is critical” (Maier & Seligman, 2016, p. 361).

can prevent depression (Seligman, 1991) and can also have a significant impact on our emotional well-being, on the likelihood that we take action, on our physical health, and on adaptive human functioning in general (Thompson, 2009).

It is important to note here the emphasis on the word “perceived”. Research indicates that in certain contexts, the sense of control need not be accurate for one to derive benefits from it. For instance, having an illusion of control in a laboratory setting has been associated with better coping and greater persistence (Alloy & Clements, 1992). An illusion of control is not always helpful, though. Having an unrealistically high sense of control can be maladaptive in the context of health-related behaviors (Thompson, 2009). Therefore, taking a balanced approach to personal control, especially when dealing with high-risk life situations, may be a more effective strategy, as compared to living with an inflated sense of control in all aspects of one’s life (Thompson, 2009).

Human need for autonomy has also been emphasized by the self-determination theory in the context of motivation (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2015). The SDT identifies autonomy as one of the three basic psychological human needs (the others being competence and relatedness). The researchers argue that human beings are more motivated to take action when they choose their goals and behaviors, rather than when these behaviors are imposed upon them due to extrinsic factors. A higher sense of autonomy or self-determination leads to the pursuit of an activity because one finds it interesting, enjoyable, or in alignment with one’s deeply held values. Activities that are not self-determined, on the other hand, are often pursued due to a sense of obligation or compulsion, and one does not feel motivated to engage in them. A sense of autonomy has been associated with higher well-being across eastern as well as western cultures (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

As we have seen, our intuitive understanding of the human need for autonomy and our desire to be happy is supported by years of research. In fact, for Seligman (1991), one of these factors led to the other, enabling him to found the field of positive psychology. Let us now look at the definition and a brief history of positive psychology, followed by an exploration of what the science of happiness tells us about living well.

Positive Psychology: An Introduction

“When I first began to work on learned optimism, I thought I was working on pessimism,” writes Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism* (Seligman, 1991, p. iii). Ironically, it was Seligman’s work on topics such as learned helplessness, depression, and pessimism that contained the seed for the founding of a new discipline concerned with happiness, optimism, and human flourishing. In 1998, as the president of the American Psychological Association, Seligman argued that psychology-as-usual was “half-baked”: it was only concerned with mental illness and not mental health. Just as the absence of physical illness doesn’t automatically lead to good health, the absence of mental disorders does not mean an individual is flourishing (Seligman, 2002). Apart from focusing on curing mental illness, Seligman argued in his presidential address, psychology also needed to find ways to enhance flourishing. This marked the beginning of the formal field of positive psychology, not as an *alternative* to psychology-as-usual, but rather, as a *balancing* force.

Positive psychology is the scientific study of human well-being. The field began with the study of happiness and life satisfaction and has evolved to center around well-being (Seligman, 2011). Well-being is a construct or idea that is difficult to define and measure in itself but consists of several measurable elements that contribute to it (Seligman, 2011). There are various theories about what constitutes well-being, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model being one of them.

Another model of well-being was proposed by Ryff (1989), who identifies six elements of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Irrespective of which model of well-being one adopts, the aim of positive psychology is to enhance human flourishing, and it often does so through evidence-based, intentional activities known as positive interventions (Pawelski, 2003).

Since it is not possible to perform a detailed review of every model of well-being in this book proposal, we will focus the discussion here around Seligman's (2011) PERMA model. We will also discuss an element of well-being that is missing from PERMA, in order to create a more holistic picture of the constituents of happiness.

PERMA. Seligman's most recent theory of well-being identifies five elements that contribute to human flourishing: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement (PERMA; Seligman, 2011).

Positive Emotions. Although I didn't know anything about the science of happiness at the time of the train ride, I did know that my life was full of sadness, anger, and fear. My family desperately wanted me to get married before I turned thirty: the upper limit of an "ideal" age for marriage in India, especially for women. This was a problem, not because I was against the idea of marriage, but because my reasons for wanting to get married were quite different from those of my parents: I was looking for lasting love, friendship, and companionship, and didn't mind waiting a few more years for the right person to come along. These differences in motivations were enough to spark many unpleasant conversations between my parents and me. What made it worse was that even though I pretended to bravely stand my ground, deep down, I found myself plagued by the fear of eternal loneliness. What if the right person never came along? Or what if

he had come and gone, while I was busy chasing an impossible dream? Or, what if my parents were right, and I was too stubborn to get along with anyone? Those were difficult questions with no answers, and the few moments of joy I did find in my life were brought about by certain friends, colleagues, and my accomplishments at work.

In the past year, I have learned that during that phase in my life, I may have been suffering from a low “positivity ratio”: the ratio of positive to negative emotions we experience on a regular basis (Fredrickson, 2013). A relatively high positivity ratio (more positive than negative emotions one experiences), within bounds, has been associated with higher well-being in a variety of settings. Fredrickson (2013) argues that positive emotions serve two important functions: first, they broaden our minds, and this enables us to be more creative and see possibilities, something we find difficult under the influence of negative emotions, which have a narrowing effect on our minds; secondly, positive emotions build our physical, social, and mental resources, while negative emotions deplete them. Having a healthy positivity ratio, then, is an important factor affecting our well-being.

Engagement. Are there times in your life when you are so deeply engrossed in an activity that you completely lose track of time? When you suddenly raise your head, happen to glance at the time, and realize that hours have passed, you forgot to have lunch, and you have no recollection of where all that time went? On the contrary, have you experienced times when you constantly looked at your watch and wondered if it had stopped working because the hands seemed stuck in place? The former state of complete absorption has come to be known as “flow”. Flow is a state of deep, effortless enjoyment. We enter states of flow while performing activities that present challenges we are adequately skilled to overcome; activities that do not challenge us become boring, and those that are too challenging make us anxious

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Based on interviews with numerous individuals, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) concludes that flow experiences are often the "best moments in our lives" (p. 3). Flow states are often associated with mastery and enhanced well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Ever since I was a child, an activity that invariably seemed to put me in a state of flow was observing and analyzing human behavior. I would spend a countless number of hours wondering why people around me behaved the way they did, and what could I learn from their behavior. I would have frequent discussions about what I observed with a couple of close friends, completely fascinated by how complex human nature was and how everyone seemed to be shaped by a countless number of factors from their environments and from within themselves. Given my interests, Psychology should have been a natural field of study for me. However, as I entered adulthood and started making "practical" decisions about my career, it seemed clear that engineering was the only reasonable option for me, because my total lack of interest in Biology eliminated the only other respectable career path of becoming a doctor. So, I spent two years of my life trying to get through engineering entrance exams. I happened to be incredibly fortunate, though, because I failed every single one of them. At first, I was quite ashamed of my terrible performance. But slowly, the implications sunk in. Now that I had already lost my dignity, there was nothing at stake, and I could study Psychology! I was overjoyed. I completed my undergraduate studies in Psychology, Philosophy, and English Literature, subjects that aligned well with my natural strengths and interests. Since then, I have always had Psychology as an integral part of my life and career, and it has led to many instances of flow in my life. To say that it has contributed to my well-being will be an understatement: it has shaped the course of my life and led me to where I am today.

Relationships. At the time of the train ride, I knew that relationships are an important

aspect of one's life. What I didn't know was that they can, in fact, be *the* most important source of well-being. Peterson (2006) has famously offered a three-word summary of the entire field of positive psychology: "Other people matter" (p. 249). Human beings are biologically programmed to love and be loved and our relationships with others significantly impact our happiness (Peterson, 2006). Our joy is amplified when we share it with others, while a lack of social connections is linked with poor functioning of cardiovascular, immune, and endocrine systems, and social isolation is associated with an increase in all-cause mortality risk (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). In essence, we are an ultrasocial species who have evolved to love, befriend, and help others in our social network, and deprivation from these experiences negatively affects our well-being (Haidt, 2006). It is no surprise, then, that some researchers assert that good relationships with others are the single most important source of life satisfaction and emotional well-being (Peterson, 2006).

This definitely seems true in my case. Much of my misery at the time of the train ride could be attributed to the unhappy relationships I had been a part of, and if not for the love and support of my friends, colleagues, and family members, I would have had a much harder time recovering. In the past few years, my life seems to be operating at a new, enhanced level of well-being, and I can confidently say that this wouldn't have happened if I wasn't surrounded by wonderful people. My relationship with my husband is the single most important source of love and joy for me, and my social connections with members of the communities I am a part of, have taken my life to an unprecedented level of well-being. Other people do matter, much more than we often realize.

Meaning. Relatively early in life, I had learned that our beliefs about our selves influence our behavior. For example, because of her belief that she can't maneuver a vehicle, my mother

has never even *tried* to learn to drive, or even to ride a bicycle. Had she attempted to learn, she may well have been successful. But her beliefs prevented her from doing so. While I was in college, I became fully convinced that limiting beliefs about our selves can be an immense barrier to us reaching our potential. When I thought about what I wanted to do with my life, I felt that this was it: I wanted to encourage people to question the validity of their limiting beliefs so that they could move closer to their potential. I had another professional goal, though: I wanted to also make a living. The profession of Human Resource (HR) Management seemed to lie at the perfect intersection of these two goals. So, I completed a Masters program in HR and joined a company well-known for its people practices. For the first few years, I was in love with my job. I helped people everyday and got paid to do it: life seemed too good to be true. But gradually, as I got caught up in the corporate way of life, I lost track of my original reason for being there. There were excel sheets to be analyzed, a never-ending list of emails to be answered, and cost-effectiveness measures to be implemented. My work no longer energized me, and this was alarming because, at first, I had truly thought HR was where I would spend the rest of my professional life. But I no longer found it meaningful. At around the same time, I came across a TED talk (Dinsmore, 2012) asserting we all deserved to and could do meaningful work in our lives. Inspired by this idea, I decided to quit my safe, well-paying corporate job, in search of meaning. Even though I didn't know it then, it was the "M" of PERMA I was seeking. (I must mention that one of the reasons I could take the drastic step of leaving my job was because my husband was willing to financially support me. I wouldn't recommend taking such an extreme measure without adequate planning and financial stability).

Steger (2009) argues that meaning is at the core of human existence because it integrates our ideas about who we are and what is our role in the world that we live in. People derive

meaning from multiple sources including family and love, religion, and work (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Modern times have seen a decline in religion (Stourton, 2015) and perhaps that's why, just like me, many people today are turning to work as a source of meaning. Most people think of their work in one of three ways: as a job (undertaken for money), a career (focused on advancement/promotions), or a calling (pursued for its intrinsic fulfillment, the greater good), and the way we view our work has significant implications for our well-being (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Work as a calling leads to states of "vital engagement" (Haidt, 2006, p. 224), combining experiences of engagement with meaning. My work in HR had mostly been a career for me, although it had elements of calling in it. Even though I am glad I left my job and discovered the field of positive psychology, which I believe is my true calling, I have since learned that leaving my job may not have been the only way to more meaning; I could have also resorted to job-crafting, an activity we will come back to in Part III (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013).

Achievement. At the time of the train ride, if there was one element of PERMA that was plentiful in my life, it was achievement. Even after spending much of my life until high school as an "average" student and then failing all my engineering entrance exams, I had done quite well for myself. Once I found myself in fields I was interested in, I worked really hard and achieved one feat after the other. I was one of the highest scorers in my class in undergraduate as well as graduate studies; I was the first woman from my family to step out of my hometown to create an independent life and career for myself in a metropolitan city; and I was climbing up the corporate ladder in terms of role enhancements as well as monetary rewards. It was the first time in my life that I was demonstrating grit: I was passionate about what I did, and persevered in the face of challenges (Duckworth, 2016). High levels of grit are associated with success in a variety of domains, and being gritty at work was paying me off.

However, as Duckworth (2016) herself points out, this element of well-being is the key to *success*, not happiness. To be truly happy, we need so much more than grit and achievement. This is the mistake I had been making, a mistake so many of us make. I had assumed that once I became successful in life: had a good job, earned a hefty salary, and was growing in my career, I would automatically become happy. This was a wrong assumption, though, as I learned soon after the train ride. What I needed were the other elements of PERMA, along with achievement, perhaps, but achievement alone wasn't going to give me the life I was looking for.

These, then, are the five constituents of well-being as identified by Seligman (2011). As noted earlier, though, this is just one model of well-being, and it misses out on an important element: physical health or vitality.

PERMA-V. As a life-long student of human behavior, I have always been fascinated with the power of the human mind. It was not until the time of the train ride, though, that I realized how important the body is. I had taken the smooth functioning of my body for granted until it became too tired to go on and compelled me to pay attention to it. My first few steps towards greater well-being soon after the train ride included a focus on my physical health.

I hadn't been alone in ignoring the role my body played in my life. Historically, the field of humanities has primarily been interested in the life of the mind, while taking the body for granted (Shusterman, 2006). So far, for the most part, even positive psychology has maintained a "neck-up" (p. 209) or cognitive focus in its quest to enhance well-being, not paying much attention to the body (Faulkner, Hefferon, & Mutrie, 2015). However, this view of human happiness is incomplete, because even though the mind is immensely powerful and influences our well-being, being human involves operating in a body that is intimately connected with the mind. Therefore, human well-being cannot be understood solely in terms of a cognitive

dimension; the physical dimension is also important. Shusterman (2006) asserts that the mind and the body are codependent, intimately connected, and equally important. Recent research substantiates this claim. Numerous studies have found that the body actively influences the mind, and engaging the body in physical activity serves several important functions for mental health for clinical as well as normal populations (Faulkner et al., 2015). The benefits of physical activity go beyond mental health: it also alleviates several physical health conditions like type 2 diabetes, breast and colon cancer, etc. (Faulkner et al., 2015).

Emiliya Zhivotovskaya has expanded the PERMA model to include Vitality. She calls it PERMA-V (O'Brien, 2014). The science of happiness, without acknowledging the mind-body connection and its role in our well-being, will remain incomplete.

These, then, are the elements of well-being. Until this point in the book proposal, we have attempted to answer the question: What makes us happy? Beginning the discussion with arranged marriages, we went on to discuss the definition of happiness and dived deeper into the field of positive psychology. As is evident, positive psychology offers some clear answers about human well-being. However, it is also clear that the field is still evolving. There are differences in the way psychologists conceive of the construct of well-being, and as research in the field continues to grow, we may find more robust answers to the age-old questions about happiness.

There is another question about happiness that has been the subject of much debate across centuries, and needs to be addressed before we move to Part II. Is our happiness something we control? Now, I realize that a book on taking charge of our happiness would be pointless if we had no control over it. So yes, we do exert some control over our happiness. This control is not absolute, though, as we will shortly see.

Is Our Happiness Under Our Control?

The ancient Greek sage Solon is credited with saying: “Man is entirely what befalls him” (McMahon, 2013, p. 253). Solon seems to have believed that whether one has really lived a happy life could only be determined at the time of one’s death, because life is unpredictable and one doesn’t know how it may turn out to be until the very end. Many philosophical and religious traditions once taught that human beings have no control over their lives or their happiness: they are solely at the mercy of divine or fortuitous interventions. In later centuries, this notion was challenged by philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who believed that human beings could, in fact, exercise some control over their lives. For Aristotle, living a virtuous life was the key to happiness, although he didn’t completely rule out the role of chance. He argued that even the most virtuous people may suffer at the hands of misfortune, and be unhappy (McMahon, 2013). The Stoics offered another perspective: while they agreed with Aristotle that a virtuous life was a happy life, they believed that it was possible for one to remain happy even in the face of torture (Sherman, 2008).

The debate about the extent of control we exercise over our lives and our happiness continues to this date. While some argue that there is no such thing as free will (Harris, 2012), others suggest that we literally attract everything that happens to us in our lives through our thoughts (Byrne, 2006). Due to my personal experiences, I find it difficult to fully subscribe to either of these extreme views.

Soon after the train ride of my existential crisis, I felt I was at a crossroads in my life. I could either go on living life just as I had been doing so far, or attempt to change something. I had realized that I wanted to be happy, and recognized that there were three domains of my life that needed to improve for me to experience greater well-being: health, relationships, and work.

Of these, health seemed to be the first priority at the time, because not only was I frequently falling sick, my doctor had categorically told me that as a woman, by ignoring my health, I was putting my future family at risk. Alarmed by this warning even before I had turned thirty, I figured my time of taking my health for granted was up, and I really needed to take corrective action.

Interestingly, when I thought about it, I realized that it was my work that had taken a toll on my health: these two areas of my life were deeply intertwined. I was working late shifts and long hours, which left me little time to exercise and take care of myself. Therefore, soon after I was well enough to resume work, I requested my manager for a change in role and shift timings. I was fortunate enough to work at an organization that was fairly flexible and employee friendly, and within six months of making this request, I was assigned to a role that fit my skills as well as my requirements. If I hadn't decided to speak to my manager, this role change wouldn't have happened on its own. By taking action, I had exerted control over my life.

Apart from a change in schedule, I also started paying attention to my routine in terms of regular exercise and nutrition. The idea of spending time at the gym had always seemed boring to me, so I enrolled in a Zumba class along with a friend. For a few months, both of us would rise early and go dancing, followed by a quick stop for a cup of tea at a roadside stall near the dance studio. Suddenly, the idea of exercise became fun and I started to look forward to it. For the last four years, I have kept up a regular exercise routine in one form or another. A few months ago, I ran my first half marathon. On the nutritional front, my diet today is healthier than ever before. I haven't been bedridden since that time soon after the train ride four years ago and my annual health check-ups in the past two years have yielded excellent results. Once again, I took action, and things changed.

Does this mean I have perfect health, always eat healthy, and exercise every single day? No. Does this guarantee that I will never be bedridden for the rest of my life? Of course not. But those are aspects of my life I don't control. The future is unknown, and sometimes, even the present gets difficult. Human life is always a work in progress, and I think that makes it interesting. But there is no denying that we exercise at least some control over our lives.

Research from the fields of positive psychology and behavioral economics also seems to suggest that we are partially in charge of our lives. Happiness researchers have found that about fifty percent of the variance in our happiness levels can be attributed to genetic factors, ten percent to our external circumstances, and forty percent to our voluntary actions (Lyubomirsky, 2008). However, as Wilson (2011) points out, these numbers may not mean much in absolute terms, as they may depend on each other. For instance, our environmental conditions can influence the activation of certain genes but have no impact on others. The point is that some part of our happiness depends on the cards we are dealt, and others on how we play the game.

We end this section where we had begun. Through his work on learned helplessness, Seligman (1991) had realized that highly optimistic people fared better in life than highly pessimistic ones, and that the skills of optimism could be learned, preventing depression and enhancing well-being. The field of positive psychology, thus, was founded on the assumption that people can take intentional action to live happier lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Before we get to what some of these intentional actions might be, I believe it is important to take a detour into the world within our selves, to try to find out who we are, because our happiness may significantly depend on knowing the answer to this question.

Part II: “Know Thyself”

“What is unique about you?” The interviewer asked me. He held the cards to my selection for an internship I really wanted.

I was twenty-four years old at the time, and was pursuing my Masters in Human Resource Management. I said: “Sir, one thing that is unique about me is that I know myself really well.”

He looked at me for a moment, and replied, “Well, that is quite a claim! It takes people a lifetime to get to know themselves, and often, even that is not enough time.”

Well, I am different. I thought to myself, but kept quiet.

It took me years before I realized what a fool I had been.

Know Thyself

Much like the idea of happiness, the concept of self-awareness has also been around for thousands of years. Ancient Greek philosophy, as well as religions such as Buddhism and Christianity have extolled the virtues of knowing oneself for centuries (Wilson, 2013). Even in modern times, self-awareness is considered to be an essential skill in building psychological resources such as resilience, willpower, emotional intelligence, etc. (Reivich & Shatte, 2002; McGonigal, 2012; Goleman, 1995). This seemingly essential skill of self-awareness, however, often gets taken for granted. Of course we should be self-aware, people say, what’s new about that? Not enough discussion is held on what self-awareness really is, whether there are any downsides attached to it, and whether it is even possible for us to become fully self-aware. In this part of the book proposal, I will argue that self-awareness may be a bigger and more complex concept than it is normally understood to be, and attempt to answer the questions listed above.

But first, let us take a brief look at why being self-aware may be an important step on our journey towards greater happiness.

Why Bother with Self-awareness?

We have already discussed that about forty percent of our happiness may depend on our individual choices, habits, and actions. But what sort of choices does this forty percent entail? Can we take action to change other people? Because if we can, for many of us, that would seem to mark the end of all problems. If only I could get my parents to change their ways, or a spouse, or a supervisor, or...the list can go on and on. But the answer is no. We have no direct control over how other people behave: they have as much of a right to their own choices and actions as we do. What about changing our circumstances or our environment, then? Well, that depends on our context and on the specific element we want to change. If I want to become taller in my thirties, that may not be possible. But if I am unhappy with my job, it may be easier for me to take voluntary action to change that particular circumstance. This leaves us with one other variable that we have leverage over in our lives: our selves. All of us are in control of our own attitudes, choices, thoughts, feelings, and actions. Or are we?

Are we in Charge of Our Selves? On the face of it, it seems that we are in charge at least of our own selves. If someone asks me to raise my right hand and touch my nose, I can do so at will (most people can). However, if I am trying to maintain a healthy diet and smell French fries at a restaurant, the more I try to avoid thinking about them, the more my mind conjures up tempting images of crispy fries. This is a common phenomenon known as ironic mental processing: when we try to avoid thinking of something, we can't help but think of precisely what we are trying to avoid (Wegner, 1994).

Let's look at some other situations. Have you ever repeatedly snoozed your alarm in the morning, even though you were the one who had set it up? Have you ever tried to build a healthy habit and failed at it again and again? Have you ever said something that you later regretted? If we are in charge of our selves, why do we exercise frustratingly little control over simple things such as avoiding the thought of French fries? And if we don't control even our selves, then isn't life meaningless?

It is to be able to answer questions such as these that we need to know our selves better. Also, based on the research from neuroscience and behavioral economics, I am convinced that self-awareness, as it is usually understood to be, is not enough for us to really know our selves; the concept needs to be expanded.

Self-awareness Redefined

Even though psychological perspectives on the self have a long history, experimental research on this construct has occurred only in the past five decades (Silvia & Duval, 2001). Duval & Wicklund (1972) are known to have posited one of the earliest theories about the self, known as the objective self-awareness (OSA) theory. The OSA states that just as we can focus our attention on external stimuli, we can focus it on our selves as well. When we focus our attention on our selves, we become the object of our consciousness, or experience objective self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Goleman (1995) identifies self-awareness as an important keystone of emotional intelligence, and defines it as "an ongoing attention to one's internal states" (p. 46). In general, self-awareness is often understood in similar terms: as a state of inward focused attention that entails being cognizant of one's thoughts and feelings on an ongoing basis. This is a helpful conceptualization of self-awareness and an extremely important one. However, I believe that an awareness of one's internal states is *a part* of being self-aware. I

posit that self-awareness has two levels, one being the individual level, which includes knowledge of one's strengths, weaknesses, personality traits, etc. along with an awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions on an ongoing basis. The second level of self-awareness entails being aware of the strengths, limitations, and workings of the human mind in general. All of us share an evolutionary history that makes us behave in certain ways universally, and being aware of these behavior patterns may be a significant step in the direction of greater self-awareness. Before we delve deeper into these two levels of self-awareness, it is important to keep in mind the following words of caution about self-awareness.

Beware of Becoming Self-aware

Wilson (2002) points out two important cautionary aspects of becoming more self-aware. First of all, a person embarking on the journey to greater self-awareness must be warned of its potential dangers, because becoming more self-aware may require one to confront various unpleasant facets of oneself. This can result in negative emotions, at least in the short term (Wilson, 2002), resulting in a decrease in one's positivity ratio. In fact, Duval & Wicklund (1972) pointed out that when people focus their attention inward, they undergo an automatic process of comparing their selves with their values, and often find their real selves falling short of their ideal selves. This leads to negative self-evaluation, as a result of which, people either attempt to change their selves, their values, or avoid the unpleasant state of self-focus altogether (Silvia & Duval, 2001).

Wilson's second warning is what I wish I was aware of at the time of my internship interview. Before my study of positive psychology, my main method for self-awareness was introspection. However, I now know that this method is flawed. Recent research indicates that no amount of introspection can help us become fully self-aware, because there are parts of our

minds we simply don't have access to (Wilson, 2002). This implies that even when one is ready to face one's flaws with courage, introspecting our way to greater self-awareness may be a futile endeavor. Wilson (2002) maintains that self-awareness is a worthy pursuit, though, and that there are other paths to knowing our selves, which we will discuss shortly. At this stage, it is enough to remember that the journey into greater self-awareness may be most fruitful when undertaken with a mix of courage and openness about what one may find, along with humility about the fact that this may result in a life-long, and still incomplete, pursuit. With this understanding, let us now turn to the two levels of self-awareness. We will first discuss the human mind, followed by individual self-awareness.

Level 1: Understanding the Human Mind

The human mind is a vast topic and the entire field of psychology is dedicated to understanding it. A comprehensive discussion of the mind is out of scope for this book proposal. Our main concern here will be to focus on certain key strengths and limitations of the human mind that can enhance our self-awareness. We will begin the discussion with the limits of the human mind, which will cover topics such as the division between our conscious and subconscious minds and a few cognitive biases. After this, we will discuss strengths of the human mind, including human agency, self-regulation, resilience, hope, and neuroplasticity.

The limits of the human mind. Till a few decades ago, it was a prevalent belief that human beings are rational creatures who make objective decisions that maximize their preferences. This notion has since been shown to be incorrect. A plethora of studies in social psychology and behavioral economics indicate that we are neither rational thinkers nor objective decision makers (Kahneman, 2011). We make errors in thinking, experience failures of self-

control, and make irrational decisions. Understanding why we suffer from these flaws requires us to understand how our minds operate.

The Elephant and the Rider. A few years ago, I went on a trip to the Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, India. I was traveling with my cousins and a couple of friends, and one of the activities we all wanted to engage in was to spot wild animals in their natural habitat through a Jeep Safari. One early morning, all of us piled onto a Jeep and headed to the national park. Almost as soon as we entered the main gate, we spotted a herd of elephants, about to cross the road about a hundred feet ahead of us. Our driver stopped the Jeep and all of us held our breath. The majestic animals leisurely crossed the road, thumping their feet, swaying their hefty bodies, clearly in no rush to get anywhere. My cousins and I quietly watched them till they were out of sight, mesmerized and awed at how gigantic and powerful the elephants seemed. While the elephants were crossing the road, a distinct thought crossed my mind: What if they notice us, go crazy, and decide to trample us? Who would stand a chance in front of their strength?

Years later, this image was brought to mind when I read Haidt's (2006) metaphor of the elephant and the rider, used to describe the human mind. Most people can relate to human beings' surprising inability to do what we *know* is good for us. The case of repeatedly snoozing our alarm or failing to exercise on a regular basis are just a few of the numerous situations where we find our selves giving in to our irrational impulses. Haidt (2006) explains such behaviors using the metaphor of the elephant and the rider. Our mind is divided into two types of mental processing systems: automatic (the elephant) - which includes our gut feelings, emotions, and intuitions, and controlled (the rider) - which takes care of rational thinking and future planning (Haidt, 2006). Having evolved over a period of millions of years, the elephant is extremely powerful and drives most of our behavior. The rider has evolved more recently and is no match

for the elephant's strength. Both these parts have an intelligence of their own, and as long as they want the same things, we can make miracles happen. However, a conflict between these two parts of the self results in failures of self-control and a sense of powerlessness over our own lives (Haidt, 2006). Just as in the case of a human rider on an elephant, things go well as long as the elephant has been trained and is following orders. But if the elephant decides to go its own way, there may be little the rider can do. In fact, our brains have many modules that work independently and outside of conscious awareness. If we extend the metaphor to consider these various modules, we are essentially talking about a rider who feels that it is controlling an entire herd of elephants. This illusion lasts as long as everyone's wishes align. But if the different elephants within us want to do different things, the rider is in major trouble and may have much difficulty in restoring order. So, it is your rider who chooses to set an alarm at night, and your elephant that decides to sleep in a little longer in the morning. Your rider knows that exercising is good for you and sets goals for physical activity, while the elephant decides to watch a movie instead of going to the gym. This is why we seem to be in conflict with our own selves, much to our consternation. If we don't know this about our selves, we are likely to spend much of our time getting frustrated with our selves. Knowing this about our selves, though, can enable us to devise ways to align the wishes of the elephant and the rider. For more details on how to do this, see Heath & Heath (2010).

These mental processing systems have also been called System 1 and System 2 (Kahneman, 2011). Wilson (2002) calls the automatic system the "adaptive unconscious" and the controlled system "conscious". I prefer the metaphor of the elephant and the rider, though, and so, for the purposes of our discussion, I will refer to these systems as the elephant (system 1,

adaptive unconscious) and rider (system 2, conscious). The elephant and the rider operate differently, although each of them has an important role to play in our optimal functioning.

Table 1 highlights some of the unique features that differentiate the functioning of the elephant from that of the rider (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008):

Elephant	Rider
Uncontrolled	Controlled
Effortless	Effortful
Associative	Deductive
Fast	Slow
Unconscious	Self-aware
Skilled	Rule-following

Table 1

Failure of self-control is not the only way in which the differences between the elephant and the rider manifest themselves; we also make errors in our thinking because of the different ways in which these parts operate. The elephant's fast, intuitive, effortless responses come in handy when we are about to be hit by a truck and don't have the time for the rider's slow, deliberate thinking to decide that we must get out of the way. However, the elephant's way of operating also leads us to fall prey to several cognitive biases, a few of which have been described below:

1. Negativity Bias. When I was about to enter fourth grade, my parents put me in a new school, one that was known to provide a better education than the previous one. One of my strongest memories from the new school is that of my English teacher, who conducted spelling tests every week. On my first test, I scored a two on ten: I was a disastrous speller (just one of many indications that switching schools was a good idea). For me, however, the problem wasn't that I scored so low, but the implication it carried with it: my English teacher carried a cane to each class and subjected his students to caning for each wrongly spelled word. Eight wrong

spellings? Eight strikes of the cane. On my first day in his class, I cried so much just watching the other students get hit that I was given the benefit of being a new student and was spared. But after that, I had to learn to spell. My English teacher was not a monster, however; he was a fairly good teacher and was generous with praise when someone showed an improvement. But even after twenty years, when I think of him today, the first thing that comes to mind is the physical pain of incorrect spellings; I have no recollection of the praise, although I did significantly improve as a speller during his classes.

I am not alone in paying more attention to the negative than the positive aspects of life. It turns out, our elephants have a natural tendency to give more weight to a negative event than to a positive event of equal magnitude or intensity (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). This phenomenon is known as negativity bias and has been observed across disciplines such as psychology, political science, economics, etc. (Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

2. *Confirmation Bias*. Human beings have a tendency to interpret new information in a way that is congruent with their existing beliefs, and this tendency is known as confirmation bias (Kahneman, 2011). For example, a friend of mine is a great believer in astrological sun signs. When she meets someone for the first time, she is quick to ask when they were born, and then goes on to highlight information from their personality that clearly makes them a Scorpion, or a Libran, or a Gemini. Interestingly, even if a person tells her they belong to the sun sign Aries, when they actually are Sagittarians, she can easily identify aspects of their behavior and personality to fit Aries. When the truth is later revealed, she says something to the effect of: “Oh, no wonder some aspects of your personality didn’t seem to fit. Now it all makes sense!” At no point, however, does she stop to question the validity of her assumptions; she simply fits whatever information she receives in the context of what she believes about sun signs.

3. *Anchoring Bias.* Another common human tendency is to rely heavily on the first piece of information offered while making decisions (Kahneman, 2011). Often, when making decisions, we need a reference point. For instance, how do I decide how much should I pay for anything? When I moved to the US two years ago, all my reference points were in the Indian Rupee, which is a significantly weaker currency than the US Dollar (as I write this, 1 USD = 67 INR). For my first few weeks in the US, for every purchase I made, I converted the USD price to INR. INR 280 for a gallon of milk? That's outrageous, I told my husband. INR 67 for a bunch of coriander leaves? That's insane! Gradually, however, my anchors have changed. After having spent \$60 (INR 4020) on a pair of jeans in the US, I now find it easier to spend relatively higher amounts of money for clothes in India, amounts that would seem preposterous in reference to my original INR anchors. Indeed, when I now shop in India, I find myself converting INR to USD and feeling that I am getting a real bargain, even though the absolute value of each item is likely to have only gone up in both countries.

4. *Availability Heuristic.* Kahneman (2011) defines availability heuristic as the "process of judging frequency by the ease with which it comes to mind" (p.129). For example, soon after I have spent several days watching a psychopath murder series on Netflix, I find myself alarmed by completely harmless strangers greeting me in a grocery store, wondering if one of them will track me down and kill me. No such thing happens when I have been watching a sitcom. Similarly, people may overestimate the number of divorces in a community based on the number of their acquaintances getting divorced (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972), and having seen a recent car accident take place, people may overestimate the probability of they themselves getting into such an accident.

5. *Bias Blind-spot.* When I first learned about cognitive biases, an interesting thing started to happen: I could easily see how people around me frequently fell prey to them. When I pointed this out to my husband, he smiled, and then gently proceeded to give me examples of my own biases. I didn't agree with anything he said, of course, until I realized that I was under the influence of confirmation bias: I was denying all the information that contradicted my beliefs about myself. Once again, I wasn't alone. Experiments have shown that people tend to notice cognitive and motivational biases much more in others than in themselves (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Gradually, with much difficulty, I began to accept that my thinking is as flawed as anyone else's. Being unaware of one's own biases is a bias in itself: the bias blind-spot. This, perhaps, is one of the most important biases to be aware of, especially in our quest for self-awareness, because not knowing what we don't know can be a major obstacle in us getting to know our selves.

This, then, is the state of affairs when it comes to the human mind. We are often in conflict with our own selves, fail to control our own behavior, and our thinking is inherently flawed. As difficult as this may be for many of us to digest about our selves, these limitations are true for all of us. As Kahneman (2011) asserts, "disbelief is not an option" (p. 57).

Getting over this initial disbelief, though, may be one of the most important steps we can take towards greater self-awareness for two reasons. First of all, it is only by being aware of these limitations that we can ever hope to overcome them; as long as we are in denial, little progress can be made on that front. Secondly, even though learning about our flaws can be disheartening at first, in the long run, it can be quite empowering. For instance, I have been a life-long procrastinator, and until recently, had no way of knowing if or how I could change my behavior. After every stressful situation my procrastination brought about, I would promise

myself I would change, and then would soon find myself in a similar situation again. It was extremely frustrating. But when I learned about the elephant and the rider, I realized it is my rider that makes these promises and the elephant that refuses to keep them. Armed with this understanding of how my mind works, I have been experimenting with taming my elephant, by finding accountability partners, or making public announcements about my goal to meet a deadline. Behavior change is a slow process and I still procrastinate, but I now know it is possible for me to change, and that possibility in itself is empowering.

So far, we have seen that as human beings, we have conflicting parts to our selves, many of our decisions and behaviors are irrational, and our thinking can often be flawed. Fortunately, this is not the whole story of the human mind. We have limitations, yes, but we also have strengths that work in our favor, qualities that enable us to achieve feats no other species have been able to accomplish.

The strengths of the human mind. While there are numerous qualities that make us distinctly human, in this book proposal, we will focus on human agency, self-regulation, resilience, hope, and neuroplasticity as a part of human strengths.

Human agency. Bandura (2006) talks about human beings as agents of change, as individuals capable of intentionally influencing our functioning as well as our circumstances. We have the ability to set intentions, to create goals and garner the motivation to pursue them, to self-regulate, and to examine our own functioning and the adequacy of our thoughts, choices, and actions (Bandura, 2006). We use these agentic personal resources to influence our lives and our environments. The more of these resources we have, the higher our degree of influence may be. It is also important to note that these resources are not fixed and can be developed (Bandura, 2006). People who have more agency are able to generate a larger number of options that

expands their freedom of action and makes them more successful in realizing their future ambitions as compared to those who have lesser agentic resources (Bandura, 2006).

Self-regulation. Self-regulation is the process through which we seek to control our thoughts, feelings, and actions to meet social and personal standards (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006). From exercising on a regular basis to quitting smoking to stopping our selves from hitting someone who is being obnoxious, many activities in our life require some degree of self-regulation. In fact, Baumeister et al. (2006) argue that self-regulation is the "trump card of personality" (p. 1796) and that we can use this ability to improve multiple facets of our life. All of us have the capacity for self-regulation, and an even better news is that this capacity can be strengthened with practice. Self-regulation is like a muscle; just as a physical muscle becomes stronger when exercised on a regular basis, our ability to self-regulate in one domain strengthens our ability to do so in other domains as well (Baumeister et al., 2006).

Resilience. Challenges and adversities are a part of the human experience. Whether it is the loss of a loved one, troubles at work, or driving in heavy traffic, many events leave us shaken or stressed. Most people who have undergone a difficult time in life report that they have grown because of that experience (Haidt, 2006). This human ability to bounce back or even thrive in the face of adversity is known as resilience (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). While all of us are naturally resilient, some people find it more difficult to take challenges in their stride as compared to others who can face any difficulty and come out stronger. This is because we vary in the degree to which we are naturally resilient. Like self-regulation, though, the skill of resilience can also be learned (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

Hope. During his work on learned helplessness, Seligman (1991) realized that one-third of the people in his experiments, even when they didn't have control over what was happening to

them, refused to learn helplessness, and continued to persevere. These were the optimists, and they never lost hope. According to hope theory, hope reflects people's perception of whether they can set clear goals, come up with strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking), and gather and sustain the required motivation to attain those goals (agentic thinking) (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). High hope is associated with a number of positive outcomes in several domains of life. All human beings inherently possess hope, and although there are individual differences, it is possible to enhance hope. There are two hope accentuating strategies that may be especially relevant for taking charge of our lives: hope enhancing, which increases people's agentic and pathways thinking, and hope reminding, which encourages people to self-manage their hope in the face of adversity (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015).

Neuroplasticity. Over a hundred years ago, James (1892/1984) alluded to the “plastic” nature of our brains, suggesting that the human brain seems capable of undergoing gradual but lasting changes. For many decades after that, though, scientists believed that the brain is fixed in form and function and does not undergo much change after a certain age. More recently, mounting research from the field of neuroscience has clearly demonstrated that this isn't true, and that James was right. Our brains have a property called neuroplasticity, which enables them to undergo lasting changes through the creation of new neural pathways across our lifetimes (Davidson & Begley, 2012). These changes can occur due to our experiences as well as through our thoughts and intentions. For example, imagining that one was practicing a simple five-finger piece on the keyboard had the same effects as actually practicing it: the brain had shown changes in response to mere imagination (Davidson & Begley, 2012). Neuroplasticity suggests that even if we have been wired a certain way by evolution (think of the cognitive biases and the conflicts between the elephant and the rider), it is possible for us to rewire our brains.

With this, we come to an end of the first level of self-awareness: an understanding of the human mind in general. The strengths and limitations discussed above are universal in the sense that all of us have them, although there may be individual differences in the degree to which we do so. For instance, our genetic makeup may have determined how resilient or hopeful we naturally are, and our conditioning may have enabled us to have more disciplined elephants as compared to others, or to make a greater effort to overcome our inherent biases. What we must take away is that all of us have these limitations and they can be overcome, and that we also have these strengths that can be further developed. We now turn to the second level of self-awareness, which takes into account our individual differences.

Level 2: Individual Self-Awareness

So far in this section of the book proposal, we have looked at the universal level of self-awareness: that of the human mind in general. However, even though all of us share a common evolutionary history, each of us is unique. Human beings are extremely complex and no two people are exactly the same: even identical twins differ significantly from one another. Being aware of our unique individual selves, therefore, is an important part of self-awareness. Once again, it isn't possible to cover the whole range of human complexity in this book proposal. The focus here is to identify a few key attributes that can enable us to become more self-aware in order to live happier lives, some of which include our explanatory styles, our mindsets, and our character strengths.

Explanatory style. As noted earlier, a sense of control over our lives is essential for our well-being. One of the factors that determines this sense of control is the manner in which we explain the causes of adversities we face in life. During his work on learned helplessness, one of Seligman's (1991) findings was that in any group that he experimented with, a third of the

participants refused to give up in the face of adversity, and persisted. Upon studying the one-third of people who never became helpless, Seligman (1991) realized that the key difference between pessimists (who tend to learn to be helpless) and optimists (who persist) is that the optimists and the pessimists differ in the way they explain the causes of the adversities that befall them. While the optimists tend to think of adversities as being caused by external, temporary, and local causes, pessimists believe that the adversities are caused by them, are permanent in nature, and will pervade all areas of their lives (Seligman, 1991). This difference in thinking or explanatory style, rather than the reality of the situation, is what determines who will become helpless and who won't. Extensive research on the subject shows that optimists tend to be more successful, have better health, and live longer as compared to pessimists (Seligman, 1991).

Seligman (1991) also notes, however, that people who are extremely optimistic often have an unrealistic sense of reality. Much like having an inflated sense of personal control, this thinking style can become maladaptive when dealing with high-risk situations (Seligman, 1991). What is recommended, then, is cultivating what Seligman (1991) calls flexible optimism: a style of thinking that can be adapted to suit the situation one is in.

To become aware of our explanatory styles, then, is an important first step towards developing flexible optimism, which can contribute to greater well-being in our lives. Also, it is possible for all of to become more aware of our unique explanatory styles and if required, adopt a more flexible and optimistic way to think.

Mindsets. In her book *Mindsets*, Dweck (2006) talks about two different ways of looking at human qualities. The belief that human qualities are carved in stone is known as the fixed mindset, and the belief that we can cultivate these qualities through effort is known as the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). The belief we subscribe to about our own selves has significant

implications for our life and our success in the world (Dweck, 2006). Citing evidence from across domains such as education, sports, business, and relationships, Dweck (2006) argues that having a growth mindset enables us to fulfill our potential to a greater degree while a fixed mindset holds us back. The best part is that it is possible for us to change our mindsets. However, “change isn’t like surgery” – Dweck (2006, p. 214) warns. When we learn to adopt a growth mindset, we don’t simply override our existing beliefs. However, as our new mindset become stronger with practice, we realize that we have another way to think, feel, and act (Dweck, 2006).

Mindsets may vary from one domain of our life to the other. For example, a housewife may be extremely adept at household chores, and may have a growth mindset in that domain of her life. However, ask her to learn to change a flat tire, and she may develop cold feet. Being aware of areas of our lives where we operate with a fixed mindset can be the first step towards change.

Character strengths. In their quest to shift Psychology’s focus from treating mental illness to enhancing mental health, Peterson & Seligman (2004) created a list of 24 character strengths that were universally admired across cultures. These strengths were categorized under six main virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Our character strengths are positive, core characteristics of our personalities and they enable us to think, feel, and behave in certain ways. More often than not, we take our strengths for granted. However, there are a variety of benefits of being aware of and intentionally using our strengths, such as increased life satisfaction (Niemiec, 2013a), increased happiness, and decreased depressive symptoms (Seligman, Steen, Park, Peterson, 2005). Becoming more aware of our strengths and using them in our lives can help us experience their many benefits.

It is only through a combination of our understanding of the human mind and that of our unique selves that we can really know our selves better. This concludes our discussion of what self-awareness is. Another question about knowing our selves that often gets ignored is the process of self-awareness: how, exactly, do we go about becoming more self-aware? We will now explore the answers to this question.

The Process of Self-awareness

At the beginning of this section, we noted that introspection, which is often considered the path to self-awareness, is a flawed method of self-exploration, and that it may be impossible for us to become fully self-aware through introspection alone. Given that self-awareness is an important part of our journey towards greater happiness, how is it that we can become more self-aware, then? Wilson (2002) suggests a few ways that can lead to greater self-insight. I have combined his suggestions with a few others to propose five different ways of becoming more self-aware, although this isn't an exhaustive list. Also, I believe that for the best results, these methods need to be used in combination with each other.

1. Introspection. Even though this may not be the most effective or accurate way to become self-aware, introspection is not a complete waste of time, either. In the spirit of complete honesty, I may be biased towards this method because I am a naturally introspective person, and reflection is what led to many of my insights after the train ride. My preferred definition for introspection was offered by James (1890/1918), as reporting what we discover by looking in our own minds. James admitted that introspection is a difficult endeavor that comes with practice, and is also prone to error. Modern research has also indicated that conscious introspection of this kind can't get to what lies in our unconscious minds as we do not have access to their content

(Wilson, 2002). This is why using introspection along with other methods that follow may be extremely crucial for accurate self-awareness.

2. Observing one's own Behavior. While the elephant part of our mind is largely inaccessible to us, one aspect of our selves we do have access to is our own behavior. Wilson (2002) argues that a careful observation of our actions can yield great insights into who we are. For instance, when I introspect, I may think of myself as a generous person. However, it is only by carefully observing how often do I demonstrate my generosity that I can know whether I am in fact generous or not.

3. Taking feedback from others. Learning how others around us: our friends, family members, and colleagues view us can often be a source of self-insight. For instance, till a few years ago, my younger brother used to tell me that I am selfish. Perhaps driven by my confirmation bias, I conveniently attributed what he said to sibling rivalry and ignored his comments. During my recent visit to India a few months ago, however, he told me that I have changed quite a bit as a person, that I have become more “positive”, “mature”, and “wise”. I will admit that my first instinct was to assume that *he* had “grown up” and had overcome his sibling rivalry, and to accept this positive feedback about myself. That may have been a mistake, though, and perhaps another example of my confirmation bias. If I truly want to become self-aware, not only do I need to pay equal attention to negative as well as positive feedback about myself, I also need to look for evidence for its validity. Is it true? Do others feel the same way? Does my behavior really indicate that? I must ask myself questions like these before I accept any feedback about myself from someone else. More often than not, when I follow this process with an open mind, I realize that feedback from others who know me well is almost always accurate.

Other people, at times, seem to know us better than our selves and can be a rich source of information about who we are (Wilson, 2002).

4. Meditation. Meditation can be defined as “a family of practices that train attention and awareness, usually with the aim of fostering psychological and spiritual well-being and maturity” (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003, p. 88). Meditation has garnered immense attention in modern times due to mounting research demonstrating its many physical, emotional, and psychological health benefits. By training the mind to be more aware, meditation enables one to develop a greater understanding of oneself, and of one’s relationship to the world (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). This ancient technique may be one of the most important ways to become more self-aware.

5. Reading psychological literature. Chances are, someone who is reading these ideas about the human mind for the first time may already be experiencing greater self-awareness, just by knowing that our selves are divided and operate in predictable ways. This is what happened to me when I learned about the metaphor of the elephant and the rider. Even though I have always been interested in human behavior, I have learned a lot more about it (and myself) in the past year by extensively reading and discussing psychological literature than ever before. This method of self-awareness is especially important because many of these results come from experiments that have been replicated several times with similar findings, indicating that much of what has been rigorously tested and reported is likely to be true. Wilson (2002) identifies this as one of the better methods to become more self-aware, although merely reading psychological literature may not be enough; combining it with reflection and observing one’s own behavior is what will actually lead to self-insights.

These, then, are some of the ways in which we can become more self-aware. Before we move forward, we need to remind our selves that looking within our selves to know who we

really are is an act of courage, because we are bound to discover our flawed nature in this pursuit. Therefore, it may serve us well to make intentional efforts towards self-compassion, which entails being kind to oneself, accepting oneself as just another human being who naturally makes mistakes and fails, and being mindful of the present moment rather than ruminating about the past or worrying about the future (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion has a significant positive correlation with self-reported measures of happiness, optimism, positive affect, curiosity and exploration, agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientiousness, and a negative correlation with negative affect and neuroticism (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and it may be a helpful buffer against being weighed down by self-criticism.

This brings us to the end of this section. So far in the book proposal, we have answered questions about what makes us happy and how can we know our selves better. Being aware of these ideas is not enough, however; we need to put them in practice. In the final part of this book proposal, we turn to the question of how, exactly, can we use greater self-awareness to take charge of our happiness.

Part III: Taking Action

We have seen what the science of happiness tells us about living well, the importance of self-awareness, and specific ways in which we can all become more self-aware. This section of the book proposal is about putting all that we have learned into practice. Unfortunately, even though there is quite a bit of research on self-awareness as well as positive psychology, nothing much seems to exist at the intersection of these two topics. Therefore, the conclusions drawn here are based on indirect links between self-awareness and happiness rather than direct findings. With that caveat, let us now turn to what can we do, based on what we have discussed so far.

We will revisit the well-being model of PERMA-V here, exploring how greater self-awareness can be used to enhance each of the constitutive elements of well-being. In the process, we will also discuss several positive interventions (evidence-based intentional activities aimed at enhancing well-being) and see how self-awareness makes them more effective.

Self-awareness and PERMA-V

In the first part of this book proposal, I shared how most elements of PERMA-V were missing from my life, except the “A”: achievement. I will now describe how I made efforts to become more self-aware, and used that knowledge to enhance these elements of well-being, even though I didn’t know this was what I was doing. As far I was concerned, I was simply trying to take action to become healthier and happier, through the process of trial and error.

Positive Emotions. One of my realizations after the train ride was that even though I had much to be grateful for in my life, I had been spending most of my time focusing on all that was wrong. I had heard about the practice of keeping a gratitude journal from a friend, and soon after the train ride, I started making a daily list of things I was grateful for. Soon after starting this practice, I started noticing more and more things that were going well in my life, and today, gratitude is one of my top five character strengths. With gratitude, came greater love for people around me, and more joy in their company. This created a virtuous cycle of positive emotions, and this may have increased my positivity ratio, resulting in higher well-being.

For those of you who find yourself consumed by negativity and would like to experience more positive emotions, here are a few suggestions for what you can do.² The first step is self-

² Positive Psychology is often misunderstood as a field that encourages people to neglect their negative emotions, to suppress any sadness they may feel, and put up a brave and smiling front at

awareness. You can find your positivity ratio by taking the Positive and Negative Affect Score survey on www.authnetichappiness.org (for free). This will give you an idea of how frequently do you experience positive and negative emotions in your life. You can also use this score to track your progress over a period of time by taking the survey at regular intervals.

Suggested positive intervention. Keeping a gratitude journal also goes by the names of What Went Well or Three Blessings Exercise, and while I didn't know this at the time of the train ride, this happens to be a quite successful positive intervention. This exercise entails journaling every night for a week, and writing about three things that went well that day and the reason why they went well (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Research indicates that people who engage in this activity are likely to be happier and less depressed six months down the line (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Engagement. Seligman (2002) writes that we are most engaged when we are using our signature strengths. Once again, I didn't know anything about the importance of strengths at the time of the train ride. I started looking for a change in my role at work because I wanted reasonable working hours and an opportunity to learn something new, rather than for an opportunity to exercise my strengths. As it turned out, I left my role as an HR Business Partner to join the Compensation & Benefits (C&B) team of the organization, a role where I spent more

all costs. This cannot be farther from the truth. Positive psychology fully acknowledges that negative emotions serve important functions in our lives. However, because of our inherent negativity bias, it is easy for us to be swayed by negative emotions even when they are not serving us. Positive psychology calls for an intentional cultivation of positive emotions to balance out our tendency to focus on the negative.

time with numbers than with human beings. Most of my strengths lie in the domain of relationship building, and unsurprisingly, C&B turned out to one of my least engaging stints with the organization. It was during my C&B work, however, that I began questioning what I really wanted to do with my life. It was through a process of introspection, observing my own behavior, and seeking feedback from those who knew me well, that I was able to identify what I most enjoyed doing, and discovered the field of positive psychology.

If you want to know what engages you most, begin with becoming more aware of your strengths. There are two different surveys you can take to this end: VIA Character Strengths and StrengthsFinder 2.0. While there have been discussions about what differentiates these two (Niemiec, 2013b), I like to think of VIA as the “being” strengths (who you are as a human being at your best) and StrengthsFinder 2.0 as “doing” strengths (what you do best in a work setting). I believe that both these categories of strengths serve a unique purpose and are equally important.

VIA character strengths. This is a free online survey available on www.authentic happiness.org. You can also get a more detailed report from www.viacharacter.org/www at a cost. These strengths were arrived at by reviewing the cultural and religious texts from across the world, and include traits that are valued universally.

StrengthFinder 2.0. This was a survey created by Gallup (<http://www.strengthsfinder.com/home.aspx>) and focuses mainly on the work setting, although strengths identified here frequently manifest themselves in life in general. Based on reports from thousands of employees across organizations, when we use our strengths everyday, we are much more likely to be engaged and experience flow than when we do not use our strengths (Rath, 2007).

Suggested positive intervention. Through an online survey conducted on www.authentichappiness.org, individuals were asked to identify their top character strengths (also known as signature strengths) and then were asked to use them in a new and different way each day for a week. This exercise increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). You can also do this by using your strengths in a new way.

Relationships. I think this element of PERMA, apart from being the most important, also tends to be the most difficult to master, because it involves other human beings who are just as complex as us, with riders, elephants, strengths, limitations, and biases of their own, resulting in various interpersonal conflicts. Jung (1963) wrote: “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves” (p. 299). He was suggesting that when annoyed with someone, instead of trying to change that person, a better response may be to critically look at our selves from that person’s perspective.

I met my husband six months after the train ride. We have been married for over three years now, and these have been the happiest years of my life. However, I now know from personal experience that marriage is no bed of roses. There are days my husband and I have arguments, instances when we disagree with each other, and times when we just don’t “get” one another. However, in times like these, I remind myself of one of the two biggest lessons I learned after the train ride: I can’t change other people; the only leverage I have is over my own self. And then, I use what is annoying me about him to see what it is telling me about myself. More often than not, I can see my own biases and flawed thinking at work. Does this always work? No. Is it always me who attempts to resolve an argument? Not at all. But do we resolve our differences more amicably because of this approach? Absolutely.

When it comes to taking action with regards to enhancing your relationships, then, what is it that you can do? First of all, become more self-aware. Know which cognitive biases do you tend to fall prey to most often. Examine your beliefs. Take the time to respond rather than react to external stimuli. And know that the only person you can change in this world is you.

Suggested positive intervention. The importance of human connections is a key message that comes out of positive psychology literature, and one of the positive interventions that have been shown to enhance well-being is performing acts of kindness for other people (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Research also indicates that when performing small acts of kindness (e.g. writing a thank you note, donating blood, connecting two people who may benefit from the connection), those who perform all of these activities on one day as opposed to spreading them over a week are the one's who are likely to experience an increase in their well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2008). So, set up a day next week do perform simple acts of kindness. Make special efforts to help others that day. And observe the effect it has on you.

Meaning. I have already shared how I had left my job in India to look for more meaningful work. The problem was, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Soon after leaving my job, I moved to the US along with my husband, who had taken a transfer within his organization. My plan was to spend a few months introspecting and experimenting with myself to discover what I wanted to do. If I didn't find anything, I told myself, I could always go back to an HR job. I spent the next few months trying to become more self-aware. I took an online course that promised to help me find my passion, asked my friends what they thought I was good at, and wrote about what I most enjoyed doing in life. I also made lists of what I valued most in life and what my natural strengths and interests were. Within six months of starting this process, I had

discovered the field of positive psychology, and applied to the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program, which is what brings me to writing this book proposal.

Suggested positive intervention. If you are looking for more meaning in your life through your work and quitting your job is not a realistic option, you can do a job crafting exercise, which involves redefining your job to align with your motivations, strengths, and passions (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013). Needless to say, you will need a certain level of self-awareness to make the best use of this exercise. You can buy a job crafting booklet at <https://jobcrafting.com/>, or attempt to change one or more of these three core aspects of your work: tasks (adding more of them to your plate or taking some off, changing how some of these tasks are performed), relationships (changing the nature or extent of your interactions with other people), and perceptions (reframing your job to view it differently and serving a larger purpose) (Wrzesniewski, Berg, & Dutton, 2010). Research covering thousands of employees indicates that those who attempt to craft their jobs often end up more satisfied and engaged, while also reporting higher levels of performance and personal resilience.

Achievement. For the most part of my life, I have thought of achievement as being measured by external factors such as money, fame, social status, etc. In Seligman's (2011) theory of well-being, however, achievement is something pursued for its own sake: "winning only for winning's sake" (p. 19). Seligman acknowledges that a life of achievement for achievement's sake is often also marked by positive emotions, engagement, and meaning, but according to him, those are the by-products of the pursuit of mastery. The self-determination theory also identifies competence as a basic psychological need of human beings: we all want to be good at something and exert mastery over the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

To be honest, the idea of “winning only for winning’s sake” does not sit well with me, and I have always had mixed feelings about achievement being added as an element of well-being. On the one hand, I agree that we all have a desire to be good at something, but on the other, I am worried that taken to an extreme, the pursuit of achievement can hamper well-being, rather than enhance it.

Suggested activity. If you do want to enhance your well-being through higher achievement in your life, though, my recommendation would be in line with what Duckworth (2016) argues. Develop grit, which is a combination of passion and perseverance for long-term goals. You will need self-awareness for the passion part of grit, which requires you to find something that you are really interested in. The perseverance part of grit suggests that you stick to what you are truly interested in, for sustained periods of time, irrespective of the challenges and failures you encounter. Being passionate about the activity is likely to give you moments of flow, and the progress you make may generate positive emotions. Persevering on something that does not align with your interests, though, may actually diminish your well-being.

Vitality. One of the things that became clear to me soon after the train ride was that to live a happy life, I needed to be healthy. But this was a lesson my rider had learned. My elephant was still resisting the idea of exercise. Upon introspection, I realized that my main reason for not wanting to exercise was that I associated it with going to the gym, which I found boring. I also knew that I wasn’t the most self-disciplined person on earth, and left to myself, would soon resort to my old habits. I used this self-awareness to design my exercise program, discussed earlier. I chose dancing as a form of exercise, which was much more fun, and invited a friend to join me, so that she could keep me accountable. I was also aware of my tendency to get bored with the same type of activity over prolonged periods of time, and so, over the years, I have

experimented with various other forms of exercising (dancing, running, walking, hiking, and even going to the gym!). Without self-awareness, it would have been difficult for me to find ways to sustain this habit.

If I had made an effort to read the psychological research on the subject as another method of self-awareness, I would have learned that variety and social connections, two tools I utilized to build an exercise habit, have been shown to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of positive interventions (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Suggested activity. If you want to add more physical activity to your life but find yourself unable to do so, first become aware of what is stopping you. Faulkner et al. (2015) argue that there are three types of barriers that prevent us from exercising: psychological barriers (lack of motivation or a perceived lack of time), physical barriers (injury, disability), and contextual barriers (weather, access to facilities, etc.). While there is an important argument that public policies should be designed so that individuals in a society and community can make physical activity a part of their life (Faulkner et al., 2015), our concern here is more with what we, as individuals, can do. In case of a physical barrier, speak to your doctor about what you can do. In case of contextual or psychological barriers, however, devise ways of getting at least some physical activity in your day, even if the activity is taking a brisk walk or dancing to your favorite music. Also, Heath & Heath (2010) argue that behavior changes should be undertaken in small steps to ensure sustainability. So, if you don't already exercise, start with ten or fifteen minutes of mild to moderate physical activity everyday for one week at a time, rather than committing to a goal of an hour of exercise each day for the whole of next year.

This brings us to an end to the process of taking action. These are just a few of numerous ways in which we can enhance our well-being. As we have seen, being aware of who we are can

be an important factor in enhancing each element of PERMA-V. Before we close this section, one final point I want to make is about balance.

A Note on Balance

“What will you do for fun today?” My MAPP classmate Darrah asked me at the end of our daily video call a few weeks ago. We have been helping each other get up early in the morning to start work on our capstones.

“For *fun*?” I was truly stumped.

Later, as I thought about this, I realized I have been enjoying writing my capstone so much that I haven’t felt the need to carve out time for “fun” in my life. This, I think, is a problem. Or at least, it can become one.

Common wisdom extolls the virtues of moderation, suggesting that extremes of any sort are not advisable. Even while asserting that virtues are the key to happiness, Aristotle had warned us against extremes, suggesting that too much or too little of even a virtue is not always better. A wise person, according to Aristotle, was someone who had practical wisdom: the ability to find the golden mean between the two extremes of a virtue (Melchert, 2002). I believe that the same principle of practical wisdom applies to the elements of well-being as well. Right now, for example, I find my work so engaging and meaningful that I eagerly wait for Monday mornings. While this is a good problem to have, taken to an extreme, this could lead to me ignoring other aspects of my well-being: my relationships, for example. Similarly, in extreme cases, one could ignore one’s work for the sake of one’s relationships, or one’s own emotional needs in the service of others. In our quest for happiness, then, balance may be an important virtue to develop for all of us.

Suggestions for Future Research and Conclusion

As noted earlier, even though there is plenty of research available on the concept of self-awareness as well as happiness, I had difficulty finding research at the intersection of the two. Even though various positive psychology concepts discuss the importance of being self-aware, there seems to be little research on the direct link between self-awareness and well-being. I believe that it would be interesting to study the link between self-awareness and happiness, and future research should explore how these two constructs are related. Also, as far as I am aware, this is the first attempt to conceptualize self-awareness as having two levels: that of the human mind in general and of individual self-awareness. Future research can also explore whether a greater understanding of ourselves at both these levels enhances our well-being.

My objective in writing this book proposal has been to use the framework of my personal story and present an evidence-based perspective on how we can enhance our well-being by focusing on what we can control: parts of our own selves. From my experience, as well as from the scientific evidence, it is clear that there are aspects of happiness that we all can take charge of. We have also seen that taking voluntary action to enhance our well-being often requires us to have a greater understanding of our selves. While this is not an easy or even pleasant pursuit, it is a worthwhile one. Using a variety of ways to become self-aware is what can lead us to a more holistic understanding of our selves, and this understanding has the potential to propel us in the direction of higher well-being. My hope is that the readers of the proposed book will find inspiration to take charge of their happiness by taking charge of their selves.

Gratitude

Using our signature strengths in a new way has been shown to enhance well-being, and writing this section of the paper is my way of using my strength of gratitude in a novel way.

I want to thank the following: My parents, for gifting me with natural hope and optimism, and for encouraging me to follow my dreams. My friends Pallavi and Garima, and my younger brother Suyash, for countless discussions on human behavior, which have nurtured my interest in the human mind. My extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, who provide a fertile ground for the study of human nature. The incredible MAPP community: teachers, assistant instructors, alumni, and my wonderful classmates. In particular, Joshua Steinfeldt and Dan Lerner for valuable tips on managing this project. Danny Torrance, for diligently reading my journal assignments and providing valuable comments. The rest of the MAPP 800 team: Judy Saltzberg, Andrew Soren, Reb Rebele, and Amy Walker Rebele, for their priceless help and support. David Yaden, Garrison Kitchen, and Nicholas Frank for generously sharing relevant resources. Rotem Elinav, for numerous discussions on the topics covered here and for being available for emergency distress calls. Darrah Wolfe, for early morning video calls that have made much of this writing possible, and for reviewing the initial drafts of this paper.

This list wouldn't be complete without mentioning my advisor, James O. Pawelski, who comfortably struck the masterful balance between supporting and challenging me throughout the capstone process. I have learned as much about writing, as about positive psychology (and philosophy), from James. And last, but definitely not the least, I thank my husband, Siddharth, for his endless love, support, and patience. My MAPP journey in itself, let alone this capstone, would simply not have been possible without him.

I am deeply grateful.

References

- Alloy, L. B., & Clements, C. M. (1992). Illusion of control: Invulnerability to negative affect and depressive symptoms after laboratory and natural stressors. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 101*(2), 234-245. doi:10.1037/0021-843x.101.2.234
- Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1*(2), 164-180. doi:10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00011.x
- Bao, K. J., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2014). Making happiness last: Using the hedonic adaptation model to extend the success of positive interventions. In A. C. Parks & S. M. Schueller (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Positive Psychological Interventions* (pp. 373-384). Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002). The pursuit of meaningfulness in life. *Handbook of positive psychology, 608-618*.
- Baumeister, R. F., Gailliot, M., DeWall, C. N., & Oaten, M. (2006). Self-regulation and personality: How interventions increase regulatory success, and how depletion moderates the effects of trait on behavior. *Journal of Personality, 74*(6), 1773-1801.
- Berg, J. M., Dutton, J. E., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2013). Job crafting and meaningful work. In B. J. Dik, Z. S. Byrne & M. F. Steger (Eds.), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace* (pp. 81-104). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Byrne, R. (2006). *The secret*. New York: Atria Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: HarperPerennial. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Davidson, R. J., & Begley, S. (2012). *The emotional life of your brain: How its unique patterns affect the way you think, feel, and live - and how you can change them*. New York:

Hudson Street Press.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2015). Self-determination theory. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 486-491. doi:10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.26036-4

Dinsmore, S. (2012, October). *Scott Dinsmore: How to find work you love* [Video file].

Retrieved from

https://www.ted.com/talks/scott_dinsmore_how_to_find_work_you_love?language=en

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Duval, S., & Wicklund, R. A. (1972). *A theory of objective self awareness*. New York: Academic Press.

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

Faulkner, G., Hefferon, K., & Mutrie, N. (2015). Putting positive psychology in motion through physical activity. In S. Joseph (Ed.), *Positive psychology in practice: Promoting human flourishing in work, health, education, and everyday life* (2nd ed.) (pp. 207-221).

Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2013). Updated thinking on positivity ratios. *American Psychologist*, 68(9), 814-822. doi:10.1037/a0033584

Gable, S. L., & Gosnell, C. L. (2011). The positive side of close relationships. *Designing Positive Psychology*, 265-279. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195373585.003.0017

Geary, D. C. (1998). Male, female: The evolution of human sex differences. doi:10.1037/10370-000

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

- Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Harris, S. (2012). *Free will*. New York: Free Press.
- Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. New York: Broadway Books.
- James, W. (1890/1918). *The principles of psychology. Vol. 1*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- James, W. (1892/1984). Habit. In *Principles of psychology: Briefer course* (pp. 125-138). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1963). *Memories, dreams, reflections*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Magyar-Moe, J. L., & Lopez, S. J. (2015). Strategies for accentuating hope. In S. Joseph (Ed.), *Positive psychology in practice: Promoting human flourishing in work, health, education, and everyday life* (2nd ed.) (pp. 483-502). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Maier, S. F., & Seligman, M. E. (2016). Learned helplessness at fifty: Insights from neuroscience. *Psychological Review*, 123(4), 349-367. doi:10.1037/rev0000033
- McGonigal, K. (2012). *The willpower instinct: How self-control works, why it matters, and what you can do to get more of it*. New York: Avery.
- McMahon, D. M. (2013). The pursuit of happiness in history. In S. David, I. Boniwell, & A. Conley Ayers (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of happiness* (pp. 252-262). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Melchert, N. (2002). Aristotle: The reality of the world. The good life. In *The great conversation: A historical introduction to philosophy*, 4th ed (pp. 186-194). Boston: McGrawHill.
- Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-compassion: an alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2, 85–102.
- Neff, K. D., Rude, S., & Kirkpatrick, K. (2006). An examination of self-compassion in relation to positive psychological functioning and personality traits. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41(2007), 908-916. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2006.08.002
- Niemiec, R. M. (2013a). VIA character strengths: Research and practice (The first 10 years). In H. H. Knoop & A. Delle Fave (Eds.), *Well-being and cultures: Perspectives on positive psychology* (pp. 11-30). New York: Springer.
- Niemiec, R. M. (2013b, December 17). VIA survey or StrengthsFinder? Retrieved July 25, 2016, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-matters-most/201312/survey-or-strengthsfinder>
- O'Brien, E. (2014, November 19). PERMA-V: Training with rigor & vigor. Retrieved July 15, 2016, from <http://positivepsychologynews.com/news/elaine-obrien/2014111930383>
- Pawelski, J. O. (2003). Is healthy mindedness healthy? *Cross Currents*, 5(2), 404412.
- Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y., & Ross, L. (2002). The bias blind spot: Perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(3), 369-381. doi:10.1177/0146167202286008

- Rath, T. (2007). *Strengths finder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press.
- Reivich, K. & Shatte, A. (2002). *The resilience factor: 7 Essential skills for overcoming life's inevitable obstacles*. New York, NY: Broadway Books
- Rozin, P., & Royzman, E. B. (2001). Negativity bias, negativity dominance, and contagion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(4), 296-320.
- Ryff, C. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: A.A. Knopf.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Free Press.
- Seligman, M. E., & Maier, S. F. (1967). Failure to escape traumatic shock. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 74(1), 1-9. doi:10.1037/h0024514
- Seligman, M.E.P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.
- Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421.
- Shapiro, S. L., & Walsh, R. (2003). An analysis of recent meditation research and suggestions for future directions. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 31(2-3), 86-114.
doi:10.1080/08873267.2003.9986927

- Sherman, N. (2008). Stoic equanimity in the face of torture. *Philosophic Exchange*, 38(1), Article 3. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=phil_ex
- Shusterman, R. (2006). Thinking through the body, educating for the humanities: A plea for somaesthetics. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 40, 1-21.
- Silvia, P. J., & Duval, T. S. (2001). Objective self-awareness theory: Recent progress and enduring problems. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(3), 230-241. doi:10.1207/s15327957pspr0503_4
- Steger, M. F. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 679-687). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Stourton, E. (2015, June 26). The decline of religion in the West - BBC News. Retrieved November 25, 2015, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-33256561>
- Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Thompson, S. C. (2009). The role of personal control in adaptive functioning. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 271-278). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1972). Subjective probability: A judgment of representativeness. *Cognitive Psychology*, 3(3), 430-454. doi:10.1016/0010-0285(72)90016-3
- Wegner, D. M. (1994). Ironic processes of mental control. *Psychological Review*, 101(1), 34-52. doi:10.1037/0033-295x.101.1.34
- Wilson, T. D. (2002). *Strangers to ourselves: Discovering the adaptive unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Wilson, T.D. (2013). Self-knowledge and the adaptive unconscious. Retrieved from

<http://www.casinapioiv.va/content/dam/accademia/pdf/sv121/sv121-wilson.pdf>

Wrzesniewski, A. (2003). Finding positive meaning in work. In K. Cameron, J. E. Dutton & R.

E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (pp. 296-308). San Francisco:

Berrett-Koehler.